

# “Outreach is Not a One-Shot”: Critical Approaches to Outreach

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**Abstract:** In this column, the author explores how outreach to underserved students can be achieved through a critical librarianship approach, which first requires centering students’ voices in order to properly establish a relationship of trust.

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The University of Iowa supports four separate cultural centers that serve minority students in the LGBTQ community, African American community, Latino and Native American community, and the Asian Desi Pacific American community. Each of these cultural centers often have open houses and campus events that are open to everyone in the campus community, including staff and faculty. When I first expressed an interest in forming a relationship with the Asian Pacific American Cultural Center, my colleague who originally established the library liaison program with the cultural centers told me that simply showing up at events can make a major difference; they begin to recognize you, thereby accepting that you are there to connect with them.

Attending events and showing up to support students can be essential in building a relationship. She then mentioned that talking to them like adults is the first step. This may seem obvious, but as outreach librarians we tend to jump in headfirst, thinking we know exactly what our students need or want without taking the time to hear from them.

When I first began my job, I worked with another colleague in my department to assist her in supporting the African American Cultural Center. We sat down with the center's coordinator and discussed how we could help and what he would like to see us do for his students. I had the idea of holding a meet and greet at the center, allowing them an opportunity to get to know us. I called the event "Coffee Talk with the Librarians" and we brought coffee, tea, cookies, and lots of snacks. We held it in the evening, right before a student-led study group. My goal was to have an honest discussion about our services, what my colleague and I could provide as their library liaisons, and to hear from them how they thought the libraries could improve their services and spaces. I hoped this would open up communication and enable them to see us as resources, rather than strangers. Unfortunately, not one single student showed. We nevertheless stuck around for another few minutes, and as students

began to steadily file into the center for the study group, we took advantage of this opportunity to talk informally with them. This allowed us to hear their ideas on how we could better plan our events and how they felt about the libraries. The advice I received from several of the students is that to increase attendance, it's best to tie an event to other events happening around the same time.

At the very least, we provided them with free coffee and snacks just in time for their study group. Although the coffee talk did not go exactly as planned, I am hopeful it communicated we wanted to engage with them within their space and that we valued their perspectives and insight. Looking back, I realize now that meeting with the students and introducing ourselves would have greatly helped in promoting the event.

Reaching out and engaging with students from underserved and underrepresented backgrounds requires cultural competency and humility. It can often be difficult for minority students to trust figures of authority, including librarians at a predominantly white institution. The most important thing to keep in mind is that minority students are not a monolith, and there is no “one-size fits all” when it comes to library outreach. I attended a presentation at the [IDEAL '19 conference \(Advancing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility in Libraries & Archives\)](#) in which the presenters discussed outreach to diverse populations, noting that language and the power of naming identity groups can be instrumental in making sure those voices are heard. The presenters challenged attendees to assess whether their outreach programs properly represented their targeted communities, asking the questions, “What does outreach for minorities look like at your library? How is it being assessed? How can it be better?” They concluded that “outreach is not a one-shot” (Hill, Tadena, & Vaughn, 2019). The way we approach outreach to students from diverse, underrepresented backgrounds is often through a deficit mindset. Our assumptions of what students understand, what

they know or do not know, and even what they care about often comes from a place of ignorance and cultural privilege. As a former student myself from a minority background, I know this all too well. I have encountered faculty and even other librarians who assumed I did not know the first thing about proper research, and some who invalidated my experiences in education. Student outreach and engagement is always done with the best intentions, but we limit our ability to connect with students when our cultural biases shape our interactions.

Critically evaluating how we provide outreach requires us to consider our students' ideas, opinions, and voices. Discussing how critical librarianship can be practiced, McElroy (2017) argues that "critical" can mean being decisive, pivotal, or urgent in nature (p. 7). I view outreach to underserved students as critical, especially when we consider the context of the current socio-political climate. Consider this when planning your next event or program for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Rather than using the event as a chance to tell students about what the libraries can do for them, ask them to share their views and critiques on library spaces, services, or collections. By simply asking students for their opinions and having an informal, low stakes chat you may gain valuable insight into issues or problems they experience that may have never occurred to you. Students may find this awkward or uncomfortable at first, but chances are great they may have never been asked for their opinions or feedback on anything like this before. Providing this opportunity places them in a place of control, empowering them to have a say in library services and spaces, and thereby changes the typical one-way transactional model of outreach. By adopting this approach, we can turn the outreach process into something that can be transformative and rooted in social justice.

## References

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