

Communities of Practice

Responsibility and Opportunities for Shared Praxis in Community College Libraries

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Introduction

My tenure in community college libraries started in September 2014 when I accepted Director of the Library role at a public, two-year college. Before becoming an administrator, all my professional experiences in academic libraries were in public services at comprehensive (four-year; Master's) colleges and research (doctoral; R1) universities. Even though I received varying levels of funding for professional development at each institution, I was fortunate as I was able to attend at least one national conference during the academic year. I was even more fortunate as my conference attendance was not limited to those in which I was a presenter or speaker. My participation and access to broader professional networks received support from each institution, and these experiences gave me greater confidence in my capabilities and facilitated my growth as a librarian.

My selection and participation in the Emerging Leaders Program¹ of the American Library Association (ALA) was a valuable introduction to building relationships with librarians. The opportunity to meet and network with librarians who were navigating the newness of

¹ "ALA Emerging Leaders Program," American Library Association, last modified April 29, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/educationcareers/leadership/emergingleaders>.

librarianship was refreshing and helped me to gauge the climate, expectations, and resources of other libraries. I also participated in the program track of the Immersion Program by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).² As the Information Literacy Coordinator for my campus, I was charged with articulating the need to embed information literacy competencies in the curriculum. The week-long institute was intense, but I left with language and strategies for engaging stakeholders in conversations about critical thinking in the research process.

My involvement in these national programs was in the earlier part of my career, and I am thankful for them. They helped me see myself and my capacity beyond the needs of my campus and the profession. In reflection, it was good that I started my career at a research university. There, I learned that financial resources are just as crucial to professional growth as mentorship. My Black woman scholar supervisor supported my development and implored me to seek opportunities external to our organization. She also taught me that advocating for myself was necessary as I, a Black woman, did not share the social capital valued by my White colleagues.

My values live in a social capital that honors the collective power of a community formed by Black people outside of the gaze and influence of whiteness to support, inform, affirm, and nurture each other.³ Mutual aid, church groups, women's clubs, and other community groups have often been the mechanism by which Black forms of capital are actualized⁴ and are a part of the Black experience, including mine. Tara Yosso shared how the community cultural wealth of people of color often manifests differently than forms of capital valued by Whites, as it rejects the deficit lens propagated by deficit scholars and white supremacy.⁵ As in the corporate environment, the values of academe are evident by what it prioritizes.

2 "Immersion Program," Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), last modified September 25, 2020, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/conferences/immersion>.

3 Caitlyn Garcia and Cynthia Godsoe, "Divest, Invest, & Mutual Aid," *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 12, no. 1 (2022): 9.

4 Dorothy E. Roberts, "Black Club Women and Child Welfare: Lessons for Modern Reform," *Florida State University Law Review* 32, no. 3 (2005): 959.

5 Tara J. Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?: A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 82.

I recognize that at least one of the aforementioned programs (Immersion) requires substantial support from one's institution in the form of funding and a written commitment from the organization. Given the prohibitive nature of such programs, community college librarians must establish their own Communities of Practice (COP). In my quest for more budgetary and leadership experience, I applied for administrator positions at four-year universities and two-year colleges. I mainly looked at directorship positions, but I wasn't sure I would make it to the interview phase of the selection process. Although I had seen the rapid ascent of some White colleagues to director-level positions in academic libraries, I knew that I would likely face more scrutiny. Still, I applied for positions that seemed attainable and some that were a long shot. To my surprise, I was offered two interviews: from a four-year for-profit college and a public, two-year college (community college). I eventually accepted the position at the community college. I did not think I would be hired as I had turned down the position based on the salary. I did not think the institution would hire me as I had turned down the position based on the salary. Thankfully, the institution met my previous counteroffer more favorably, and negotiations went smoothly. Soon after, I left a position I [really] enjoyed to get the administrative experience I desired.

As a community college library administrator, I immediately recognized the differences in support for professional conferences, particularly for national conferences. My funding was much more constrained—even as an administrator—and my networking opportunities were limited to system-wide meetings (for Directors and Deans), which I, alone, could attend. While this was tolerable for me, it also meant that funding would be even more restrictive for my professional and paraprofessional staff. Through conversations with other community college librarians, I discovered they also had minimal funding for national conferences and felt they missed out on developing relationships with other librarians due to the lack of money and support.

Never in my career was I as restricted in professional development as my stint as an administrator in a community college library. As a director, I assumed I would get the chance to manage budgets and develop as a leader to advance in my career. Even though I knew community colleges were marginalized, I viewed them as just another higher education sector. I did not anticipate the differences in professional development would be so pronounced, especially given the sector's assertion of being teaching colleges. Community colleges vary greatly based on size, demographics, location, and other characteristics.

Given those differences, one should read this chapter as a call to action in which they may find similarities with their own experiences and institutions.

In addition to understanding the complexities and differences in two-year colleges and that my experiences do not represent the institutional type as a whole, my recommendation for praxis focuses on the gendered and racialized experiences of my career in librarianship and the results from empirical research inspired by those experiences.⁶ Black librarians make up 5.4% of academic librarians,⁷ a small percentage of the profession that does not capture the racial composition by institutional type. This chapter explores my experiences as an administrator in a community college library and how those experiences shaped my understanding of how community college librarians navigate professional growth. My call for action is the establishment of communities of practice to counter professional isolation, which the racialized and gendered environments of academe can exacerbate.

Recognition of the Problem

As the Director of the Library, I soon realized that I had to adjust my expectations for conference attendance. The administration told me that two system-wide meetings would require my attendance and that the college would cover the costs; however, it was clear that funding outside these meetings would be unlikely. As the library director, my membership in the system-wide library organization was automatic, and I served as the sole representative from my campus. Only after attending the first meeting did I understand why it was so crucial for me to participate. Discussions of our products, services, and policies are negotiated and selected at these meetings. To better understand the organization and its membership, I volunteered to serve as an officer and, ultimately, on the executive board. While this was a deliberate way to ensure that our library had great resources and competitive pricing, my professional networks were limited to the goals, benefits, and priorities of the institution. In the grand scheme, my work was

6 Evangela Quinette Oates, "Marginalized Faculty at Marginalized Institutions: Counternarratives as Resistance in Exploring the Experiences of Black Librarians at Public, Two-Year Colleges," (PhD diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2020), 185.

7 American Library Association, "Diversity Counts," 2012, accessed August 12, 2022, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/diversity/diversitycounts/diversitycountstables2012.pdf>.

productive as it yielded the intended results (electronic collections, package deals, consortia agreements, etc.) for the faculty, staff, and students at the college alone.

My interest in learning more intimately about the work of community college librarians took a backseat. For instance, my public services librarian started and cultivated a graphic novel and anime collection, which birthed several student organizations. Given my intention to support him, I needed to connect him with other community college librarians with similar interests. Sure, there were research libraries with such collections and examples of student engagement and learning. Still, there was no one I could point to as a potential collaborator or resource. I assumed my lack of professional network in community colleges was due to my employment exclusively at comprehensive and research libraries. When I attended national conferences, I did not remember meeting librarians who worked at two-year colleges. Why? Did I not ask? Where were community college librarians and their voices in the profession?

Isolation in the Profession

Professional isolation is a phenomenon found throughout the literature for educators. In education and librarianship, professional isolation seems to be acute,⁸ especially for Black women educators⁹ who are often responsible for creating their networks without departmental support.¹⁰ Additionally, they contend with inconsistent professional

8 Mee-Len Hom, "Invisible Presence: An Asian American Librarian's Experience," in *In Our Own Voices: The Changing Face of Librarianship*, ed. Teresa Y. Neely and Khafre K. Abif (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 159; Laura O'Grady, "Lonely at the Top: Is Professional Isolation Suffocating Our Library Directors?," *Public Libraries* 57, no. 5 (2018): 7; Dorothea Salo, "Can We Block the Pipeline Out?," *Library Journal* 139, no. 6 (April 1, 2014): 16.

9 Amelia N. Gibson, "Civility and Structural Precarity for Faculty of Color in LIS," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60, no. 3 (July 2019): 219, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2019-0006>; J. Camille Hall, Joyce E. Everett, and Johnnie Hamilton-Mason, "Black Women Talk about Workplace Stress and How They Cope," *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 2 (March 2012): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934711413272>; Kimberly A. Griffin, "Voices of the 'Othermothers': Reconsidering Black Professors' Relationships with Black Students as a Form of Social Exchange," *The Journal of Negro Education* 82, no. 2 (2013): 169, <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.82.2.0169>; Teresa Y. Neely, "The Jackie Robinson of Library Science: Twenty Years Later," in *In Our Own Voices, Redux: The Faces of Librarianship Today*, ed. Teresa Y. Neely and Jorge R. Lopez-McKnight (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 74.

10 Oates, "Marginalized," 68.

development funding,¹¹ lack of preparation, and an overwhelmingly White and gendered profession.¹²

For Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), I would argue that professional isolation is distinct from social isolation due to how each group perceives their work and whether one's social life has a place in their work. For instance, although I have purchased food for staff to eat, I do not expect that a relationship exists beyond our respective roles. I view it as a way to show appreciation for their contributions to the organization. The food is available for them to take at their leisure without any expectation. Conversely, Black educators often report professional isolation in the form of exclusion from informal gatherings with their White colleagues.¹³ As noted by Oates, their exclusion only presents a problem because, as Black educators believe, it is during these gatherings that decisions about the organization and department (and their work) occur.¹⁴ In this way, not only are they not involved in decision-making, but they are also cut off from knowing about essential processes, policies, opportunities, and initiatives. This is a crucial point to understand as professional isolation goes beyond one's desire—if they have any desire at all—to be socially integrated.

In my case, working at a rural community college with perpetual financial deficits produced compounded feelings of isolation and stagnation. Oddly enough, I was relieved of this reality when I began conducting my research studies. Through the coursework in my doctoral program, I started to seek answers to many of the questions I had since I began working at the community college. Curiosity about my circumstances, a gap in research on community college libraries, and what I perceived as lacking collaboration between community college librarians led me to my dissertation topic. Knowing so little about my peers, their experiences, and their work brought me closer to them in ways I did not anticipate. Through my study, I learned how the narrators (participants) worked in libraries as undergraduates. They all had

11 Oates, "Marginalized," 79.

12 Trevar Riley-Reid, "Breaking down Barriers: Making It Easier for Academic Librarians of Color to Stay," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 43, no. 5 (September 2017): 393.

13 Brandoy Jones, Eunjin Hwang, and Rebecca M Bustamante, "African American Female Professors' Strategies for Successful Attainment Of Tenure And Promotion At Predominately White Institutions: It Can Happen," *Education, Citizenship, and Social Justice* 10, no. 2 (July 2015): 141.

14 Oates, "Marginalized," 161.

worked in libraries at four-year or research universities as students and staff. Most profoundly, I learned that poor management, hostile environments, lack of advocacy, and persistent dysfunction intensified their feelings and reality of isolation.¹⁵

In relation, my narrators (participants) and I embarked on a journey to reflect on our experiences, and through their stories, I saw similarities in their experiences and the need to create our network of professionals. The need for a community of practice was also used in the design of the study as I wanted my work to demonstrate both how these relationships could organically form out of mutual interests as practitioners, the possibilities of creating partnerships for the dissemination of scholarship, and a way to extend *service* beyond the traditional avenues and organizations.

What is a Community of Practice?

The term community of practice (CoP) is often informally used to describe people with shared interests in the community who share their knowledge to learn, improve, and solve problems based on practice. More formally, in *Communities of Practice: An Introduction*, Wenger-Trayner defined a community of practice as having three essential elements: the domain, the community, and the practice. Identity and collective interests make up the domain.¹⁶ The community comprises members who see themselves concerning each other based on their interest in the domain; they “engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information.”¹⁷ Lastly, the community membership comprises practitioners (the practice). This collective effort based on shared interests by the membership may include practices such as reusing assets, coordination, synergy, documenting projects, visiting other practitioners’ programs, discussing development, mapping knowledge, and identifying gaps.¹⁸ These are just a few

15 Oates, “Marginalized,” 97, 112.

16 Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, “Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction,” (June 2015), 2.

17 Wenger-Trayner, “Communities,” 2. <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/15-06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>.

18 Wenger-Trayner, 3.

activities in which the practices of these communities can be seen, and many of them are used by librarians in all types of libraries.¹⁹

While community college librarians may have well-established communities of practice, their work is almost invisible to the broader profession as there is minimal scholarship or other writings on their work.²⁰ Therefore, I encourage librarians at two-year colleges to write about their experiences, challenges, successes, and accomplishments as a responsibility to the sector. Consider submitting your work to higher education journals (community college focus) and those from the profession. I recommend the *Association of College & Research Libraries*, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *Community College Review*, *Public Services Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Applied Research in Community College*.

Responsibility and Opportunities for Communities of Practice (CoP)

While I wholeheartedly encourage librarians at four-year colleges, research universities, and community college scholars to research community college libraries, librarians at two-year colleges must become significant contributors to the writings and visibility of their sector. The work of academic libraries is mostly the same but varies across sectors. In this way, communities of practice should address the most salient issues of practice (tenure, retention, promotion, open educational resources (OERs)) in academic librarianship.

Smith and Lee reported some exciting results from a CoP that focused on OERs.²¹ Members of the CoP found that “a distributed leadership, some administrative support, and being open to new members and

19 Christina H Gola and Lisa Martin, “Creating an Emotional Intelligence Community of Practice: A Case Study for Academic Libraries,” *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 7 (2020): 756; Francia Kissel et al., “Bridging the Gaps: Collaboration in a Faculty and Librarian Community of Practice on Information Literacy,” in *Information Literacy: Research and Collaboration across Disciplines*, ed. Barbara J. D’Angelo et al. (Fort Collins: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 415; Eboni A Johnson and Shaunda Vasudev, “I Cannot Be the Only One: Creating a Community of Practice for Outreach Librarians,” *Public Services Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2020): 126.

20 Jennifer Arnold, “The Community College Conundrum: Workforce Issues in Community College Libraries,” *Library Trends* 59, no. 1–2 (2010): 220; Oates, “Marginalized,” 135.

21 Brenda Smith and Leva Lee, “Librarians and OER: Cultivating a Community of Practice to Be More Effective Advocates,” *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 11, no. 1–2 (2017): 120.

new ideas are keys to sustaining an active group.”²² Additionally, the collaborative nature of the CoP and the sharing of tools reduced the duplication of labor. The findings attributed distributed leadership as being an asset to CoP and are helpful to those who have concerns about the management of the group as well as how to keep the momentum going. This suggestion could also encourage library professionals who are used to hierarchical models (top-down leadership) to take a more active role in the administration of the CoP.

Community college librarians must also expand the conversation on academic libraries by focusing on all areas of their work but emphasizing what is unique to their sector. The tenure and promotion processes would be another ideal area for a CoP. Although the tenure process at community colleges is generally less laborious than research libraries (ex, publish or perish), one still must navigate the explicit and implicit expectations of their department and the institution. In cases where librarians are faculty or staff—or when the process for librarians is unclear—a CoP could improve morale, provide guidance, and link librarians with someone who could serve as an external reviewer.

A pilot study on the tenure and promotion process of Black faculty at a community college found that their tenure and promotion processes lacked mentorship, did not provide a formal, written protocol, and heavily relied on the support of Faculty of Color (FOC) during the process.²³ In *We Here, Speaking our Truth*, the authors showed how the issues of whiteness and neutrality influence the retention of LOC, particularly in early-career positions, which shape so much of one’s trajectory in librarianship.²⁴ *We Here* created spaces for the LOC community in which mentorship flourishes from organic and genuine relationships aimed at nurturing the whole person.²⁵ Community college librarians need intentional collaboration for professional development, advancement, and collegiality.

22 Smith and Lee, “Librarians and OER,” 120.

23 Evangela Q. Oates, “Tenure and Promotion Experiences of Black Faculty at a Public, Two-Year Institution in the North: A Case Study,” (Poster, 43rd Annual Association for the Study of Higher Education Conference, Tampa, Florida, November 2018).

24 Jennifer Brown, Jennifer A. Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa L. Mendez-Brady, “We Here: Speaking Our Truth,” *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (2018): 168.

25 Brown, Ferretti, Leung, and Mendez-Brady, “We Here,” 175.

A CoP may start formally or informally based on the needs and objectives of the community. In *Bridging the Gaps: Collaboration in a Faculty and Librarian Community of Practice on Information Literacy*, the authors wrote about using CoP for faculty-librarian collaborations on information literacy.²⁶ While there were the expected tensions between faculty and librarians (curriculum, authority, etc.), the CoP allowed for deeper conversations about students' knowledge of the research process and plans for shared analysis and dissemination of the findings from student surveys.²⁷

In *Using Digital Environments to Design Inclusive and Sustainable Communities of Practice in Academic Libraries*, Carroll and Mallon reported on another campus initiative, a miniature Community of Practice (Mini CoP).²⁸ Using a participatory leadership frame, their study focused on two roles within the CoP: Community Coordinator and Community Facilitator. The Community Coordinators were responsible for recruitment and management, while the Community Facilitators scheduled meetings for the Mini CoP. Members of the Mini CoP (3-5 members), which included the facilitator, reported they “felt a sense of ownership in their community, and felt accountable to show up to meetings on time and prepared.”²⁹ Perhaps your department is large and would benefit from Mini CoP. On the other hand, if you are part of a small department, distributed leadership roles might be necessary to share tasks and responsibilities. By creating your CoP through informal or formal organizations or networks, you might find that specific models of CoP may work better for your purposes.

Recommendations

The expansion of the conversation must also include the lived experiences of BIPOC librarians. While researching the state of librarianship for community college Librarians of Color (LOC), I was saddened but not surprised by the lack of investigation into their experiences.

26 Kissel et. al., “Bridging,” 411.

27 Kissel et. al., 421.

28 Alexander J. Carroll and Melissa N. Mallon, “Using Digital Environments to Design Inclusive and Sustainable Communities of Practice in Academic Libraries,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 47, no. 5 (September 2021): 3.

29 Carroll and Mallon, “Using Digital,” 5.

Besides works from Oates³⁰, Agbim³¹, Porter, Spence-Wilcox, and Tate-Malone³², I found no other writings from Black and Women of Color (WOC) whose work looked at their racialized experiences. Indeed, there are more stories to be told and shared with the larger community. CoPs are valuable in helping BIPOC librarians come together to enact changes not only at their campuses but as a collective effort to change policy, start initiatives, and conduct their research on their lived experiences. There is strength in numbers, and where one may not have the time, skills, professional support, and tools to publish (journal, book chapter, blog), members of their CoP may have the talent to organize and manage such projects.

Academic journals are good outlets to share one's work within the profession, but they are not the only medium to consider. If one desires to share their practices widely, consider blogging to connect to a broader audience. Blogs allow one to disseminate findings to laypersons as well as library professionals. Multiple members of the CoP could be responsible for managing the blog, vlog, or podcast. *LibVoices*, a podcast hosted via Anchor and other platforms, broadcasts interviews with LoC about their individual and collective work, projects, and scholarship.³³ Social media is another excellent way to elicit engagement, particularly X (formerly Twitter), as it has many academicians who use the platform. Hashtags *#WeHere*, *#WOCinLIB*, *#LibraryTwitter*, and *#AcademicTwitter* provide discourse, knowledge, and ideas for educators and library professionals. Reposts and hashtags are great ways to maximize the visibility of your tweets and track posts and discussions on the topic.

Lastly, I recommend collaborating with teaching faculty and administrators.³⁴ Leading faculty could be great partners in your CoP, especially

30 Evangela Q. Oates, "Battered but Not Broken: A Composite of the Experiences of Black Librarians at Public, 2-Year Colleges—Dissertation of the Year," *Community College Review* 51, no. 2 (April 2023): 151.

31 Ngozi P. Agbim, "The Role of a Black Chief Librarian in the Urban Community College Library," in *The Black Librarian in America Revisited*, ed. E. J. Josey (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 171.

32 Alyssa J. Porter, Sharon Spence-Wilcox, and Kimberly Tate-Malone, "I, Too: Unmasking Emotional Labor of Women of Color Community College Librarians," in *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS*, ed. Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, Series on Critical Race Studies and Multiculturalism in LIS, no. 3 (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018), 273.

33 *LibVoices* is a podcast that seeks to amplify the voices of librarians of Color. It is co-hosted by librarians Jamia Williams and Jamillah R. Gabriel. <https://anchor.fm/libvoices>.

34 Kissel et al., "Bridging the Gaps," 419.

those who are strong proponents of library services and are involved in collaborative projects (research instruction, collections, OERs, etc.). Combining your expertise and professional development funding may provide resources for software, equipment, and other tools needed for your projects. If your institution has a grant-writing office, determine which grants may be available to support your CoP. Administrators may be more open to financial support CoP if other funding contributes to the project. While I have not received funding for a CoP, I have been able to leverage financial support for professional development when I received travel grants or other fellowships through external organizations.

Conclusion

I write knowing the task at hand is heavy. Even now, my recommendations may seem impossible for specific individuals. However, during this global health crisis, age of disinformation, and the doubling-down on fascist and white supremacist policies, the need for more support, acknowledgment of trauma, and a critical look at the impact of professional isolation will require more compassion and collaboration. As it is, I am not convinced, nor have I seen evidence from national library organizations of their intent to address ongoing issues of equity and incivility for community college librarians. As evident in the work of our pioneers³⁵, it will be the responsibility of small, committed groups to bring the profession forward, and with this chapter, I charge you to take your seat at the table or, if needed, build your own.

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35 Oates, "Battered but Not Broken," 149.

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