

Collaborations between Public Library Educators and Practitioners to Apply a Theory of Change and Promote Civic Engagement for Racial Justice in the American South

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ABSTRACT

The Institute of Museum and Library Services' *National Leadership Grants for Libraries* program recently awarded a \$332,939 grant titled "Civic Engagement for Racial Justice in Public Libraries" (RJ@PL) to the University of Alabama and the Chicago State University. The grant's purpose is to build the capabilities of public librarians and selected communities to promote civic engagement for racial justice and achieve the following objectives: 1) Assessment of public library efforts to advance racial justice (externally and internally); 2) Operationalization of strategic participatory planning process using a theory of change to develop roadmaps and action plans that further racial justice in select community domains (economy, education, health, etc.); 3) Implementation of key strategic components of information-based offerings in six/eight library settings. This paper reports ongoing collaboration to further the three design components via applying a theory of change for an intended impact of increased community wellbeing resulting from improved racial climate.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

critical librarianship; public libraries; social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

American South; civic engagement; collaborations; racial justice; theory of change.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights collaborations between public library educators and practitioners to apply a theory of change and promote civic engagement for racial justice in the American South¹. Effective collaboration is essential to the success of civic engagement (Singh, 2020; Mehra et al., 2011). The research context is a three-year grant entitled “Civic Engagement for Racial Justice in Public Libraries (RJ@PL)”² recently funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ *National Leadership Grants for Libraries (NLG-L)– FY 2022 Guidelines* to the University of Alabama (UA) and Chicago State University (CSU) from August 2022 – July 2025 [LG-252354-OLS-22] (RJ@PL, n.d.). The grant’s purpose is to build capabilities of public librarians and selected communities to lead civic engagement and promote positive social change by advancing racial justice in their environments and within their work settings (i.e., RJ@PL goals). Public library educators from the UA and CSU are partnering with multiple state and public libraries³, to meet the following objectives: 1) Assess public library efforts to promote racial justice and civic engagement externally as a community agency and internally as a workplace; 2) Operationalize a responsive and participatory strategic planning process using a theory of change (ToC) to develop roadmaps and action plans that further racial justice in select domains of community life (e.g., agriculture, economy, education, entertainment/sports, environment, health, information technology, law/justice, manufacturing/retail, public policy, and youth/family) and the internal library workplace; 3) Implement key strategic components of information-based offerings in six/eight library settings to promote racial equity and civic engagement. The RJ@PL is currently underway in its third and final year. This paper reports on the importance and role of collaboration to further the three design components in the grant via applying ToC. The intended impact of increased community wellbeing resulting from an improved racial climate are anticipated using ToC. The strength of the paper is that it presents a holistic conceptualized picture of the RJ@PL. Findings from the multiple datasets collected in the RJ@PL via varied methods is outside the paper’s scope. Based on reviewers’ feedback, we describe part of the project in this paper, present partial data during the conference, and will publish various take-aways in future avenues. Additionally, a future requirement of providing complete demographic information by all survey respondents will ensure more complete correlational analysis between demographic attributes and feedback on racial topics.

¹ The United States Census Bureau’s (2019) demarcation of the southern region and its three divisions include groupings of sixteen states (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia) and the District of Columbia (Graham and Zentella, 2010; Harvey, 2016; Ray, 2003).

² See RJ@PL website at: <http://civicengagement4racialjustice.ua.edu/>.

³ RJ@PL partners include: Alabama Public Library Service (AL), Athens Regional Library System (GA), Austin Public Library (TX), Birmingham Public Library (AL), Georgia Public Library Service, Howard County Library System (MD), Kentucky Department for Libraries & Archives, Library of Virginia, Louisville Free Public Library (KY), Maryland State Library Agency (MD), Northwestern Library System (NC), Richland Library (SC), Richmond Public Library and Suffolk Public Library (VA), Tennessee State Library and Archives (TN), and others. See list of RJ@PL people at: <http://civicengagement4racialjustice.ua.edu/people.html>.

2. GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

The RJ@PL project is intentionally focused on the regional level for the following reasons:

- a) The American South is stereotypically characterized as racially intolerant (Cooper & Terrill, 2019). The RJ@PL challenges such limited notions in public perceptions, scholarly discourse, political networks, and new media (Escott et al., 1999).
- b) Contemporary race-relations can be strengthened when there is acknowledgement of their specificities connected to their very particular sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic conditions (Woodman, 1979).
- c) The project is grounded in specific regional contexts to avoid overly general claims that lack specific applications to local conditions.

3. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATIONS IN THE RJ@PL

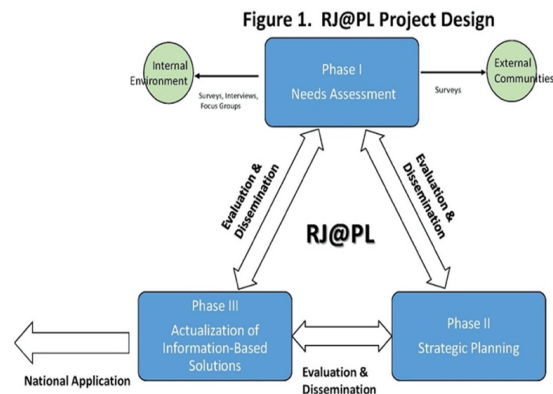
Civic engagement involves making a difference in the civic life of communities by creating intellectual spaces (physical/virtual) or “civic commons” for people to engage and work together for the perceived public good (Kranich, 2012; Coward et al., 2018). It is linked to community engagement where public institutions collaborate with external/internal stakeholders and seek mutually acceptable solutions to contemporary concerns (Mehra et al., 2016). In the RJ@PL, southern public librarians and their select communities collaborate to assess, plan, and implement information-based offerings that promote racial justice working with public library educators who lead the activities. The primary target group are public library stakeholders (i.e., staff, paraprofessionals/professionals, friends of the library, volunteers, domain experts, etc.). The secondary target group includes external community stakeholders associated with the participating public libraries. Beneficiaries are both libraries as an institution and workplace (including the staff) and their external service communities.

4. RJ@PL PROJECT DESIGN

RJ@PL includes five interrelated phases (see Figure 1): (Phase 1/Year 1) Assessment; (Phase 2/Year 2) Strategic planning; (Phase 3/Year 3) Actualization of information-based solutions; (Phase 4: continuous) Evaluation; (Phase 5: continuous) Dissemination. This paper represents the first three RJ@PL phases in its following four objectives (Mehra et al. 2023):

- Objective 1: To implement two quantitative online surveys collecting feedback from library staff about race-based concerns in their communities and within their work settings. A third online survey collects feedback from library community stakeholders about race-relations in their environments.
- Objective 2: To conduct qualitative interviews/focus groups with library staff about their future challenges to further racial justice within and in their external communities.

- Objective 3: To develop and refine engagement frameworks and action plans for various domains using a ToC for external/internal relationship-building during 12 online strategic planning workshops with potential actions, resources, and promising practices.
- Objective 4: To implement select information-based programming that furthers civic engagement for racial justice in external/internal constituencies at six/eight exemplar libraries.



Objective 1 – Objective 3 have been completed, while the project is currently underway with Objective 4 during the grant’s third year.

5. THEORY OF CHANGE IN THE RJ@PL

Theory of change (ToC) is an approach to creating change that emerged from efforts of philanthropic associations that funded comprehensive community change initiatives (Weiss, 1995). ToC is “a particular approach for making underlying assumptions in a change project explicit and using the desired outcomes of the project as a mechanism to guide project planning, implementation, and evaluation” (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). The five RJ@PL elements of the ToC include: 1) *Context*: Southern communities and their public libraries; 2) *Sequence of required events*: Constructed through the project design (see above); 3) *Underlying assumptions*: Racism is a human rights issue acknowledged within the LIS professions and beyond; Racism needs to be addressed via systematically operationalized approach that integrates uniquely tailored solutions; 4) *Intermediate and long-term outcomes* in Objective 3 and Objective 4.

6. ROLE OF COLLABORATION IN THE RJ@PL

Wood and Gray (1991) define collaboration when “a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (p. 146). RJ@PL outcomes justifies the inclusion of various categorized stakeholder groups, sometimes with individuals in multiple roles and responsibilities, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1*Roles and responsibilities of various RJ@PL stakeholder groups.*

Group	Role Description	Collaboration Outcomes
Partners (6): state library agencies [AL, GA, KY, MD, TN, VA].	Distributed assessment surveys; Identified participants for qualitative assessment; Assisted with planning workshops; Provided representatives to serve on the Advisory Board, Diversity + Domain Task Force; Identified select exemplar libraries (semi-completed).	Effectively played their roles to help in grant progress.
Partners (9): individual libraries/library systems [AL, GA, KY, MD, NC, SC, TX, VA (2)].	As above.	Effectively played their roles to help in grant progress.
Advisory Board (15): public library staff.	Advises project team in accomplishing goals/objectives; Includes attending two meetings per year, available for brief consultations (as needed); Assists with evaluation.	Attended and contributed to analysis of data, verification of strategic plans, and prioritization. Recruited others to attend the planning workshops.
Diversity + Domain Task Force (10 + 10): public library staff and other members.	Participated in assessment surveys and qualitative assessment and in monthly planning workshops.	As above.
Library staff members.	Participated in the planning workshops.	As above.

According to Wood and Gray (1991), there can be several outcomes of collaborations including:

- specification of an “intention for change”;
- social change;
- broader visions’ achievement from “seeing different aspects of the problem”;
- increase in “systemic capacity to respond to the environment” (p. 149).

These collaboration outcomes were observed to some degree, with possible exception of social change itself, because of mid-completion of the RJ@PL. The following is a summary of specific collaboration activities in the RJ@PL data collection and preliminary data analysis. The RJ@PL data collection instruments are available at URL:

<http://civicengagement4racialjustice.ua.edu/research--action-plan.html>.

6.1 Survey 1 respondents: RJ@PL implemented an online survey with open-ended and quantitative questions following the Likert scale to collect feedback from library staff about

racial diversity and workplace climate. 273 surveys were collected in response to the following six question categories (with select examples of feedback topics about outcomes):

- 1) Workplace culture/inclusion [10Q] [1,427 responses] (e.g., perception of importance of racial diversity in the workplace, extent of incidents of unconscious racial/cultural biases).
- 2) Staffing/professional development [10Q] [1,619 responses] (e.g., extent of library leadership team's racial/ethnic diversity, professional development training on topics of racial/ethnic diversity).
- 3) Workplace policies/procedures [6Q] [751 responses] (e.g., effectiveness of current workplace policies to promote racial equity).
- 4) Personal experiences [8Q] [1,085 responses] (e.g., discussion of race-related topics in the workplace within the past five years, extent of concerns about workplace racism).
- 5) Open-ended questions [3Q] [213 responses].
- 6) Demographics [8Q] [1,295 responses] [116 females, 100 white, 120 full-time].

The number of responses indicated in brackets [...] total both quantitative and open-ended feedback. Not all questions were addressed by all respondents. Many respondents did not identify all their demographic characteristics; demographic data above indicates the majority category of those who provided the information. Outcomes of collaboration included data to support attainment of project goals (e.g., perceptions about equitable treatment of all employees by library leadership); descriptive data of library workplace as institutions within the community (e.g., treatment of job applications from candidates from diverse racial/ethnic groups); increased understanding of racial justice within libraries as workplaces (e.g., level of prioritization toward commitment to facilitating inclusion in decision-making); and seeing broader aspects of the problem of racial justice internally (e.g., macro-and-microaggressions, tokenism, hegemony of the majority).

6.2 Survey 2 respondents: RJ@PL employed a qualitative online survey with comment boxes for collecting open-ended feedback from library staff about their information offerings, activities, and initiatives related to racial justice in diverse facets of community life. 186 surveys were collected in response to the following eleven question categories: 1) Economy [7Q] [134 responses]. 2) Education [7Q] [75 responses]. 3) Entertainment/Sports [7Q] [63 responses]. 4) Environment [7Q] [56 responses]. 5) Farming/Agriculture [7Q] [59 responses]. 6) Health [7Q] [57 responses]. 7) Information Technology [7Q] [56 responses]. 8) Law/Justice [7Q] [49 responses]. 9) Manufacturing/Retail [7Q] [45 responses]. 10) Public Policy [7Q] [52 responses]. 11) Youth/Families [7Q] [44 responses]. Demographics [11Q] [710 responses] [80 white, 70 full-time]. Not all questions were addressed by all respondents. Many respondents provided several points to consider that were coded as separate counts. Several respondents did not identify all their demographic characteristics; demographic data presented above indicates the majority category of those who provided the information. Outcomes of collaboration included

data to support attainment of project goals (e.g., identifying specific challenges to civic engagement for racial justice in various domains); seeing broader aspects of the problem of racial justice externally in the community (e.g., limited resources to market programming and marginal community participation); increase in capacity to respond to the problem through broad documentation of the concerns in many communities (e.g., cooperation/buy-in of library staff, finding suitable partners).

6.3 Survey 3 respondents: RJ@PL implemented an online survey with open-ended and quantitative questions following the Likert scale to collect feedback from library community stakeholders in the 17 regions about race-relations in their environments. 125 surveys were collected in response to questions about community perspectives on racial justice and libraries [9Q] [810 responses] and demographics [10Q] [729 responses] [44 females, 35 white, 38 full-time]. The number of responses indicated in brackets [...] total both quantitative and open-ended feedback. Not all questions were addressed by all survey respondents. Many respondents did not identify all their demographic characteristics; demographic data presented above indicates the majority category of those who provided the information. Outcomes of the collaboration included collection of data to support attainment of project goals (e.g., level of concerns about racism in communities); community data to support potential increase in the library's capacity responding to the problems librarians had identified earlier, including existing barriers and those for future-plans (e.g., marginal access of racial/ethnic minorities to valuable resources, information support to seek/retain jobs).

6.4 Interview/focus group participants: The RJ@PL team conducted qualitative interviews/focus groups with 50 library staff about future challenges to further racial justice in their external communities and in their internal work settings. The research entitled "Future Library Roles in Community Engagement Strategic Foresight" involved asking 10 questions integrated into semi-structured narratives. Collaboration outcomes included qualitative data to support attainment of project goals (e.g., specific strategies to integrate diversity and inclusion tangibles into library planning processes); attainment of a broader vision to see more aspects of the problem of racial justice in communities (e.g., e.g., current library leadership's strategy to disown associated language around diversity and inclusion); data to support an increase in the capacity to respond (e.g., effective knowledge management needed to implement community needs assessment into library day-to-day operations) (Mehra et al., forthcoming).

6.5 Strategic planning workshop participants: The following is the number of collaborators who engaged with the strategic planning process for each workshop: Economy = 27; Education = 26; Entertainment/Sports = 11; Environment = 25; Farming/Agriculture = 15; Health = 15; Information Technology: 13; Law/Justice: 9; Manufacturing/Retail: 9; Public Policy = 16; Youth/Families: 10; Internal Workplace: 25. Collaboration outcomes included library staff beginning to identify, discuss, compare, contrast, and document an integrated understanding of the intersectional problems of racial justice in their communities/workplace (e.g., economic disparities are connected to educational/health inequities) as well as strategize uniquely tailored operationalizing applications from effective approaches implemented in other geographic locations to address the problem (e.g., how to learn from political resistance to antiracist programming in Florida to address white supremacists in Alabama).

6.6 Implementation of Strategic Plan Components: We are in the process of selecting “exemplar libraries” that will operationalize select goals/objectives that were refined during the planning workshops to illustrate demonstration of civic engagement for racial justice in interrelated domains.

7. HOW DID WE COLLABORATE?

RJ@PL integrated multiple collaboration types (see Table 2) with examples contributing to its success in meeting RJ@PL’s goals to date (Together Team, 2023).

Table 2
RJ@PL. collaboration types.

Collaboration Type	Description	RJ@PL Examples
Communication-oriented collaboration	Effective communication among team members.	Multiple communication strategies used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● individual and group emails. ● collaborative tools (google forms, google docs). ● Zoom (synchronous conferencing).
Task-oriented collaboration	Achieving specific tasks, goals, or projects with focus on individual responsibilities and contribution of expertise to complete the assigned tasks.	Stakeholders assigned specific tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● complete surveys, attend focus groups. ● revise/edit strategic roadmap document. ● evaluate strategic priorities.
Network-oriented collaboration	Building/leveraging professional relationships within/outside the organization involves connecting with individuals across different departments, teams, and external partners.	Stakeholders participated in monthly planning workshops where they shared strategies and resources to address each other’s problems.
Community-oriented collaboration	Creating a sense of community and shared purpose within the team.	Discussion in the monthly workshops; several participants have attended many workshops, and a community has developed around the shared experience of racial justice work.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR LIS EDUCATION

RJ@PL collaborations described in this paper provide tremendous possibilities of application/use for library and information science (LIS) educators, students, and practitioners, including the following:

- In its shaping of the RJ@PL, readers glimpse how ToC can help conceptualization and structure project design to address problematic issues (e.g., racism) and difficult sociocultural and political concerns.
- The ToC from systems design presents a logical mechanism to articulate connections between details of organization and information-related solutions to address more complex human-centered problems for seeking external and internal funding.

Holistic vision of the RJ@PL briefly showcases select strategies of collaboration between LIS educators and practitioners to bridge the profession's self-created theory-practice divides with relevance to community context (Mehra, Sikes, and Singh, 2020). RJ@PL reflects a more progressive theory-praxis-impact discourse that operationalizes social justice beyond the white-entrenched verbiage predominant in majority LIS networks (Mehra and Gray, 2020). RJ@PL experiences are helping understand the nature of the desired social change with respect to race from public librarians' perspective as anticipated and extending the application of the ToC literature with a likely wider significance beyond the American South. Expected changes in both libraries as workplaces and in the communities served by the libraries include: changes in attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about race; changes in knowledge about race; changes in awareness of race as a structural factor that organizes life in the community; changes in skills managing race in everyday life/practice; changes in behavior in matters where race is a factor; changes in social conditions around race. Several broad outcomes anticipated as endpoints from RJ@PL include: changes in visibility of race as a community, societal/workplace issues; changes in community norms regarding race; changes in partnerships to solve problems of racism; changes in public and political will in specific domains where race is a factor; changes in policies to achieve antiracism; changes in business practices to achieve antiracism. RJ@PL is spotlighting the affirming stories of impact, leadership, civic engagement, and racial justice that have been overlooked in the past, to be reported in future publications.

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