

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Professional Development Events in Academic Libraries Have Minimal Impact on Knowledge, Behavior, and Organizational Change Without Meaningful Design and Participant Intentionality

Dali, K., Bell, N., & Valdes, Z. (2021). Learning and change through diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development: Academic librarians' perspectives. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47(6), 102448.

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Article abstract

Objective – To explore experiences of library diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional development events (PDEs) and to examine the long-term impacts on knowledge and personal practices of librarians and organizational change

Design – Exploratory, qualitative survey, hermeneutic phenomenology, retrospective reflection on a critical incident

Setting – Academic libraries across the United States and Canada

Subjects – 141 survey responses from academic librarians in public and private institutions who attended a DEI PDEs

Methods – The authors distributed a survey in late 2020 to librarians in public and private academic institutions across the US and Canada. Participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on memorable and impactful DEI PDEs they attended in the last five years and to focus on events at least a year before the survey was conducted. Participants were also asked to describe if the PDE changed their own learning and practice, as well as their organization's policies and practices. The authors used hermeneutic phenomenology as a framework for their research and data analysis, which they describe as an approach to phenomenology that emphasizes the range and diversity of experiences. The survey questions were designed to illicit retrospective reflection and critical incident technique in order to capture the most impactful and memorable experiences with PDEs from respondents. Survey responses were coded, categorized, interpreted, and then mapped to the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of change, a principle that breaks the phases of change into six processes: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. Additionally, the authors also ensured they represented diverse backgrounds as a method for addressing and reducing bias.

Main Results – The authors uncovered a trove of varied experiences and perspectives related to personal as well as organizational knowledge and change. However, they identified five broader categories of learning from the study data: cognitive learning, behavioral learning and change, personal learning and change, social learning and change, and emotional learning and change. The majority of study participants (n=91) chose to attend DEI PDEs rather than being required by their organizations to attend. Many came into the PDE with goals to attain new knowledge (n=39) and to change their behavior (n=30). Similarly, respondents noted that the PDE impacted them most by giving them new awareness around DEI topics and systemic inequities (n=51) and inspired behavioral changes and a commitment to taking action (n=28). PDEs also impacted some participants' self-awareness around their own biases and privileges (n=22). However, responses included skepticism around the impact of PDEs on any real and meaningful change, particularly related to organizational culture and action. Respondents emphasized concern about performative allyship and underscored the challenges and barriers to making DEI a meaningful component of many institutional practices and policies. While respondents noted increased awareness around systemic inequities, these responses stood in stark contrast to several comments expressing frustration at the lack of meaningful organizational change and demoralization felt at the fruitlessness of DEI PDEs. The authors' initial data analysis revealed that PDEs most impacted cognitive awareness and behavioral action. However, when they mapped the data to the TTM, results emphasized the impact of PDEs on behavioral learning and action.

Conclusion – Academic librarians who participate in DEI-related PDEs experience a wide array of emotional responses to the training and leave with a broad range of cognitive, behavioral, and affective impacts. While data suggests that these PDEs increased awareness and knowledge and behavioral action the most, there is little that suggests that meaningful organizational change follows afterwards. Another challenge is the gap between having awareness of DEI topics and taking steps toward meaningful self-improvement. The authors note that it takes time for knowledge to translate into action and highlight the importance of post-PDE check ins by PDE facilitators and library administration. Academic librarians should approach DEI PDEs with intentionality by challenging themselves to set goals and use their new DEI knowledge to create actionable change both personally and organizationally. On the other hand, creators of DEI PDEs should take time to understand the participants and organizational culture in order to design trainings intentionally, using the TTM as a guide to identify how the PDE maps to the stages of change leading to meaningful action and follow up. Without intentionality, follow up, and goal setting, DEI-related PDEs may be ineffective, performative, and demoralizing.

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

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Commentary

This research expands on the authors’ previous publication on recent improvements made to DEI PDEs and the impact in library settings. Previous research by Leung (2022) and Ely (2021) critically

examines the authenticity and impact of one-time PDEs and DEI statements of university libraries and note the ineffectiveness and harm of performative DEI work. Cruz's (2019) literature review explores DEI in academic libraries and similarly notes that true and meaningful commitment to DEI requires thoughtful and intentional action. Research by Geiger and colleagues (2023) indicates that academic library workers feel more dissatisfied than satisfied around DEI initiatives and building DEI into the work culture. Dali et al. (2021) add to the current literature on DEI in academic libraries and bring a unique approach by examining long-term impacts of DEI PDEs and including a rich set of qualitative data.

This article was evaluated using the adapted Russell and Gregory's (2003) qualitative research appraisal questions (Suarez, 2010). The authors identify a clear and specific research question, though their discussion includes an additional component of addressing recommendations and suggestions for designing effective DEI PDEs. The qualitative survey design guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, combined with retrospective reflection and mapping to the Transtheoretical Model appropriately matches the exploratory research question. The authors account for their varied backgrounds and experiences and utilize those varied experiences as a method of bias control.

Study methods lack some details including survey question creation, validity testing, distribution, duration of the study, and data management. Inclusion criteria only required that respondents were people employed at academic libraries at the time the research was being conducted. The data analysis techniques are appropriate to the study and richly described. Additionally, the authors are up front about gaps in their own research and note the lack of responses focused on accessibility, immigration, religion, gender, and sexual identity. However, the authors do not examine the harms that DEI PDE experience may cause to participants from historically marginalized backgrounds, nor the credibility of memory recall of events that occurred in the past. Lastly, the authors also do not identify whether there was any example of PDE that had a meaningful, positive impact.

Findings from this study are richly described and the authors take a holistic approach to examining the many facets of DEI PDE experiences. They highlight several optimistic comments about DEI awareness and commitment to action, as well as deep cynicism about the impact of PDEs on organizational change and the intentions of participants in attending PDEs. This study seems to validate some of the cynicism and skepticism felt around the lack of impact of PDEs. The authors note that any small, positive change in DEI action must be acknowledged and celebrated, but that there is a scarcity of examples of organizations that have made these changes in meaningful ways.

This study is a call to action for librarians and library organizations to approach PDEs with more intentionality, to make commitments for personal and organizational change, and to follow up on those goals. As a predominately white profession, meaningful progress around DEI in librarianship is of vital importance to truly uphold our professional values of diversity and social inclusion. This study underscores the ineffectiveness and performative aspects of some of these initiatives. The authors highlight actional steps for designing meaningful learning activities for PDEs which include gauging participant levels of readiness and interest, customizing the training to organizational needs, and following up with participants on their commitments to change. The authors also call for a focus on intersectionality in DEI PDE design and note the lack of PDEs related to certain areas. Participants must explore their reasons for attending PDEs to have meaningful personal and organizational impacts.

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