

## A Cross-Disciplinary Team Approach to Offering Institution-Wide Structural Racism Educational Programming: Three-Year Reflections

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are at the forefront of institutional conversations, strategies, and goals. Librarians have a natural role in contributing to greater institutional DEI activities, including educational programming and training. However, it can often be challenging for librarians to dedicate time and staff and to be seen as a partner in DEI activities on campus. This Voices of Experience article reflects on the educational advocacy work of a cross-disciplinary committee at a small graduate school of psychology whose goal was to educate the campus community about the embedded historic and ongoing structural racist practices that impact the community.

**Experience:** Over three academic years, 2021- 2024, the Structural Racism Programming Committee (SRPC) planned and offered 21 programs to our entire community of students, faculty, and staff. Each event centered on a theme, such as voting, housing, education, and the environment. A variety of event types were offered, including presentations, panels, film screenings, exhibits, and tours. An end-of-year program evaluation survey was developed and distributed each year to aid in continuously improving and planning future programs.

**Discussion:** Overall, the programming was valued by the community, but attendance remained low due to several consistent barriers including scheduling conflicts, lack of time, and competing priorities. Additionally, a small number of students reported that they did not participate because they failed to see the relevance of the subject matter to their clinical psychology studies and field work. Varying the event formats seemed to increase interest and participation. Based on the committee's observations and the program evaluation results, programming was adjusted each year.

**Takeaways:** For other librarians seeking to contribute similarly to DEI educational initiatives at their institutions, recommendations include proactively expressing interest and offering expertise, seeking partners outside the library, determining activity scope, and remaining flexible.

## Background

Since the mid-1990s, colleges, universities, and the academic libraries that reside within them have sought to respond to issues of racism, discrimination, and lack of inclusivity in academia<sup>1</sup>. The librarian profession overall has codified the advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a fundamental value of librarianship, with the American Library Association (ALA<sup>2</sup>) identifying the promotion of DEI as one of their Key Action Areas and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL<sup>3</sup>) outlining equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as a Core Organizational Value and Core Commitment.

Additionally, a focus on DEI programming aligns with the values of the American Psychological Association<sup>4,5</sup>, the professional organization of psychology, which has identified its own responsibility as an organization to dismantle systemic racism in the profession of psychology. As a small nonprofit graduate school offering master's and doctoral degree programs in clinical psychology, the Michigan School of Psychology (MSP) seeks to raise our graduate school community's awareness of social justice issues and increase multicultural competencies to meet the demands of the profession and the needs of the local

community. Furthermore, research continues to identify the need for DEI learning opportunities in graduate education<sup>6,7</sup>.

As noted by the Joint ALA/ARL Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force<sup>8</sup>, “The process of learning, understanding, and thinking critically about EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) terminology creates a consistency around shared language. Developing a common understanding of core constructs such as racial identity, systemic racism, structural racism, equity, inclusion, diversity, and social justice, along with internalized oppression and antiracism, is a necessary step in advancing racial equity.” This understanding is of critical importance for MSP’s students who, as future clinicians, will serve diverse communities.

Internal discussions among the members of MSP’s Institutional Equity and Anti-Racism Committee (IEARC) in 2020 revealed a desire to create programming on campus that would help to develop a shared understanding of the concept and effects of structural racism among the institution’s majority White staff, faculty, and student body. Structural racism is the “results from laws, policies, and practices that produce cumulative, durable, and race-based inequalities, and includes the failure to correct previous laws and practices that were explicitly racist.”<sup>9</sup>

## Experience

### *Inception of the programming committee*

Ultimately, in response to these internal discussions and an increased institutional commitment to anti-racism and social justice, librarians and staff from the departments of student engagement and communications at the Michigan School of Psychology formed the Structural Racism Programming Committee (SRPC) in the fall semester of 2021. We agreed on the need for programming designed to raise student awareness about structurally racist history and practices across the country as well as in the local community. Thus, the SRPC’s goal was to plan and host an ongoing education series for our community that would specifically focus on structural racism.

Further, we sought not only to build awareness of the pervasiveness of structural racism but also to build empathy for and increase understanding of those living in the metro Detroit and southeast Michigan areas whose everyday lives are deeply impacted by structural racism. In order to best achieve this goal, it was essential that the staff involved in the project represent diverse departments and skill sets so as to contribute expertise in planning, promoting, and executing the programming<sup>10-12</sup>. While academic librarians have traditionally worked directly with students, faculty, or their departments to support research, curricular, or information technology needs, examples in the literature of cross-departmental collaborations to engage in institutional dialogue on cultural competence are limited. Cross-departmental collaborations provide opportunities to focus expertise on institutional goals of increasing DEI and social justice awareness<sup>13</sup>. Collective action is required to address complex social issues like structural racism<sup>14</sup>.

The SRPC’s work began in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many colleges and universities, MSP returned to in-person operations during the 2021-2022 academic year while

continuing to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students could elect to attend all classes in person or to attend them all remotely. Our students train to be clinical psychologists and practicing therapists, serving a diverse client base both in the field experience required by their degree programs and throughout their careers. Understanding how structural racism impacts every person in our community fosters the development of holistic, culturally competent clinicians.

#### *Assembling a cross-disciplinary programming committee*

The committee came together serendipitously, though some members were on the IEARC and had participated in those institutional-level conversations. The SRPC was composed of individuals who had expertise in DEI, expressed interest and passion about planning structural racism education, and had varied experiences and skills. The committee's membership is refreshed every academic year; new faculty and staff members are recruited annually. In the fall of 2021, committee members included:

- *Librarians*: brought expertise in identifying and researching topical and relevant resources such as books, documentaries, speaker bureaus, and other types of media; had connections to other libraries to see what programming other schools were hosting related to structural racism
- *Communications*: brought expertise in communications and marketing; were skilled in culturally aware communications; brought awareness of community events and other efforts in our area on structural racism education through social media and other channels
- *Student Engagement*: brought expertise in program development, project management, and student services; had connections to other higher education institutions to see what programming other schools were hosting related to structural racism

Over the past three years, while we have strived to have representation from both faculty and staff, the composition of the SRPC has remained primarily staff. That said, collaboration between staff departments has brought a variety of skills, creativity, and innovative ideas to our programming efforts.

#### *Determining programming scope*

Structural racism encompasses many topics, groups, and aspects. To narrow our programming, each year the SRPC meets during the summer to revisit the programming scope for the coming year. The first year of programming primarily focused on the impact of structural racism on the Black community. In addition, we selected themes for our year-long programming plan including education, voting, housing, health, and more. In the subsequent two years, we continued our emphasis on how structural racism impacts the Black community, but focused our programming more narrowly on the history and experiences of the people in and around Detroit. This allowed us to highlight local organizations, speakers, and events, which also reduced speaker fees and travel costs. We also leveraged the Metro Detroit focus to begin offering programming that featured other marginalized cultural groups. While we have continued to feature the Black community in our programming, some of our events have addressed how discrimination against the Black community in Metro Detroit has also impacted the Asian community, Indigenous community, and Arab American community.

*Program planning and logistics*

At the beginning of each academic year, the SRPC meets to discuss potential topics, speakers, and modes of delivery for the upcoming year. At least one event is offered every other month between September and July. Each programming month also focuses on a single theme, and a variety of methods have been used to collect ideas for each theme. For example, when looking at structural racism in housing, we searched for local nonprofits working on housing discrimination, checked local museums and organizations for potential exhibits, reviewed other university websites in the area for potential speakers, shared personal contacts we have of individuals working in housing, and so on. We also consider other institutional partners with shared interests that can co-host with us, such as student organizations. Once a list of ideas is compiled, the committee reviews and selects one or two options to pursue for each event. A committee member volunteers to take the lead and contacts the organization or individual to invite them to participate, identifies a date and time that maximizes attendance and committee support, and plans logistics for the event with the aid of the other committee members.

At the SRPC's inception in 2021, we approached administration to request funding for our initiative and were granted a special budget of \$1,350 beginning that year. This transitioned to a standing budget for the 2024-2025 academic year. The funds are divided among the five months of programming with \$200 planned per month for speaker fees, screening licenses, and event supplies as needed. The additional \$350 provides flexibility to sponsor a larger scale program. For example, one year we invited a local filmmaker to screen her film and host a structured Q&A with our community.

Over three academic years (2021–2024), a total of 21 events were offered, with five to eight events hosted annually. Table 1 provides a list of events by academic year, the highlighted theme within structural racism, presenter information, length of program, and mode of delivery. A variety of events were hosted ranging from presentations by individual speakers, panel discussions, and documentary film screenings to more experiential events such as interactive gaming experiences, exhibits, museum visits, and walking tours. Since the SRPC began hosting events during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have made our events as accessible as possible to both in-person and remote attendees. Presentations are offered both in person and on Zoom with recordings shared after the event to all registrants. Additionally, we schedule events on varying days throughout the year in order to reach different members of our student body who have varied on-campus class days. Due to events being both synchronous and asynchronous, total attendance has been difficult to assess, but synchronous attendance has ranged from five to 25 attendees per event.

Table 1. Structural Racism Programming Events, 2021-2024

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Theme in Structural Racism</b>	<b>Event Title</b>	<b>Presenter</b>	<b>Length and Modality</b>
2021-2022	Voting	Is Voting a Right or a Privilege?	Faculty member from local university	50 Minutes; Zoom
2021-2022	Housing/ Environmental	A Short History of Racism in Detroit Virtual Tour	Detroit Experience Factory	2 Hours; Zoom
2021-2022	Education	Structural Racism and Inequities in Education: Effects on Students and Strategies for the Future	Institutional faculty and research partner	50 Minutes; Zoom
2021-2022	Education	The Disparity of Discipline	Local therapist	50 Minutes; Zoom
2021-2022	Policing/ Criminalization	Panel Discussion on Structural Racism in Law Enforcement	Institutional faculty; American Civil Liberties Union Racial Justice Project Staff Attorney	50 Minutes; Zoom
2021-2022	Policing/ Criminalization	“Driving While Black” as “Living While Black”	Local professor of law	50 Minutes; Zoom
2021-2022	Housing	City Rising: Gentrification and Displacement	PBS documentary screening	1 Hour and 30 minutes - 1 hour for movie and 30 minutes for discussion; In-person movie showing
2022-2023	Introduction to Structural Racism	Detroit’s Black History By the People That Lived It Walking Tour	City Institute	2 Hours; off campus event
2022-2023	Introduction to Structural Racism	Not That Funny Experiential Game	Institutional faculty	50 Minutes; in person event
2022-2023	Gentrification	Last Days of Chinatown	Documentary screening and Q&A with director	1 hour film and 1 hour Q& A; in-person movie showing on a Friday evening
2022-2023	Introduction to Structural Racism	Not That Funny Experiential Game	Institutional faculty	50 minutes; in person event

2022-2023	Gentrification	Gentrification: The Physical and Symbolic Displacement of African American Detroiters and Its Impact on Mental Health	Institutional alumna	50 minutes; in-person and on Zoom
2022-2023	Gentrification	A Place to Call Home: Gentrification & Intergenerational Poverty in Detroit	Cass Community Social Services	50 minutes; in-person and on Zoom
2022-2023	Environmental Racism	Environmental Racism	Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice	50 minutes; in-person and on Zoom
2022-2023	Employment	Black Single Mothers Who Obtain Doctoral Degrees - How Do They Do It?	Institutional alumna	50 minutes; in-person and on Zoom
2023-2024	Housing	“We Don’t Want Them”: Race & Housing in Metropolitan Detroit	Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion	Week-long passive program in our student communal space
2023-2024	Housing	Detroit Virtual Tour on Redlining, Racism and Segregation	City Institute	1.5 hours; Zoom
2023-2024	History	Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History Visit	NA	1-2 hours; in-person at the museum
2023-2024	Literacy	The Right to Read	Documentary screening	1 hour 20 minutes; at-home passive program
2023-2024	Literacy	Adult Literacy: Bridging the Gap between Academic and Economic Achievement	Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency	50 minutes; in-person and on Zoom
2023-2024	Introduction to Structural Racism	Summer Reading Program	NA	NA

### *Assessing the series*

At the end of each year the SRPC seeks continuous improvement in our programming efforts by assessing the year’s events, then begins planning for the next year. In 2021-2022, after completing the first year of programming, we developed an end-of-year program evaluation survey in Google Forms (Appendix A). The goal of the evaluation was to gain a better understanding from both attendees and non-attendees of how they learned about programming

opportunities, why they did or did not attend events, what they gained from attending programming opportunities (if attended), what barriers may have caused them to not participate, suggestions for improvement, and input on topics for future structural racism programming. MSP's Institutional Review Board approved the project, deeming it exempt. We distributed the survey to all students, faculty, and staff via email to gather feedback about the events offered that year. Subsequently, we sent a reminder email to encourage further participation. Results of our assessment are presented in the next section. We analyzed survey results quantitatively using descriptive statistics and informally reviewed qualitative comments for themes. The SRPC used these findings along with our observations and takeaways to determine the direction of programming for the next year in regards to themes, events, and speakers.

## Discussion

The SRPC formed in response to an increased institutional commitment to raise awareness and educate about social justice issues, increase multicultural competencies for both students and employees, and find new ways to safely engage students amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. SRPC programming sought to bring attention to the historic and ongoing structural racist practices happening within the local community and provide a space for dialogue. After three years, the SRPC reflected on lessons learned and identified future directions through our survey evaluation data and observations.

Observationally, attendees voiced their appreciation for these learning opportunities over the three years of programming. In general, the committee received positive verbal feedback about the overall intent of the programming series, presentation topics, and opportunity for discussion. A total of 66 respondents completed the end-of-year program evaluation survey, of whom 43.9% were attendees and 56.1% were non-attendees.

### *Reasons for attending and not attending events*

The SRPC debuted the programming series while returning to in-person activities on campus in the fall of 2021. As such, an important factor to consider was what motivated students, faculty, and staff to attend or not attend events. Figure 1 showcases the combined data over three years of reported reasons for attending, while Figure 2 reports the barriers to attending shared by both attendees and non-attendees in the survey.



Figure 1. Survey Respondents' Reported Reasons for Attending

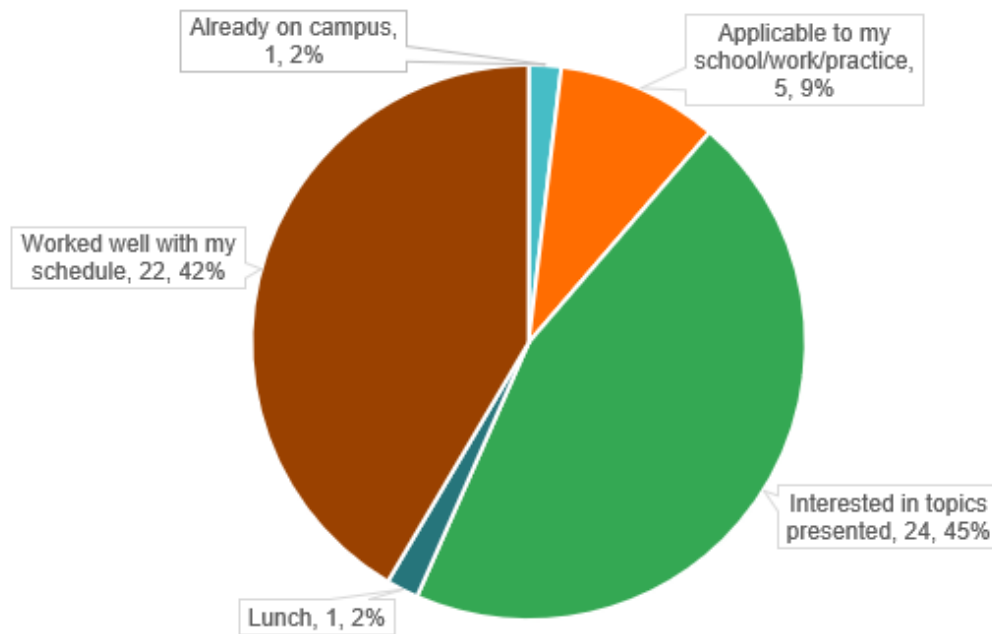
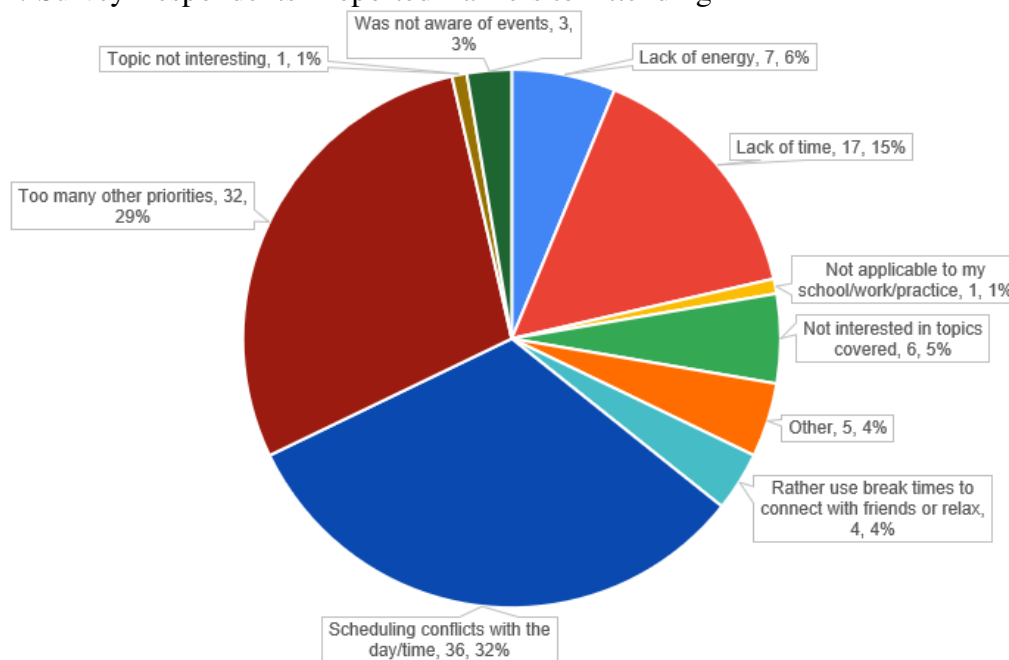


Figure 2. Survey Respondents' Reported Barriers to Attending



Across the three years, attendees consistently reported two primary reasons for participating in the programming: 1) they were genuinely interested in the topics and 2) the timing worked well for their schedules. However, they rarely reported it was applicable to their coursework, field work, or clinical practice. This was a surprise, given the purpose of this programming was to raise awareness of the structural racist practices impacting the mental health of their clients and the importance of culturally responsive care.

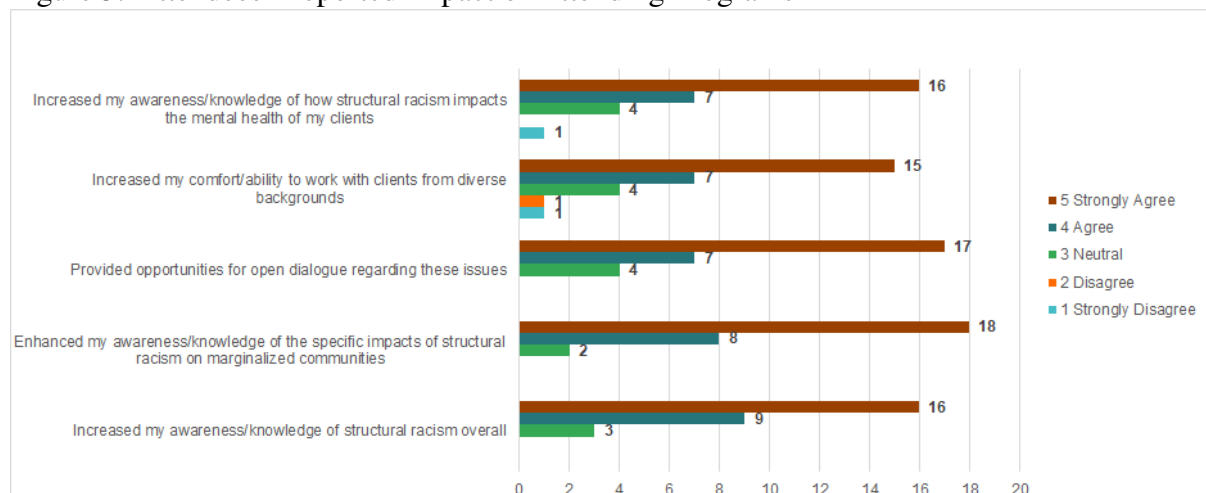
Over the three years, the top two reasons reported by all survey respondents for not attending any events or participating in more programs were: 1) scheduling conflicts and 2) competing priorities. Non-attendees specifically reported scheduling conflicts, lack of energy and capacity to attend extracurricular events, and lack of time as barriers to attending and/or watching a recording of the event. Comments of this nature are common at MSP because students typically have additional commitments such as full-time work and clinical practice in addition to academics.

When asked what could help encourage more participation, respondents provided a number of suggestions and ideas. Related to marketing, they suggested sending more reminder emails and having professors promote the events in their classes. They also suggested providing incentives to participate such as a catered lunch or giving extra credit in one of their classes for attending events. Respondents stated that while they considered these topics important, integrating this content into the curriculum to facilitate discussion of how to apply this knowledge to working with clients from diverse backgrounds would be more helpful. Indeed, more effort seems to be needed to assist students in seeing the relevance of this content to their clinical work.

#### *What attendees learned*

Of utmost interest was understanding what attendees learned from participating in the structural racism awareness programs. Figure 3 provides an overview of responses to questions that asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with five statements.

Figure 3. Attendees' Reported Impact of Attending Programs



Most attendees positively rated each statement, strongly agreeing or agreeing that events increased their knowledge and awareness of structural racism generally and its impact on marginalized communities. However, there was a greater variance in responses related to applying what they learned to their practice of psychology and recognizing the impact of structural racism on their clients' mental health. In particular, some respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that attending the programs would help them work more effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds. Significantly, attendees felt the programs provided a space for open and safe dialogue on these issues.

*Lessons learned and future plans*

The findings from our annual program evaluation survey, coupled with our reflections on how the programs went each year, have led to several changes throughout the last three years as well as inspired plans for additional changes in the future.

*Event attendance*

Overall, attendance at events varied; some events saw less than five attendees, while others had approximately 15–25 in attendance. All events were offered both in person and via Zoom in order to allow members of the community to attend regardless of whether they were on campus that particular day. During the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years, the school had COVID-19 restrictions that limited on-campus participation. In general, the pandemic depressed attendance at all institutional events. It was difficult to expect community members to join yet another Zoom meeting on top of Zoom classes and/or meetings. Beyond the context of the pandemic, the entire campus community is very small with approximately 200 students in total, many of whom are typically out at clinical training sites, in class, or working during the day. The SRPC considered an event to be successful if five or more people attended. At larger schools this attendance number would be quite small; however, given the size of our institution, we did not view minimal attendance as inherently negative. That said, small attendance may suggest larger issues. As suggested by survey respondents, the lack of perceived value or connection of attending these programs to future clinical practice needs to be addressed to potentially increase attendance. This could be achieved in a number of ways, as discussed below.

*Promotion and marketing*

Over its first three years, the SRPC focused on increasing marketing and promotion strategies to promote greater attendance. Having the communications department represented on the committee facilitated marketing all events through MSP's existing channels. Promotional efforts included posting events on the institutional website's events listing page, on the Student Events Google Calendar, on classroom smartboards, on a rolling PowerPoint in the main communal area, in weekly opportunity emails, and in community reminder emails within a few days of the event. Despite all of these efforts, students often expressed that they hadn't even known the event happened. As survey responses suggested, this points to the potential overwhelm among students navigating the demands of their graduate programs. SRPC programming also competed with other events on campus. The committee is seeking additional ways to promote events through the classroom and identify faculty champions who have a vested interest in supporting this programming. In addition, it may be fruitful for the SRPC to explore the potential for providing extra credit for classes as suggested by survey respondents.

*Increasing reach through institutional partners*

MSP has multiple student organizations that relate in some way to structural racism, including the Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity Alliance (IDEA), the Middle Eastern and North African Psychology Club (MENA PC), and the Association of Black Psychologists Student Circle (ABPsi). These student organizations have strong student leaders and often host events for

students relating to their mission. As the SRPC plans events throughout the year, some events are identified as relating to a specific student organization. While the SRPC has had conversations about partnering with student organizations, this has not frequently occurred. When planning events, there are many moving pieces including research, marketing and promotion, communication with presenters or organizations, working with facilities to reserve space, and more. Because the committee is frequently operating under pressure to accomplish all of the requirements of hosting an event, responsibilities are generally delegated to committee members. When the SRPC has been intentional about partnering with student organizations or other institutional entities, giving students a key role in structural racism education, student attendance and engagement at events increased. Earlier in the year during the idea generation stage, it would be beneficial to partner with student organizations and then to frequently communicate with them during event planning processes. If students are able to play a role in the planning process and provide input on what they would like to learn more about, the committee would likely see higher levels of engagement throughout the entire community.

### *Committee composition*

While SRPC members represent a number of departments at MSP, a goal is to find at least one faculty member to participate in the committee's work each year. Faculty members, all of whom are practicing clinical psychologists, would bring a different perspective, skillset, and networking base that staff do not possess. Their insight into how SRPC events could be promoted in classes, which often feature discussion-based and experiential learning, or even integrated into curricula would be invaluable. Faculty frequently have the opportunity to engage with students on topics related to structural racism, both in and out of the classroom, and the insights gleaned from these interactions could help inform the committee's work. Some faculty members at MSP study issues relating to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and could contribute their own research findings and personal experiences to the committee. Furthermore, recruiting faculty to the SRPC has the potential to address the perceived lack of connection with clinical practice discovered in the survey results.

One of the challenges of the SRPC is identifying which structural racism topics to bring to campus due to the extremely wide array of options. Respondents from our surveys offered suggestions of topics relating to Arab Americans, Asian Americans, LGBTQIA+ populations, racism in educational settings, issues surrounding immigration, and more. The SRPC will continue to use suggestions from the program evaluation survey when determining which events to offer on campus.

## **Takeaways**

Librarians serve an important role as information experts and advocates. Our skills in researching, organizing, and advocacy can strengthen institutional and professional organization initiatives in diversity, equity, and inclusion. For other libraries seeking to engage in similar DEI or other programming at their institutions, we provide three primary recommendations as a result of our experience: identify institutional partners, determine the purpose and scope of your education series, and plan with flexibility.

*Identify institutional partners* - With DEI at the forefront of institutional strategies and goals

in both higher education or clinical settings, there is a high likelihood of finding partners within your institution who have similar interests and motivation. However, librarians may not be immediately considered as a partner by other departments, so be ready to initiate a conversation, volunteer, or apply for a committee. Showcasing the unique contributions librarians can make to these initiatives and larger institutional goals may also open doors to other opportunities.

Potential institutional partners to consider in higher education institutions include offices of student affairs; offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion; faculty; and student organizations. Building relationships with student organizations, in particular, could offer a unique opportunity to increase student engagement and attendance at events. In addition, approaching faculty to identify ways of engaging students is another potential avenue for collaboration.

Potential partners in hospital or health care institutions could include offices of continuing education, departments or institutes focused on health equity, or even research offices. When training health care providers, it is especially important to apply for continuing education credits from appropriate training organizations as an incentive for attendance.

*Determine the purpose and scope of your education series* - Focusing on structural racism awareness with an emphasis on the local history and experiences of the Black community was driven by our institutional mission and the focus on training culturally competent future therapists and psychologists who will likely work with a diverse client base in the surrounding areas. We recommend aligning DEI programming with your library's strategic priorities as well as greater institutional strategic goals. It is also important to consider the primary audience of your programming and tailor your events accordingly. Given the ever-changing influence of the current political climate on institutional goals, DEI initiatives may come under increased scrutiny, which may limit DEI opportunities.

*Plan with flexibility* - Finally, we recommend approaching cross-collaborative partnerships and program planning with flexibility. One of the initial drivers of developing this series was to safely encourage engagement and connection as a community as we returned to in-person operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the series was intentionally delivered with multiple engagement points through offering synchronous/live events both in person and online as well as recording events for watching later. Despite these efforts, we struggled with attendance numbers during the first year of programming. The following two years saw slow increases in attendance while we experimented with a variety of new formats beyond traditional didactic events, such as gaming, documentary screenings, exhibits, and visits to local museums. However, being flexible in how you deliver events and being willing to pivot to different formats is important for sustainability.

This Voices of Experience article reflected on the development, launch, and lessons learned of offering a structural racism programming series by a cross-departmental team over a three-year period. Education series like this can provide a safe venue for campus communities to learn about, discuss, and reflect on structural racism, while providing opportunities for students to gain insights and increase their cultural competence as future healthcare professionals.

## Data Availability Statement

Data associated with this article may be requested from the corresponding author.

## CRedit

**Stephanie Swanberg:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft **Candi Wilson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft **Carrie Pyeatt:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft **Kinsey Tekiele:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft **Dana Erickson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft **Jana Thompkins:** Conceptualization, Writing – Review & Editing

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