



Peer-Reviewed Article

Collection Development as Anti-Racism: An Exploratory Analysis of Anti-Racist Statements on ARL Library Websites

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ABSTRACT

Social justice issues have received increasing attention in academic libraries in recent decades, and from 2020 were prominent in the messaging of institutions that published anti-racist statements on their websites. Using a content analysis approach, this study explores a sample of these texts from the websites of Association of Research Library (ARL) member libraries to investigate how they envision collection development as a facet of anti-racism. Statements were found to be largely lacking in practical detail, indicating a lack of deep engagement with the issue of racism in collection development practice. The majority of statements invoked "racism" in abstract terms, without explicitly connecting it to specific racialized groups, and focused on diversification of collections as the primary method for countering racial injustice. Smaller numbers of statements named specific social groups and committed to scrutinizing practices that may contribute to the continued "whiteness" of their collections; these show better alignment with emerging scholarship in this area and greater promise of efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Anti-racism, diversity, academic libraries, collection development

SUGGESTED CITATION

Macaulay, D. (2026). Collection development as anti-racism: An exploratory analysis of anti-racist statements on ARL library websites. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 11(2), 98–126.
<https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/21/6>

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Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the highly publicized murder of George Floyd, and ensuing demonstrations protesting police brutality, triggered an outpouring of public declarations by representatives of academic institutions voicing opposition to racism in U.S. society (Meikle & Morris, 2022; Sotto-Santiago et al., 2021). Academic libraries were among the organizations that responded in this way to a perceived need to speak out about yet another lethal deployment of institutional force, with little regard for accountability, against a person of color. The statements that were published on library websites generally carried a tone of urgency and detailed specific actions that would be taken to address the problem of racism, as manifested both in the activities of librarians and through the contribution of libraries to the broader educational mission of academia. This research examines how collection development concerns figured in a sample of those statements, with the aim of better understanding how this area of library practice is considered by librarians to be implicated in efforts to address or counter the social forces of injustice in general, and racism in particular.

While the texts in question were obviously less thoroughly elaborated than strategic planning or policy documents resulting from extensive organizational effort, it can be assumed that they were intended to convey the most important facets of a library's plans for anti-racist work. Since collections are normally considered to be a central pillar of academic library services, it is interesting to investigate whether the writers of these statements saw their collection development programs as advancing the aims of anti-racism and social justice, and if so, in what ways – especially in light of survey results from the fall of 2020 indicating that less than 20% of U.S. academic library directors considered their libraries to have well-developed anti-racist strategies addressing collections (Frederick & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021). Further, considering that official pronouncements by academic libraries on the related topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been noted to be frequently vague and disengaged from the institution's local context (Devarenne et al., 2024; Hudson, 2017; Macaulay, 2023), the question arises whether anti-racist statements show a similar tendency to abstractness, or instead engage more specifically with the various ways that racism might be manifested, and countered, through library work within a given community – potentially indicating a more or less robust approach to addressing this problem.

Specifically, this research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Do statements addressing academic libraries' commitment to anti-racism include collection development as a salient area of activity?
2. Do the themes of the academic library statements linking collection development and anti-racism name specific social groups as being concerned or affected by these collection development activities, or do they present "anti-racism" and related concepts as reified ends in themselves?

3. What aspects of collection development are commonly identified in these statements as contributing to attainment of the anti-racist aims of academic libraries?

Ultimately, this research helps throw additional light on how academic library collections have been viewed as affecting the broader social world, as part of the enterprise of higher education. At the time of writing, it also bears witness to a cultural moment that, in the United States, may soon be overtaken by political pressures discouraging public attention to questions of racism and social injustice.

Background and Literature Review

Guiding Documents of the American Library Association

Racism, here taken very generally to mean discrimination against people based on their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, has not often been directly addressed in the library literature until relatively recently. While there has been general recognition that the presence of distinct social groups within the communities served by libraries requires attention in terms of appropriate services (including collections), the specifics of racial relations have usually been elided (Honma, 2005). This is well illustrated in various statements of principle formulated by the American Library Association (ALA) over the years, which professional librarians in the United States have long consulted for guidance in thinking about how library collections and services should relate inclusively to their communities.

With regard to library collection development specifically, the ALA's Library Bill of Rights begins with the assertion that library resources should be provided for "all people of the community the library serves" (American Library Association [ALA], 2019a, Article I), and should not exclude materials on the basis of authors' origin, background, or viewpoint; it also states that libraries should provide materials reflecting "all points of view" (Article II). In terms of both service to a community of users, and development of a library collection representing global knowledge, the guiding principle expressed in these documents is absence of discrimination of any sort – without reference to the societal tendencies that might otherwise result in such bias.

In recent years, statements such as the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Diversity Standards (2012) and the ALA's interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights with regard to "Diverse Collections" (2019a) have drawn on contemporary understandings of socio-cultural diversity in providing guidance on building a library collection that fits the requirements of the entirety of the community:

A diverse collection should contain content by and about a wide array of people and cultures to authentically reflect a variety of ideas, information, stories, and experiences.... Library workers have an obligation to select, maintain, and support access to content on subjects by diverse authors and creators that meets – as closely as possible

- the needs, interests, and abilities of all the people the library serves. (ALA, 2019a, para. 1)

The “Diverse Collections” guidance goes on to mention “content created by and representative of marginalized and underrepresented groups” as a necessary component of such a collection (ALA, 2019a, para. 4). The Interpretation of ACRL Diversity Standard 4 on “Development of collections, programs, and services” goes further in specifically calling for “consideration of the needs of historically oppressed, underrepresented, and underserved groups” (2012), going beyond simple representation of different groups in a diverse collection by introducing attention to the effects of inequitable relations of power.

The concept of diversity invoked in these documents acknowledges significant differences between “peoples and cultures” but does not link these differences to historical factors producing overrepresentation of particular groups; reference to historical marginalization (and related concepts), on the other hand, recognizes that relations of power have resulted in oppression, underrepresentation, and lack of service to some on the basis of group identity. From this perspective, racism can be classified as a special type of social marginalization, and is in fact treated as such in the current ALA Policy Manual (ALA, 2010): this includes a section entitled “Combatting Racism,” stating that “institutionalized inequities based on race are embedded into our society and are reinforced through social institutions and further perpetuated by policies, practices, behaviors, traditions, and structures,” and that libraries “must seek to provide an environment free of racism, where all are treated with respect and dignity” (Section B.3.2). However, no further elaboration is provided as to how this might be achieved.

Race and Diversity in Academic Libraries and their Collections

Discussion of how library service provision and collection development could be tailored for specific socio-cultural groups, including those defined racially, was sporadic until the 1990s¹. Early research in this domain largely concerned itself with the practical implications of serving a multicultural population (for example, Wertheimer, 1980). References to race or ethnicity as a salient factor in academic collection development, correspondingly, were most frequently encountered in discussions of collections work in institutions with a substantial number of students identified with minorities, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Segal, 1987), or universities with a large Mexican American student population (Haro, 1972).

In the 1990s, the terminology of “diversity” began to be more frequently used in describing communities of academic library users that included significant populations of historically underrepresented and underserved ethnic or racial groups: both Trujillo & Weber

¹ A couple of articles assessing the state of library services to African Americans published during the Jim Crow era (Gleason, 1945; Shore, 1932) are now of primarily historical interest.

(1991) and Chadley (1992) discussed the issue of “cultural diversity” in academic libraries in terms of the special predicament of “African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians” (Chadley, 1992, p. 206). Johnson-Cooper focused on racial diversity in presenting practical recommendations for building a multiracial collection in an academic library from an “Afrocentric” perspective, arguing that the “information needs of a racially diverse population of users demand a racially diverse collection” (Johnson-Cooper, 1994, p. 158). As attention to the concept of diversity as a consideration in academic library collection development intensified over the 1990s, racial groups typically figured as constituents of a multifaceted, heterogeneous society whose needs were to be considered, alongside others, in building appropriately diverse collections reflective of that society (Delaney-Lehman, 1996; Pettingill & Morgan, 1996; Vega García, 2000). At the same time, diversity in itself was treated as a quality to be cultivated in order to achieve the goal of a universally beneficial “pluralism” in education. As Johnson-Cooper puts it: “Diversity can be the bridge which will allow us as a society to make the transition from mere numerical diversity to interactive pluralism wherein all racial groups can engage their differences in a process of mutual enrichment” (1994, p. 154).

Over ensuing decades, the purview of diversity concerns related to library collections expanded to commonly include gender and sexuality (Ciszek, 2011; Proctor, 2020) in addition to race, ethnicity, and culture; other attributes of identity that were often mentioned in conversations about diversity in other contexts, such as religion, physical ability, neurological disposition, age, socio-economic class, and veteran status (Jones, 2005), do not appear to have figured significantly in discussions of library collections. From the mid-1990s, broader institutional initiatives aimed at promoting generalized “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) at universities and colleges became more prevalent (Ciszek, 2020), providing encouragement for diversification efforts within academic libraries that frequently included a collection development component alongside attention to library staffing and services (Buttlar, 1994; Semenza et al., 2017). Numerous case studies have been published since the mid-1990s describing projects in academic libraries to assess and improve collection diversity both generally (Delaney-Lehman, 1996; Kristick, 2020; Pettingill & Morgan, 1996), and with respect to specific groups such as locally prominent ethnicities or nationalities (Schomberg & Grace, 2005) and the LGBTQ community (Proctor, 2020).

Social Justice, Anti-Racism, and the Critique of Diversity

While earlier discussions of diversity in academic libraries largely took the marginalization of social minorities as a given that could be effectively addressed by increasing their representation in the ranks of library personnel and in collections – that is, through “inclusion,” – the past two decades have seen increasing attention to the social forces producing continued homogeneity and exclusion of marginalized groups (Ciszek, 2020) – in effect, foregrounding the “equity” component of the DEI concept. Social justice concerns, including anti-racism, began to be more frequently articulated as a critique of structural inequities

perpetuated through practices at the institutional level, with a persistence beyond the intentions and behavior of individuals, and requiring more than a superficial increase in overall representational diversity as a solution (Hudson, 2017; Morales et al., 2014). Peterson (1996) offered an early criticism of how celebratory invocations of “multiculturalism” in library literature “obscure[d] equity issues” (p. 172) specifically with respect to race in the U.S., while the study of race and racism was marginalized and not accepted as serious scholarship by the profession. This theme was elaborated at length by Honma (2005) who echoed Espinal (2001) in adding an analysis of the unacknowledged “whiteness” of the Library and Information Sciences (LIS) field and of libraries in general, describing them as having “historically served the interests of a white racial project by aiding in the construction and maintenance of a white American citizenry as well as the perpetuation of white privilege in the structures of the field itself” (p. 4). The theme of a library milieu that privileges perspectives and behaviors associated with an implicitly racialized mainstream ideal, while marginalizing non-mainstream “others,” was subsequently taken up by a number of authors who elaborated theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing anti-racism in U.S. academic libraries as a response to the dominant culture of whiteness (Brook et al., 2015; Espinal et al., 2018; Leung & López-McKnight, 2021).

In the realm of academic library collection development, reframing the problem of homogeneous collections as the product of pervasive power imbalances did not necessarily diminish librarians’ focus on including more materials by and about marginalized people: this has remained the most commonly articulated goal of projects to counter collection whiteness (England, 2023; Inefuku, 2021; Price 2022). However, diversification was situated as part of wider efforts to analyze and modify the institutional practices contributing to the marginalization of non-white racial groups within the record of knowledge maintained by libraries. Warner (2001) identified factors reinforcing collection whiteness that continued to be salient, decades later: bias in the scholarly publishing industry resulting in fewer works published by non-white authors, lack of coverage of these publications by reviewers and approval plans, selector bias disfavoring non-traditional publications, and reluctance to budget time and money to support pursuing materials outside of the academic mainstream, are all themes echoed variously by England (2023), Inefuku (2021), Morales et al. (2014), and Price (2022) in their discussions of barriers to collection diversification in the service of social justice. Discussing collection diversity more broadly, Jahnke et al. (2022) reviewed additional structural barriers including metadata or indexing bias that complicates the task of identifying materials relevant to a collections diversifications project, rigid classification schemes that inadequately represent changing disciplinary profiles and emerging interdisciplinary fields, and overdependence on usage statistics or user demand to guide collections-related decisions, potentially resulting in exclusion of non-mainstream publications that attract relatively modest use.

The Practice of Anti-Racist Collection Development

The critique of the whiteness of academic libraries and their collections, alongside dissatisfaction with frequently vague and superficial treatments of “diversity” at the institutional level (Devarenne et al., 2024; Hudson, 2017; Macaulay, 2023), has prompted an emerging literature concerned with the practicalities of collection development work grounded in social justice principles in general and anti-racism in particular. While building on previous conceptualizations of collections diversity, the approaches documented in these studies acknowledge the argument of Jahnke et al. that “diversity as it relates to library collections is an ongoing pursuit that requires critical engagement with developing areas of scholarship, emerging social justice issues, and critique and re-evaluation of methods” (2022, p. 166).

Koob et al. (2023) described how their project group shelved a contemplated plan to audit their library’s existing collection for diversity – a methodologically fraught and ultimately unnecessary step in their view, considering the array of factors contributing to its whiteness and the overwhelming testimony of non-white colleagues and users, – and instead developed an approach to assist librarians in proactively questioning their selection decisions, in terms of how these might continue to exclude materials that diverge from the racialized mainstream. Their solution took the form of a workbook reviewing the concepts associated with whiteness in library collections and posing questions to prompt collection managers to consider diversity in a number of areas including scholarly publishing venues and publishers as well as authors, subject matter, and intended audience; issues with basing acquisition and weeding decisions solely on usage data were also addressed. Additionally, Koob et al. foregrounded the need to engage with the “multicultural community” in identifying appropriate materials for addition to the collection, and to appropriately value and reward the contributions of non-white librarians working in this area. The importance of community engagement in the collection diversification process had earlier been emphasized by Blume and Roylance (2020) in their discussion of a collection “decolonization” project undertaken “from a place of respect”, where the input of librarians and scholars of Pacific Islander background was sought to “co-create” an area studies collection for the Pacific Islands at the University of Utah.

Mullaly et al. (2023) added the term “justice” to the familiar triumvirate of equity, diversity and inclusion in their chapter providing guidance on “JEDI acquisitions and collections” in small and medium-sized academic libraries. Their recommendations for collection development intended to “decenter Whiteness [sic] and actively work toward equity, inclusion, and accessibility through a diversity of voices, subjects, publishers, and vendors” (p. 105), stressed the need for careful, consultative planning in developing an approach that is sustainable over the long term. Along with selection and acquisition practices that largely correspond to those discussed above, they recommended creation of an action plan including a clear definition of the specific collection areas targeted for diversification, assessment measures, areas of responsibility, budget, and timeline; they also highlighted the benefits of increasing

participation both within the library and externally, for example through involvement of student groups and other campus units such as diversity offices. Devarenne et al. (2024) adopted a social justice orientation in their discussion of best practices for integration of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) themes in academic library collection development policies, emphasizing that these should include “dismantling structures of oppression” (including racism) and “rejecting neutrality”, along with an acknowledgement of how the routine processes of collection development can pose barriers to diversification. They also noted that the effectiveness of EDI commitments in library policies is often vitiated by employment of vague or unclear language. To avoid this, they recommended developing a clear and specific definition of what collections diversity involves for the library, setting concrete goals for collection development efforts in this area, and “embedding” EDI collections work firmly in the local context through outreach efforts with stakeholder communities: “By centering user needs throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and assessment, libraries can more effectively surface institution-specific collection problems and identify impactful approaches for addressing them” (p. 5).

Anti-Racist Statements from Academic Libraries

Few studies have been published analyzing public statements from academic libraries on the issues of diversity and racism, and fewer still have discussed collection-related themes. Matthews (2021) analyzed formal responses by Canadian libraries and library associations in the wake of the George Floyd murder, noting that only 7% of the academic libraries in the study had published such a statement (compared to 34% of the total sample), and that overall, the language of the responses was vague in terms of concrete commitments to action, and focused mainly on information sharing. Ely (2021) noted that only a small subset of the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion statements he found on the websites of members of the 16-member UBorrow consortium in 2020-2021 included non-neutral, action-oriented anti-racism and social justice language, which he compared favorably with the more vague language on the majority of sites that featured such statements. Research on academic library strategic plans and web pages published in the 2010s (Macaulay, 2023; Mestre, 2011; Saunders, 2015) does not mention anti-racism as a theme in the samples studied, though use of social justice language with respect to collection development was noted in a small number of documents reviewed in 2021 (Macaulay, 2023). Devarenne et al., including anti-racism implicitly within the broader category of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), found that few libraries shared policies relating EDI to collection development, and when they did, the policies “largely fail to articulate goals and values that are specific to their institutional context and collections” (2024, p. 3).

Method

The research employed a content analysis approach to investigate the nature and prevalence of discursive themes that connected anti-racism to collection development activities within a body of texts extracted from library websites. In its application in this research, content

analysis is a qualitative methodology involving scrutiny of textual material to inductively develop a set of abstracted thematic categories reflecting the research questions, against which the individual texts are then checked to enumerate theme occurrences. The counts of occurrences are then analyzed to detect patterns or trends that will reflect features of the context – in this case, the professional milieu of academic librarians in North America (Julien et al., 2008).

The sample of texts analyzed in this research was drawn from the websites of member institutions of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the summer of 2023, excluding member libraries not affiliated with specific institutions of higher learning. This group of 120 institutions included the largest and most well-funded academic libraries in the US and Canada, geographically dispersed throughout these two countries; no other criteria were used in selecting this group of websites for the research or conducting the analysis. To locate statements for analysis, I used the Google “site:” search operator to search the web domains of each library for texts including the word “racism” (including cognate terms such as “racist” and anti-racist”, by virtue of the search engine’s stemming algorithm). While this method of locating relevant texts was relatively efficient, there was some risk of missing statements that might be related to the themes of concern but did not include variants of the word “racism”; restricting the search to the main web domains of the institutions studied also introduced the possibility that relevant texts residing on other domains might be omitted from results. Additionally, since the functioning of Google’s search algorithms are not documented, there is no guarantee that the searches would reliably return the same results over repeated attempts. To supplement this search strategy, the websites were also browsed via their site content menus to verify that no relevant texts had been overlooked. From the texts identified in this way, I extracted statements addressing the specified topics in relation to library collections, collection development, or information resources. Since the analysis was concerned with statements about actions taken by libraries to address racism, texts that only described or listed library resources were not considered.

I analyzed the content of the extracted texts to identify themes articulating “what will the library do with its collections to address racism?” Through an iterative process of reviewing these statements, I developed a set of 43 detailed, conceptually distinct propositions, which I subsequently classified into broader categories that characterized a) the social groups referenced; b) the general thematic emphases of the statements; and c) any specific orientation that was articulated with respect to collection development practices, and to impact on the external world (see Appendix 1). Only a single researcher was involved, so validation of the theme definitions and their categorization was based solely on iterative readings of the texts. The website texts studied were invariably written in a direct, relatively unambiguous style, which simplified the process by reducing the need for extensive interpretive work. Ultimately, the analysis looked primarily at the specific groups – if any – that were named in the anti-racist

themes addressed, and the explicit thematic focus of the statements on the following subject areas derived from the analysis:

- racism (including themes of racial injustice and white supremacy)
- justice (without specific reference to race)
- diversity
- equity, or inclusion of marginalized or underrepresented populations
- education or outreach

Additionally, statements were analyzed to identify which aspects of collections work were included in anti-racist efforts, and to determine whether they included explicit reference to the impact of these efforts on the external world.

Results

Documents on Library Sites Addressing Racism

Of the 120 libraries studied in the summer of 2023, the websites of 39% (n=47) featured some sort of text explicitly expressing a commitment to anti-racism or describing action in this area; this included documents describing DEI efforts that also mentioned anti-racism. Of this subset, 64% (n=30) referenced collection development, collections or library information resources in some relation to anti-racism. Five of the libraries hosted two such documents each on their sites, giving a total of 35 documents examined. These documents were mainly presented – though not always explicitly titled – as “statements” of position on the topics in question, but the set included other document types as well, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Document Types

Document Type	Number
Statement	24
Action plan	5
Group description	2
Project announcement	2
Group report	1
Statement update	1

All five library sites that featured two documents offered statements, accompanied by some other document type: two included action plans, with the remainder including a statement update, a group description, and a group report respectively.

A total of 73 theme occurrences were identified in the documents examined. As shown in Table 2, a slight majority of the documents (54%, n=19) articulated a single theme with respect to the implication of collection development activities in anti-racist action; these documents supplied 26% of the total set of theme occurrences examined. A smaller set of 16 documents (46%) included more extensive treatment of the topics of concern here, combining multiple themes and providing the majority of the content analyzed (74% of the total set of theme occurrences, n=54).

Table 2

Document Types and Numbers of Anti-racist Themes Per Document

Document Type	1 theme	2 themes	3 themes	4 themes	6 themes	Total themes
Statement	13	5	2	3	1	47
Action plan	4	-	-	1	-	8
Group description	-	-	-	2	-	8
Project announcement	2	-	-	-	-	2
Group report	-	-	-	-	1	6
Statement update	-	1	-	-	-	2
Total Documents	19	6	2	6	2	

Reference to Social Groups Implicated in Anti-Racism Efforts

Overall, the great majority of theme occurrences (71%, n=52) identified in this analysis did not specify any particular social group(s) that would be concerned in anti-racism; 19% of the theme occurrences (n=14) made reference to racial groupings including Black, BIPOC (Black,

Indigenous, and People of Color), African-American, and – on the site of one Canadian institution, – Indigenous people. No other specific racial/social groups were mentioned. A smaller number (10%, n=7) focused more generically on underrepresented or marginalized people as the concern of anti-racism.

Since the context of a theme's appearance alongside others in a given document will color its meaning to some extent, it is worth looking at the co-occurrence of thematic categories at the document level. Documents including multiple themes are counted in Table 3 if there is at least one occurrence of the more specific thematic category.

Table 3

Group References in Documents

Group Reference	Multi-themed Documents (n=16)	Single-theme Documents (n=19)
Black/BIPOC/Indigenous	8 (23% of total)	1 (3% of total)
Underrepresented populations	4 (11% of total)	2 (6% of total)
No group	4 (11% of total)	16 (46% of total)

Statements featuring a single theme were much more frequently generic with respect to the social groups concerned by collection development efforts in this area, for whatever reason: a desire to make the statements brief, a reluctance to be too specific in case particular groups were left out of the picture, or perhaps an assumption that readers would fill in the details. The documents including multiple themes more frequently related anti-racism explicitly to social groups defined by race, or by their historical marginalization. Still, only 26% of the total document set referred explicitly to racial groups in their treatment of anti-racism in collections, while 17% mentioned marginalized or underrepresented populations, leaving a clear majority (57%) that mentioned no group at all.

Thematic Focus of Statements on Anti-Racism

Analysis of keywords appearing in the 73 theme statements (hereafter termed “occurrences”) about “what library collections will do to address racism” led to the identification of 5 primary subject areas into one of which each theme was classified. Overall, references to **diversity**, diversification, and related terms were most frequent (40%, n=29); **racism**, racial injustice, or white supremacy were explicitly mentioned in 27% of theme occurrences (n=20), while **equity** or **inclusion** (including references to diversification specifically with respect to

underrepresented groups) were invoked in 25% (n=18). A handful of theme occurrences (4%, n=3) referenced **justice** (generally) or systemic inequity, and the same number focused on miscellaneous aspects of **education** or outreach such as publicizing collections or supporting relevant areas of study or types of research².

Table 4 shows the number of individual documents featuring themes in the various subject areas. In the slightly larger sample of 19 documents that included only a single theme, racism was more common as an explicit subject (appearing in 42% of those documents, n=8) than diversity or equity/inclusion, which were mentioned in five documents each (26%). Just one of these documents featured a theme of justice in general (5%), and none mentioned education. The set of 16 multi-themed documents featured a higher concentration of references to diversity (63% of multi-themed documents, n=10); 56% of these documents (n=9) included themes of equity/inclusion, and 44% (n=7) explicitly referenced racism. Smaller numbers included themes of education/outreach (19%, n=3) and justice (13%, n=2).

Table 4

Subject References in Documents

Subject	Single-theme (n=19)	% of single-theme documents	Multi-theme (n=16)	% of multi-theme documents	Total (n=35)	% of total documents
Diversity	5	26%	10	63%	15	43%
(Anti-) Racism/ racial injustice	8	42%	7	44%	15	43%
Equity/ Inclusion	5	26%	9	56%	14	40%
Justice	1	5%	2	13%	3	9%
Education	0	0%	3	19%	3	9%

² Since the texts in question were all identified as treating collections or collection development in relation to racism – that is, were presented in a context that implied racism as an overarching theme, – it might be suggested that all the documents could be included in the group of texts focusing on this subject. For this analysis, however, only statements that explicitly included racism-related keywords were classified in this way.

These numbers indicate that overall, while references to diversity predominated in the thematic statements in the sample as noted above – that is, there was a greater density of references to diversity than to the other subject areas this research is concerned with, – most of these references were in the multi-themed documents, while single-themed documents more frequently invoked racism as their main subject. The less substantial texts, understandably, kept their focus on racism; the more elaborate multi-themed documents, in providing more details or alternate language with respect to anti-racist action in the collections domain, included more references to diversity and equity or inclusion.

Conjunction of Group Reference with Thematic Focus

Figure 1 shows the frequency with which the various thematic subject areas appeared in conjunction with references to specific groups, or no group, within the individual themes. This breakdown of the collection development-related themes of anti-racist statements indicates that, overall, generic references to diversity and diversification clearly predominated (40%, n=29), with generic references to (anti-)racism being the next most prevalent (22%, n=16). Relatively few racism-related themes went so far as to specify the object of the racism in question; the most frequent specific references to African American/Black/BIPOC/Indigenous groups (over half of the total in the sample) were made in the context of equity or inclusion, and themes with this subject – not surprisingly – comprised all references to marginalized or underrepresented populations.

Figure 1

Subjects and Group References in Documents: Theme Occurrences

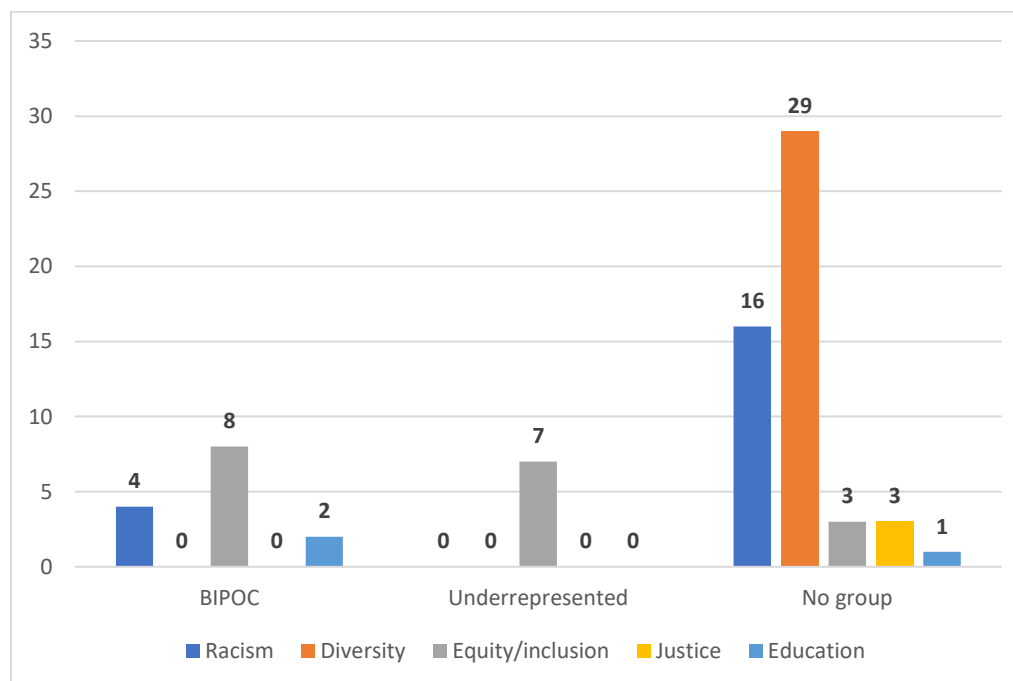
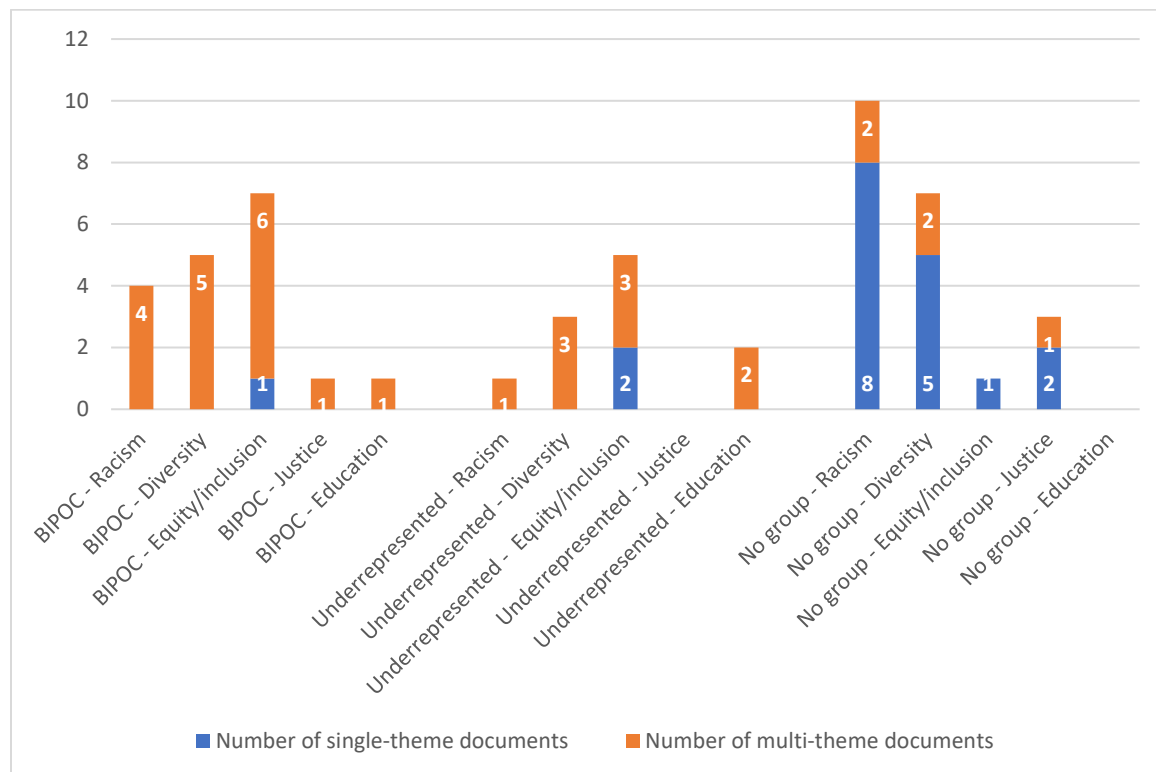


Figure 2 counts the occurrence of group references in conjunction with the various subject categories within documents, considering the context of multiple themes where present. The 16 multi-themed documents much more often positioned treatment of the subjects identified for this analysis alongside reference to Black, BIPOC, or Indigenous groups, or underrepresented or marginalized populations, than did the more cursory statements including a single theme³.

Figure 2

Group-subject Co-occurrence in Documents



Collections Focus and External Impact

Themes were also analyzed for mention of the aspects of library collections that would be involved in the anti-racist activity described (terms in bold face are used in Table 5):

- **generic** (none specified)
- collection **composition**
- collection development **practices**

³ Because co-occurrences of group-subject pairs can overlap in the multi-themed documents – for example, a document referencing the BIPOC group could mention both racism and diversity in different themes, – the counts for multi-themed documents in Figure 2 exceed the total number of such documents.

- **outreach** about collections
- **access** to collections

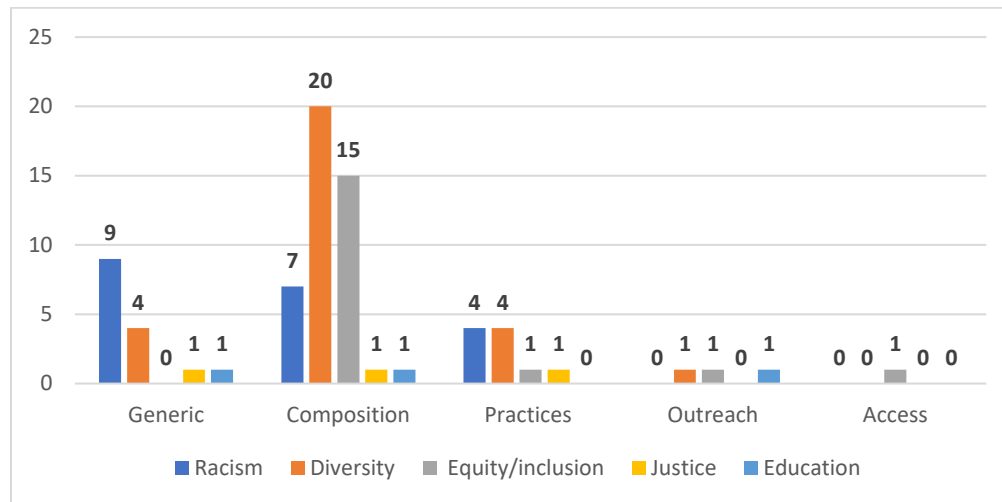
The results, shown in Table 5, indicate that while a substantial portion of themes were generic – in that they did not specify any particular aspect of collections that would be involved in anti-racist work, – a clear majority were concerned with addressing racism through adjustments to the composition of collections. A smaller number described changes to collection development practices, mainly by committing to eliminating racism or bias from such practices or by making them more inclusive, but also specifically by diversifying material suppliers. A handful of themes concerned outreach about collections or access to them.

Table 5

Collections Focus: Theme Occurrences

Collections Focus	Theme Occurrences	% of Total
Composition	44	60%
Generic	15	21%
Practices	10	14%
Outreach	3	4%
Access	1	1%

Breaking down the collections themes by the five subject categories used in this research (as shown in Figure 3) highlights the predominance of themes related to diversity or equity/inclusion with regard to the materials composing the collection, which represent close to half (48%, n=35) of all theme occurrences. The subject of racism mainly figured in themes with a generic collections focus (12%, N=9) or a focus on collection composition (10%, n=7), with a smaller number (5%, n=4) related to changes to collection development practices.

Figure 3*Collections Focus by Subject: Theme Occurrences*

Finally, the analysis looked at how themes articulated the impact of the collections-related anti-racist efforts they described (see Table 6). While all the documents presented themes in the context of an implicit overarching intention to ameliorate the world by addressing racism, relatively few of the theme occurrences (22%, n=16) explicitly stated how this would be achieved. The majority of this subset (14% of total theme occurrences, n=11) mentioned challenging racism or injustice, or advancing justice, as the intended effect of collection development activities; much smaller numbers mentioned support for teaching and research (5%, n=4), or supporting anti-racist social action (1%, n=1).

Table 6*External Impact: Theme Occurrences*

External Impact	Theme Occurrences	% of Total
Challenge racism/ advance justice	11	14%
Support for teaching/research	4	5%
Support for social action	1	1%

Discussion

Most of the texts analyzed in this research were relatively short and can be assumed to have been addressed to a wide audience with the aim of registering recognition of the George Floyd murder (along with similar crimes) as a manifestation of systemic racism and signaling current or planned efforts to counter this racism in various ways. With this understanding, it might be considered unlikely that these statements would address the finer details of collection development activity, when collections are mentioned as element of an organization's anti-racism at all. Unlike strategic plans or policy documents, these statements are typically not intended to guide library work, but rather to reflect on the position of the organization with regard to racism and indicate that consideration is being given to this problem.

However, because the texts in question were generally concerned with conveying serious engagement with urgent issues, specificity was often a theme. While a few simply mentioned plans to study the topic with the aim of identifying measures to address racism, the majority made a point of describing, in the form of commitment or pledge, the actions that would immediately be taken in this area. Moreover, just under a third of the texts were presented explicitly as action plans, descriptions of groups or projects intended to address racism, or updates to previous statements of commitment. And while well less than half (39%) of ARL academic libraries had statements or other texts addressing anti-racism on their sites in the summer of 2023, substantially more than half of those texts (64%) mentioned library collections or resources in this context.

With this overall emphasis on specific and effective action in mind, it is interesting to note the extent to which the treatment of anti-racist collections work in these texts exhibited the vagueness typical of much discourse about diversity. While the texts offered as a response to the murder of George Floyd and other African Americans were mainly framed to present their assertions in the context of anti-Black racism, nearly three-quarters of the theme occurrences identified in this analysis did not explicitly state this, or refer directly to any group that might be concerned by this issue; well over half of the documents examined did not refer to an affected group at all in direct relation to anti-racist collections efforts. The documents focused primarily on the concept of racism, in relative abstraction, with a parallel emphasis on diversity in more substantial texts that included two or more themes. Divorced from more specific language engaging with the local or national community that the libraries served, these commitments to anti-racism largely repurposed the more established language of diversity, by identifying collection diversification as the means of countering racist forces in society; in fact, a couple of the statements stated that the libraries were already engaged in these efforts through their diversity-related activities. Ultimately, the majority of statements acknowledged a lack of diversity in collections, implicitly resulting from the same systemic racism that has led to the deaths of so many people of color at the hands of law enforcement in the U.S., and the primary

thrust of responses to this situation was on adding more materials to represent the communities that are the objects of racism, or on the topic of (anti-)racism itself.

This emphasis on diversifying the composition of library collections, especially when combined with a specific commitment to counter marginalization of Black (or BIPOC) people and their experience in the record of knowledge, should not be discounted as an approach to anti-racist collection development. As Morales et al. note in a frequently quoted statement, academic librarians in particular “are perhaps uniquely equipped and empowered to define and redefine systems of knowledge that convey ‘truths’ about how we know the world and how that knowledge is organized and evaluated” (2014, p. 445). Collection development choices that result in improved representation of historically marginalized groups present a library’s users with a universe of approved information that is more or less “decentered” from the traditional mainstream identified with whiteness – resulting not only in a potentially more welcoming experience for non-white users (Vega Garcí a, 2000), but also in improved support for research and further publication, and in turn for teaching, in areas that are of real impact and concern to those groups (Devarenne et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, aspirations to improve representational diversity in the collection may prove ineffective and unsustainable, if they do not include a clear definition of exactly what a relevant diversification effort would involve in the institution’s local context, and an understanding of how this may be impeded by librarians’ cultural bias as well as by engrained ways of conducting collection development and acquisitions. Emerging scholarship in this area has contributed to the identification of specific barriers to diversifying collections that are common in academic library work, and this is perhaps reflected in the statements studied here that included commitments to review collection development practices and modify them where they were found to be racist. However, these were far outnumbered in the sample by more cursory invocations of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the service of anti-racism that stopped short of providing a practical dimension for these concepts. Additionally, statements focused on addressing a more or less abstracted force of “racism” with a generalized solution of “diversity” neglected to acknowledge a local social context, where engagement with the people impacted by racism, – both within and external to the institution, – would help ensure collection development efforts are in touch with the needs and preferences of these communities. In this respect, it is striking how few of the statements in the sample specifically emphasized outreach or mentioned impact in the form of support for teaching and research or other anti-racist social action as a goal of collection development.

This discussion has intentionally bracketed questions around the purpose of statements from academic libraries acknowledging the problem of racism and announcing anti-racist initiatives. It has not considered whether such texts might be effective in attaining any particular aims or even if they are necessary at all. Rather, the analysis has treated these statements simply as a readily available corpus of public communications articulating specific orientations

informing library work in general and collections work in particular. For this reason, no practical recommendations for crafting an effective statement will be offered here beyond acknowledging an assumption on the author's part that readers looking to be informed about an organizational response to racism and commitment to anti-racist work will likely value such statements according to their demonstration of thoughtfulness, compassion, and engagement – and conversely, discount them to the extent that they exhibit a reluctance to grapple with the thorny issue of how racial discrimination can be manifested and countered in the practical social context in which the organization operates.

Conclusion

Attention to issues of social justice has become increasingly prevalent in North American academic libraries over the first decades of the 21st century, and in the distinctive historical moment of 2020, was prominent in the public messaging of the numerous institutions that published timely anti-racist statements and related documents on their websites. Three years later, a substantial portion of the ARL-member academic libraries studied in this research continued to feature website texts expressing a commitment to anti-racism, and a majority of these statements included references to collection development activities. These texts largely focused on listing specific actions taken to address racism; however, the language used to describe the collection development activities included in these efforts showed a marked tendency to refer to racism in the abstract, without explicit connection to the populations concerned, along with a generalized emphasis on diversifying collection contents as the method for countering racial injustice. While these texts do not provide guidance in the same way as strategic planning or policy documents, they nevertheless stand as official statements reflecting institutions' approaches to addressing a vital social issue; in this respect, they could reasonably be expected to engage substantively with the implications of an anti-racist approach to library work. A growing body of scholarship focused on the ways racist structures of power can be reproduced through the operations of academic libraries suggests that attention to bias – both personal and systemic, – and efforts to engage with racialized groups within the institution's local community are essential components of a practical approach to anti-racist collection development. The evidence of the anti-racist statements analyzed in this research indicates that a number of libraries were prepared to scrutinize their collection development practices for bias; more than a few were also willing to identify the marginalized communities implicated in anti-racist efforts as specifically Black, African American, Indigenous, or people of color. The majority, however, appeared to invoke a more superficial notion of representational diversity that has questionable efficacy as an anti-racist strategy. Without a clearly understood and sincerely maintained connection to those whose very lives are put at risk in a racist society, institutional pledges to anti-racism are susceptible to interpretation as merely performative displays, similar to the cursory commitments to DEI found in many institutional statements on that topic (Macaulay, 2023). And, as the keywords associated with these concepts increasingly

become lightning rods for censure from political actors, it becomes all the more crucial that libraries' approaches to countering racism in its various manifestations go beyond platitudes, and stay grounded in an understanding of how collection development can practically work against – or else contribute to – the unjust marginalization of racialized sectors of our community.

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Appendix 1: Themes and Categories

Theme: What will libraries do with respect to their collections to address racism?	Subject	Group	Collections Focus	External Impact
Diversify collection in all ways	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Diversify collection in terms of authorship/voices	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Diversify collection in terms of format	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Diversify collection in terms of language	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Diversify collection in terms of subject matter	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Diversify in terms of viewpoints	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Include non-traditional materials	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Represent diverse community (general)	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Represent diverse community (specific local community)	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Represent diverse community (university)	Diversity	None	Collection composition	-
Diversify vendors/sources	Diversity	None	Collection development practices	-
Promote/cultivate/celebrate diversity in collections	Diversity	None	Collection development practices	-
Increase awareness of diverse collections	Diversity	None	Collection outreach	-
Address DEI in general in collections	Diversity	None	Generic	-
Support diverse communities	Diversity	None	Generic	-
Support diverse views	Diversity	None	Generic	-
Support African American Studies	Education/ Outreach	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection composition	Support for teaching/research
Promote or increase outreach around collections of works by people of color	Education/ Outreach	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection outreach	-

Support emerging interdisciplinary research	Education/ Outreach	None	Generic	Support for teaching/research
Include BIPOC perspectives	Inclusion/ Equity	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection composition	-
Include Black/BIPOC authors	Inclusion/ Equity	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection composition	-
Include materials by Black authors on allyship	Inclusion/ Equity	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection composition	-
Represent Black, BIPOC, African American history/culture	Inclusion/ Equity	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection composition	-
Diversify collections in terms of subject areas related to underrepresented groups	Inclusion/ Equity	Marginalized populations	Collection composition	-
Include or amplify marginalized/underrepresented voices/perspectives	Inclusion/ Equity	Marginalized populations	Collection composition	-
Increase equity of access to collections	Inclusion/ Equity	None	Access	-
Make collection development work more inclusive and equitable, from an anti-racist perspective	Inclusion/ Equity	None	Collection development practices	-
Promote collections that have been excluded	Inclusion/ Equity	None	Collection outreach	-
Include materials on inequities in the U.S.	Justice	None	Collection composition	-
Address systemic bias and inequity in collections	Justice	None	Collection development practices	Challenge racism/injustice; advance justice
Advance social justice	Justice	None	Generic	Challenge racism/injustice; advance justice
Include materials that address/challenge anti-black racism in particular	Racism	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Collection composition	Challenge racism/injustice; advance justice
Address/challenge anti-indigenous racism in particular through collections	Racism	Black/BIPOC/ Indigenous	Generic	Challenge racism/injustice; advance justice
Include anti-racist resources	Racism	None	Collection composition	-
Include materials on racism (general)	Racism	None	Collection composition	-

Include materials relevant to anti-racist movements	Racism	None	Collection composition	Support for social action
Support research/inquiry into racial injustice	Racism	None	Collection composition	Support for teaching/research
Eliminate racist practices in collections	Racism	None	Collection development practices	-
Eliminate white privilege/white supremacy-related practices in collections	Racism	None	Collection development practices	-
Address/challenge racism in collections in specific ways (for example, fill gaps)	Racism	None	Collection development practices	Challenge racism/injustice; advance justice
Address/challenge white supremacy in general through collections	Racism	None	Generic	-
Address/challenge racism in general through collections	Racism	None	Generic	Challenge racism/injustice; advance justice
Support anti-racist pedagogy	Racism	None	Generic	Support for teaching/research