

**Against the Odds: Reflections on Asian American Identity and  
Multicultural, Shared Leadership in Academic Libraries**

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**Abstract:** The author of this essay describes her personal experiences as an Asian American woman, and the influence of these experiences on the multicultural, shared-leadership practice she brings to academic libraries. Drawing upon over two decades of library management and leadership experience, the author reflects upon the reasons why more Asian Americans and members of other marginalized groups are needed within academic library leadership, and why existing biases and persistent discrimination have made it difficult for them to attain these roles.

With the historic election of President Barack Obama in 2008, there were those in the mainstream media who theorized that Americans were living in a “post-racial” era, a term later defined by Wilbur C. Rich as “a society in which phenotype, racial ancestry, and color do not determine one’s life chances.”<sup>1</sup> In the new post-Obama era, many of us see clearly that this proclamation was wishful thinking, and that racism and other destructive ideologies are gaining new ground in the United States -- if ever they had really lost ground or had not merely gone underground. Universities and academic libraries are not exempt from these destructive ideologies, unfortunately. These institutions were conceived and built by human beings, and as such, remain just as invested as other legacy organizations in maintaining the status quo. We should not be surprised that organizations where we find the most elite among us are also

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<sup>1</sup> Wilbur C. Rich, *The Post-Racial Society is Here: Recognition, Critics, and the Nation-State* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

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places where we find stubborn forms of prejudice and discrimination. Perhaps in these places it is just harder to recognize a lack of progress for all the worthwhile diversity and inclusion goals that are often publicly espoused. Perhaps it is a case of our rising expectations that some of us are taken aback when these institutions fail to fully welcome people of color as colleagues or when they specifically resist appointing people of color and women into executive leadership roles.

As I write this essay, I have been a manager and leader in academic libraries for over twenty years. I am also an Asian American woman who happens to be lesbian, feminist, and multiracial, and who happens to have working-poor origins – and for those reasons, am steeped in a lifetime of experiences with racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. This is not to claim victimhood over such experiences, but rather to claim a sense of intimacy with these ideologies as the forced recipient of them, and to explain my passionate resistance against them as destructive forces. Like many others, I am familiar with the victories and setbacks that come with fighting social injustice, but what may be somewhat different is my willingness to describe how these experiences have informed and shaped my leadership philosophies in libraries. They have inspired me to build what I hope is a more collaborative, shared, and transparent leadership practice in the organizations I serve. They motivate me to urge more people of color to seek out leadership positions, and to advocate for current leaders to create more high-visibility leadership opportunities for people of color and women in their libraries. In my view, we need to have more people of color and women at the table when traditional organizations desire to become more flexible, responsive organizations. We need to have diverse experiences

on board whenever academic policies and practices are being designed to meet the needs of our changing society. Our institutions require the infusion of multicultural, wide-ranging perspectives and experiences that we bring, because this will help us serve our increasingly diverse constituents better.

I experienced the challenges of racism and classism firsthand as a native Detroiter raised in a working-poor neighborhood in the 1960s through the 1980s, during a time when Asians represented less than one percent of Detroit's population.<sup>2</sup> My family members were long-time Detroiters who operated a hand laundry in the city in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the passage of the US Fair Housing Act,<sup>3</sup> they lived in the backroom of their laundry business, because many building-use restrictions in the surrounding Detroit neighborhoods prohibited the rent or sale of houses to non-Caucasians.<sup>4</sup> My maternal grandmother was Irish American and Native American, the daughter of coal miners from West Virginia, but she had fallen in love with and married my grandfather, a "paper son"<sup>5</sup> immigrant from China. At the time, racist and

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 56.

<sup>3</sup> The Fair Housing Act was enacted as Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968. See the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development website for more details: [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/fair\\_housing\\_equal\\_opp/progdesc/title8](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/progdesc/title8).

<sup>4</sup> Racially-based building-use restrictions were common during this area. One example of these building-use and/or deed restrictions can be found in the 1948 restrictions posted online by a Detroit-area homeowners' association, Wing Lake Farms: "That no lot, or any part thereof, shall be sold, conveyed, rented, leased or loaned by either party hereto to any person not of the pure, unmixed, white, Caucasian Gentile Race, nor shall any person not of the pure, unmixed white, Caucasian Gentile Race be permitted to occupy or use any lot or buildings erected thereon, except that an owner or tenant of the premises may employ servants thereon who are not of the pure, unmixed white, Caucasian Gentile Race."

<sup>5</sup> "Paper son" is a colloquial term used to describe a Chinese man who used false documentation or "papers" to immigrate to the US during the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882-1943.

sexist laws, namely the US Expatriation Act of 1907 and the Cable Act of 1922, forced women to lose their U.S. citizenship if they married men with Asian origins.<sup>6</sup> This was how my grandmother lost her citizenship for love. In protest, even after the laws were repealed, she refused to repatriate until the late 1960s, and then it was only to gain access to her social security benefits. She was a staunch anti-racist activist who advocated for African Americans struggling against oppression in the civil rights movement. She taught me and my siblings at an early age to fight back against racial oppression and to confront the abuse of power.

There were many years I could report, without exaggeration, that I heard the racial slur “Chink” yelled at me or one of my family members at least once a day. There were also the occasional times when the driver of a passing car rolled down his window to shout, “Go back where you came from,” or when a schoolyard bully attacked us as outsiders by throwing rocks, invariably taunting us with the theme song to the TV show, “Kung Fu.” At one point, I witnessed a group of White teenagers threaten my grandfather with violence as they called him a “dirty Chinaman.” These were relatively mild forms of racism, however, compared to the hatred of Asian Americans that permeated Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s, when a deep recession and the competition of Japanese car companies exacerbated the decline of the U.S. automobile industry. It was common to see bumper stickers proclaim, “I don’t drive a rice burner.” Rabid anti-Asian sentiment found its ultimate expression in the vicious 1982 murder of

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<sup>6</sup> Sections of the US Expatriation Act of 1907 authorized the removal of a US woman’s citizenship if she married a non-US, male citizen. The Cable Act of 1922 was enacted to repeal these sections, except that it kept in place the provisions for removing the US citizenship of any woman who married an Asian man who could not be naturalized due to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man killed in a racially motivated attack by two White automobile workers who perceived Chin to be Japanese. My first cousin once removed, Kin Hoy Yee (who I called Uncle Kin) was a founding member of the American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), a group that fought for Asian American civil rights after the lenient punishment of Chin's attackers spurred national protests. Uncle Kin's principled sacrifices and hard work for social justice modeled for me the way that all leaders should behave. Good stewards of the public trust were of high integrity and commitment, and they knew how to inspire people to work together toward a better future. Successful community leaders possessed the ability to form meaningful coalitions to make positive changes in the communities they served.

Over the past two decades, racist incidents and exchanges were directed at my family and me far less frequently, but when they did occur, they happened several times in library contexts. My early experiences with racism and discrimination gave me the motivation and the will to confront the issues head on, but truthfully, I would rather not have to address them on most days. I continue to see the insidious effects of implicit and explicit bias in many of our processes in higher education. When I have served on search committees for executive leaders, for example, I have heard the national origins and citizenship status of Asian American candidates questioned, whereas these same aspects about non-Asian candidates were never addressed, a phenomenon that some have referred to as the "perpetual foreigner." I have seen people refer to candidates' appearances as not being "deanly" enough, when the applicants have not matched the White male archetype of a leader. When asked to explain this longing for "deanliness," search committee members retreated to the more familiar refrain; the

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candidate “just didn’t seem to be the right fit.” At a planning meeting, a respected senior member of administration referred to the odds of a project succeeding as having a “Chinaman’s chance in hell.” Later, when asked about the remark, he would not acknowledge the term “Chinaman” to be a racial slur, and accused me of being too sensitive. When I have attended national library conferences, no matter how I am dressed or badged, I have been mistaken for a member of the wait staff. I believe this is because most of the people serving meals and refreshments in these predominately White meetings happen to be people of color, which serves as another illustration about the way in which class intersects with race to reinforce people’s roles and status relative to others.

The concept of “microaggressions”<sup>7</sup> is commonly understood now in academia, but this was a phenomenon not widely known when, several years ago, I experienced an incident that I refer to as “the tipping point.” During one senior-level library meeting, several of us in Library Administration were engrossed in selecting the members of a proposed task force, and we identified eight librarians with the expertise to handle the work. Three of them happened to be Asian American, five of them happened to be White. Upon seeing the list of colleagues, my dean at the time announced suddenly that we had chosen “too many Asians.” When I asked her to explain the remark further, she and other administrators in the room brushed my question aside by, again, informing me that I was being “too sensitive.” My immediate reaction was to

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<sup>7</sup> The term “microaggressions” is defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group,” in an article by Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, et al., “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice,” *American Psychologist*, 62 (2007): 273.

ask, “What is the tipping point? When does a group of Asian Americans become too many?” (The dean in question later apologized for the remark, but only after I had advocated for the composition of the task force to remain as it was, with the three Asian American librarians in place.)

These are only a few examples, but suffice it to say that my anecdotal experiences do nothing to contradict the data that show a lack of substantial progress in diversifying library leadership ranks. They may instead provide insights into the obstacles of bias, discrimination, and differential treatment that Asian American colleagues encounter when they aspire to attain and/or carry out leadership responsibilities in what is, by all hard evidence, a decidedly non-post-racial society.

Attracting, retaining, and advancing librarians of color have been stated priorities for the library profession for several decades. However, as census data show, in the 2000s, people of color comprised only 11% of the total number of credentialed librarians; in academic libraries, this figure rose only slightly higher to 15%.<sup>8</sup> When historical data are available about librarians of color serving in management or administrative positions in academia, they consistently show that the numbers of people of color in senior management or director positions are not representative of the numbers of minority populations in institutions of higher education.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Denise M. Davis and Tracie D. Hall, *Diversity Counts* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see the Association of Research Libraries’ *ARL Annual Salary Surveys* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006-2015).

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Other data illustrate that minority inclusion is low in administrative ranks across much of academia (e.g., African Americans at 7.6 percent in public research universities in 2003; Asian American females at 1.4 percent in 2003-2004, and Hispanic women in postsecondary education administration at 2.2 percent in 2003).<sup>10</sup> A recent study, released in 2017 by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, showed a substantial gap still exists between the percentage of minority administrators and the corresponding percentages of racial/ethnic composition in the U.S. population. The researchers concluded: “The minority representation gap in higher [education] administrative positions is not narrowing. It has been fairly consistent for the past 15 years, and – if anything – it is widening.”<sup>11</sup> These disappointing statistics mirror data related to US management ranks in the corporate world, where “racial minorities remain underrepresented in leadership roles relative to their proportion in the US population.”<sup>12</sup>

The library and information science (LIS) literature offers copious scholarship describing the purposes of diversity initiatives and affirmative action in academic libraries, decrying the poor representation of minority librarians in the profession, and pointing out the slow progress being made in increasing the numbers of minorities in upper ranks of academic libraries.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Alvin Evans and Edna Breinig Chun, *Are the Walls Really Down? Behavioral and Organizational Barriers to Faculty and Staff Diversity* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 2007), 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Bichsel and Jasper McChesney (March 2017), *Pay and Representation of Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Higher Education Administrative Positions: The Century So Far*, Research Report, CUPA-HR, 14. Available from <http://www.cupahr.org/surveys/briefs.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> Arpi Festekjian, Susanna Tram, et al., “I See Me the Way You See Me: The Influence of Race on Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Leadership Perceptions,” *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 21(1) (2014): 102.

<sup>13</sup> For examples, see Camilla Alire, “Diversity and Leadership: The Color of Leadership,” *Journal of Library Administration*, 32(3) (2001): 95-109; DeEtta Jones, “The Definition of Diversity: Two Views. A More Inclusive Definition,” *Journal of Library Administration*, 27(1/2) (1999): 5-15; Lorna Peterson, “The Definition of Diversity:

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Some reports contain analyses of statistical data regarding minorities in the profession and within certain ranks to illustrate progress or lack of movement toward filling higher-level positions.<sup>14</sup> One study compared the career development patterns of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members' managers with participants in ARL's Leadership and Career Development Program (LCDP), an initiative geared toward mentoring minorities with leadership potential. That study concluded that achieving "diversity in management and a complete integration of diversity within the culture of the organization" are critical to increasing minorities in library leadership roles.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as late as 2014-2015, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) reported that only 14.8% of professional staff in the 109 US university libraries were racial/ethnic minorities, with 6.8% of those being Asian and Pacific Islander. Only eight people of color were executive leaders in those 109 libraries.<sup>16</sup>

Peter Hernon, Ron Powell, and Arthur Young published the results of a study that identified the attributes of present and future library leadership. In the study, directors of large Association of Research Libraries (ARL) shared their perspectives that successful candidates for future directorships should possess "a substantive record of successful accomplishment" and

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Two Views. A More Specific Definition," *Journal of Library Administration*, 27(1/2) (1999): 17-26; and Mark D. Winston, "The Importance of Leadership Diversity: The relationship Between Diversity and Organizational Success in the Academic Environment," *College & Research Libraries*, 62(6) (2001): 517-526.

<sup>14</sup> For examples, see Denise M. Davis and Tracie D. Hall, *Diversity Counts*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, Office for Research and Statistics, Office for Diversity, 2006. 2006; Deborah R. Hollis, "Affirmative Action or Increased Competition: A Look at Women and Minority Library Deans," *Journal of Library Administration* 27(1) (1999): 49-76.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Zou and La Loria Konata, "Connecting Diversity to Management: Further Insights," in *Our New Public, a Changing Clientele: Bewildering Issues or New Challenges for Managing Libraries?*, ed. James R. Kennedy. (Westport, CN: Libraries Unlimited, 2008): 154.

<sup>16</sup> Association of Research Libraries, *ARL Annual Salary Survey* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2015).

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must show “progressive administrative responsibilities” in their career paths.<sup>17</sup> If that is true, then it would seem critical for the library profession to have queued up, posthaste, a strong cohort of minority colleagues into the middle-management pipeline. This career pathway question became the impetus for one of my own research studies entitled, “Opting Out or Overlooked?,”<sup>18</sup> conducted in 2009. In my study, I hoped to examine the library profession’s mid-career ranks and find out whether librarians of color were indeed being groomed for leadership and, once ready, whether they would be willing to step into senior-leadership roles. My focus was on librarians of color who were then serving as department heads, managers, and supervisors, below the level of assistant or associate university librarians/deans/directors in 21 large, urban, doctoral research universities. The research questions for my study were designed to explore librarians’ perceptions about their career aspirations, advancement factors, and career mobility. For example: Did librarians of color in middle management roles aspire to become senior-level administrators in academic libraries? What interest did they have in the perceived functions of these positions? I wanted to examine the personal, professional, and institutional factors perceived to be supporting and/or preventing aspiring librarians of color from attaining senior-level positions.

Unfortunately, midway through my study, it became evident that I would not be able to gather enough data for any substantial analysis to occur, nor could I publish my findings. This

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Herson, Ron Powell, and Arthur Young, “University Library Directors in the Association of Research Libraries: The Next Generation, Part One,” *College & Research Libraries*, 62 (2001): 125.

<sup>18</sup> Adriene Lim, “Opting Out or Overlooked? Librarians of Color and Advancement to Senior-Level Administrative Positions in Academic Libraries” (unpublished study, Simmons College, 2009).

was because I could not find enough middle-management librarians of color to meet the requirements of my study's design. Thus, my formal project failed, but the attempt still allowed me to gain interesting insights. Seven of the urban-serving libraries confirmed there were no librarians of color who served in middle management roles at their institutions at the time. Six of the 21 would not confirm or deny that this was the case, despite repeated follow-up requests and my own inability to identify any librarians of color at these libraries through professional networks. In the remaining eight libraries, only 12 librarians of color could be found. Of these, nine participated in my study.

The low number of librarians of color in middle-management roles at these urban-serving institutions seemed to portend a disappointing outcome for the increased diversification of library leadership. To make matters worse, major budget cuts in academic libraries have resulted in the reduction of supervisory and middle management jobs altogether,<sup>19</sup> which arguably would seem to reduce the overall advancement chances for anyone with aspirations for senior-leadership roles -- but would perhaps be particularly bad news for librarians of color, given the odds against them. Without accurate data about the career paths of these librarians, the profession cannot know whether its diversity initiatives and leadership training programs have had a noticeably positive effect on the ability of librarians of color to obtain equitable promotions and advancement. In my study, the librarians of color who participated noted that they were unsure or neutral about their desire to advance higher in the

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<sup>19</sup> William M. Curran, "Succession: The next ones at bat," *College & Research Libraries*, 64(2) (2003): 134-140.

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library ranks; none of the librarians responded unequivocally that career advancement was what they wanted. At the same time, a willingness to commit to perform the work required and an agreement on the benefits of assuming these leadership roles were clearly indicated in their responses. The ambivalence revealed in these responses led me to ponder how Asian American librarians might also be internalizing negative reactions and assumptions about their own leadership capacities and potential.

A recent study completed by Binh P. Le focused specifically on the leadership aspirations of Asian American librarians and found more optimistic results than I did (although Le's subject population was broader than the middle-management group upon which my study was based). Among other data, his study showed a substantial number of Asian American librarians aspired to hold leadership/administrative positions at some point in their careers – 13 out of 29 survey respondents.<sup>20</sup> Further, he found they seemed to “share a common goal – to influence library and education policies” as change agents.<sup>21</sup> This is a satisfying finding for those of us who hope for more Asian American leadership in the profession. Given the persistent, disproportionately low numbers of Asian Americans in senior leadership positions, however, Le's revelations are also troubling. If the number of aspiring Asian American librarians in Le's survey population is indicative of a broader trend of more leadership aspiration occurring among us, and yet the numbers of Asian Americans in leadership positions have continued to stagnate, why is this the

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<sup>20</sup> Binh P. Le, “Leadership Aspirations of Asian American Academic Librarians,” *International Information & Library Review*, 48(2) (2016): 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

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case? This situation seems to match a pattern that has occurred for decades in corporate environments, a phenomenon referred to as the “glass ceiling” – that “unseen ... barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements.”<sup>22</sup> As one report concluded about a similar state of affairs in the private sector: “Glass ceiling barriers continue to deny untold numbers of qualified people the opportunity to compete for and hold executive level positions.”<sup>23</sup> For Asian Americans, these barriers are exacerbated by racial stereotypes and cultural differences, inspiring one executive coach, Jane Hyun, to call the phenomenon a “bamboo ceiling” rather than a “glass” one.<sup>24</sup>

How do stereotypes of Asian Americans as servants, perpetual foreigners, and “the other” affect perceptions of Asian Americans as potential leaders? The answer to this question may have been addressed inadvertently, if not answered explicitly, in the conclusions of a study by Arpi Festekjian *et al.* Festekjian and her colleagues investigated the intrapersonal leadership perceptions of a large group of business undergraduate students in Southern California, and introduced race into the study’s simulated work situations to determine how the undergraduates’ perceptions of leadership capabilities were affected. Their study affirmed the effects of race on people’s leadership perceptions, with undergraduates tending to rate

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<sup>22</sup> U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission. (1995). *A solid investment: Making full use of the nation's human capital* (Final Report of the Commission). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office (1995): 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> See: Jane Hyun, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

Caucasian Americans as prototypic, agentic leaders more often than Asian Americans. The researchers then speculated about the impact these differential perceptions might have on “leadership opportunities for racial minorities, possibly in the form of blatant or subtle discrimination (e.g., minorities being passed over for leadership promotions because they lack ‘executive presence’).”<sup>25</sup> Reading their conclusions, I was reminded of the times I had heard people describe otherwise highly qualified candidates of color and women as somehow not “deanly enough,” never quite ready for that top job, not exactly the “right fit,” when compared to White male candidates with similar credentials and experience. Being aware of racial and gender stereotypes and perceptions is the first step toward confronting this problem; the implicit-bias training many of us are receiving at our institutions is a good sign we are beginning to combat the insidious effects of this phenomenon.

In a study of minorities in the business world, David Thomas and John Gabarro examined the career trajectories of minority corporate managers and executives compared to White counterparts, and concluded there were still patterns in the careers of minorities that showed “systematic inequity as a result of race,” with minority executives and managers moving more slowly early in their careers than their White colleagues.<sup>26</sup> They observed that the signals sent to minorities with potential for high-level positions more often took the form of a

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<sup>25</sup> Arpi Festekjian, Susanna Tram, Carolyn B. Murray, Thomas Sy, and Ho P. Huynh. “I See Me the Way You See Me: The Influence of Race on Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Leadership Perceptions,” *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 21:1 (2014): 114.

<sup>26</sup> David Thomas and John Gabarro, *Breaking Through: The Making of Minority Executives in Corporate America*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press (1999): 80.

willingness of others to invest personally in them, rather than the fast promotions given to White managers and executives. Aiding the career mobility of minority managers “is possible, but it places the equivalent of a ‘tax’ on minorities in the form of time, no matter whether one pays it willingly or begrudgingly, with or without awareness of its existence.”<sup>27</sup> The different rules and playing fields for minorities may be demanding more time and achievements in lower levels of the library’s structure than it may be demanding of others, and thereby discouraging librarians of color from both aspiring to and reaching the highest levels of leadership in their libraries.

As Thomas and Gabarro noted, having powerful mentors and sponsors helps minority protégés obtain visible and challenging assignments; gain access to important networks of people; receive enhanced resources within their existing positions; and enjoy the benefits of a strong signal sent to others that they were worthy of an extraordinary investment. But so far, this has not been enough to make a large difference in minority achievement in academic or library administrative ranks. The numbers are stagnating, not only in libraries, but in administrations across academia. I believe this realization means that the library profession’s focus on mentoring and sponsorship of minorities may be on the right track for short-term, incremental impact, but for all the wrong reasons if we are looking for substantial, long-term results. Without identifying and addressing head-on what are likely to be multiple root causes of the gaps in advancement, I believe that increased mentorship and sponsorship may continue

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

to reinforce differential treatment of people of color in ways that will only minimally challenge the status quo. Instead, we need leaders to consider whether or not they are giving newer minority professionals the same promotion and advancement opportunities as early in their careers as those from the dominant groups. We need to reconsider whether or not library administrators are subconsciously experiencing the sense of a “tipping point,” a gut reaction that makes them feel that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, that makes them overlook their Asian American colleagues and other people of color when leadership opportunities arise.

In the end, will it really matter if academic libraries fail to advance greater numbers of minorities to positions of leadership and influence? In addition to the obvious ethical problems involved in failing to address racial/ethnic discrimination in library hiring and promotion practices, there are many reasons to assert that it does matter now and will matter in the future. Institutions of higher education and their libraries serve increasingly diverse, multicultural populations; these individuals want to see themselves and their unique concerns reflected in our institutional leadership ranks, and in our programs and services. Diversifying leadership will help our institutions evolve into more culturally versant, flexible, and responsive organizations than they have been in the past, better able to compete and prepare students to participate as citizens in a global, interdependent economy. Creative ideas for solving our most daunting problems and the ability to leverage the distinctive strengths inherent in different cultures are easier to obtain if we have diverse, culturally adept people in our leadership ranks

and structures in higher education and academic libraries. As many have asserted, diversity and inclusion are good for business – even if believing in equal opportunity and the intrinsic worth of human beings are not persuasive enough on their own to motivate urgent action on our parts.

A benefit of having diverse, culturally adept leaders is the potential for empathy to become *baked into* more of our administrative prioritization, collaboration, and decision-making processes. Service design may see improvements as well, as diversity and inclusion become not some lofty, abstract goals related to an abstract user population, but essential components that bring more multicultural knowledge into our library collaborations for improved overall performance. Empathy, the ability to understand how another person is feeling or experiencing a situation, should be acknowledged as a major factor in successful service design and user-experience work in libraries. Cindy Tripp, a leader in design thinking, describes it this way:

First and foremost, you have to reframe the way you see the people you serve --- stop calling them your target market – or any name that turns them into a statistic or a bullseye. Instead, consider them to be people: the people you hope to serve, your stakeholders. That reframe alone opens your eyes and leads you into a different type of engagement with them. ... With empathy as your framework, you can better listen to the people you want to know. And you need to get to know them in human ways.<sup>28</sup>

Arguably, outstanding leadership requires mature forms of empathy – for one’s stakeholders, staff and faculty members, clients, and communities; what better way to achieve empathy in

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<sup>28</sup> Cindy Tripp, “No Empathy, No Service,” *Design Management Institute Review*, (Fall 2013), 62.

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senior leadership ranks and to ensure the perspectives of diverse user populations are considered than to have strong leaders join the conversation, people who happen to have affinities and relationships with those same user communities. We need libraries that truly value multicultural perspectives, expertise, and innovation, to the extent that we should be more afraid of losing out on new service opportunities or not meeting our users' needs, than being afraid of losing any unfair privileges and advantages we may have. What better way to develop an understanding of the "other" as human beings and to begin sharing experiences with more people of color as leaders and colleagues?

Many of us in executive-level positions would admit proudly to drawing strength, confidence, and vision from our personal experiences and backgrounds. My personal background, the fact that I grew up as a child of working-poor parents and ran away from home a high school dropout at the age of 16 to escape a violent stepfather, led to an inevitable recognition of the abuse of power and the will to resist it. This led to my use of the Detroit Public Library as a haven, a place of soul healing and self-managed learning, and this learning inspired a life of community activism in my 20s and 30s, where I organized coalitions of political groups to oppose racism, sexism, and domestic violence. And this coalition-building led to a deepening conviction that each person's voice and lived experiences were valuable and had the potential to create magnificent change, solve intractable problems, or avert disasters, if only someone would listen. The conviction became a belief in shared leadership and participatory mechanisms that would allow for a lone voice to change the trajectory of the organization if warranted. My absolute passion is the library, however, that institution where fascinating

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voices, especially those of oppressed peoples, could be recorded, accessed, shared, and contemplated in thousands of intellectual and creative works. All of these experiences inform my leadership approach and explain the input I share in senior administrative meetings. They motivate me to lead and create adaptive, good places to work, in ever more challenging, complex, and unpredictable external environments. And they make me wish for more Asian Americans and other people of color to be by my side to lend support to my voice and mine to theirs. What unique stories and ideas do my Asian American brothers and sisters have to share, and how can they help us reshape and improve our institutions? All of us need more Asian Americans and people of color to step up to the plate, because the work is waiting, and it is a serious, meaningful, and joyful thing that we do.

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