

# **Student-Led Resistance: A Model for a Critical Librarianship Reading Group in Uncertain Times**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the formation, implementation, and impact of a student-led Critical Librarianship Reading Group (CLRG) initiated in a graduate Library and Information Science (LIS) program in the U.S. South. Designed to fill gaps in formal curriculum related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the CLRG became a transformative space for students to critically engage with social justice theory and practice. The significance of this intervention is heightened by recent political attacks on DEI efforts, most notably, Donald Trump's moves to dismantle federal DEI initiatives and defund related programming (Haberman & Karni, 2020; White House, 2025). As higher education institutions face increasing scrutiny and censorship around critical race theory and queer inclusion, the CLRG offers a case study of resilience and student-driven curricular repair.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Critical Librarianship; Social Justice; Curriculum.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Critical librarianship; LIS education; Student-led initiatives; Critical race theory.

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# INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the formation, implementation, and impact of a student-led Critical Librarianship Reading Group (CLRG) initiated in a graduate Library and Information Science (LIS) program in the U.S. South. The reading group was designed to fill gaps in the formal curriculum related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The CLRG became a transformative space for students to critically engage with social justice theory and practice. The CLRG began during Trump's first term in office. The significance and need for the reading group is heightened by the most recent political attacks on DEI efforts, most notably, Donald Trump's moves to dismantle federal DEI initiatives and defund related programming (Flannery, 2024; Haberman & Karni, 2020; White House, 2025).

Interventions like the CLRG are critical to preparing culturally competent LIS professionals. However, such work cannot be left to students alone. As anti-DEI legislation spreads and intellectual freedom is threatened, LIS educators must embed EDIA content into core courses, support student activism, and engage in ongoing professional development. This paper calls for a recommitment to critlib principles as part of a broader resistance against white supremacist and anti-LGBTQ+ educational censorship. It provides a replicable model for other programs seeking to create brave learning spaces rooted in equity, self-reflection, and collective care.

The significance of student-led interventions is heightened by a national political climate that has become increasingly hostile to DEI initiatives. High-profile actions such as the Trump administration's defunding of federal DEI programming and bans on racial sensitivity training (Haberman & Karni, 2020), alongside state-level restrictions on critical race theory and LGBTQ+ content (Flannery, 2024), have created a chilling effect in higher education. Against this backdrop, the CLRG serves as a case study in resilience, resistance, and student-driven curricular enhancement. It also illuminates both the promise and limitations of grassroots educational interventions within professional programs.

This paper draws on both single and collaborative autoethnography (SAE and CAE) as methodological approaches. These narratives are offered from three positionalities: a graduate student, an early-career librarian, and a faculty member. Autoethnography enables each participant to reflect on their lived experience in relation to institutional structures, while CAE provides a space for collective meaning-making. This methodological orientation aligns with the principles of critical librarianship (critlib), which centers experiential knowledge and critical reflection as tools for dismantling dominant paradigms and decolonizing education (Chávez, 2012; Gamboa et al., 2024; Hernandez, 2021). The theoretical framework is grounded in critical race theory (CRT), LatCrit, and the InfoCrit model developed by Colón-Aguirre and Cooke (2022), which advocates for the ethical and intentional integration of structural critique into LIS teaching and research.

Critical librarianship challenges the notion of library neutrality, recognizing that information institutions are not exempt from broader systems of oppression. According to critlib.org, this movement seeks to embed social justice principles into every aspect of library

work, including pedagogy, service, and policy. However, these principles are not consistently or robustly reflected in LIS education. As Cooke et al. (2016) and Noble et al. (2014) have shown, social justice content is often relegated to elective courses or framed as a “special topic,” rather than embedded in core curriculum. This creates a disconnect between institutional messaging and students’ lived experiences, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds who enter LIS expecting to be prepared for equity-centered professional practice.

Some of the students in the LIS program described in this paper voiced concerns about the lack of critical theoretical engagement in their coursework. These concerns came into sharp relief following participation in national professional conferences, where they encountered frameworks such as CRT and intersectionality that were largely absent from their LIS classrooms. Inspired by these experiences and supported by the department’s Library and Information Science Student Association (LISSA), one LISSA member spearheaded the formation of the CLRG. The initiative was co-developed with an early-career librarian serving in a diversity residency and a faculty member whose scholarship centers on race and information institutions. Each brought different perspectives and roles but shared a commitment to creating a learning environment that would critically interrogate the limitations of LIS education.

## **FORMATION AND STRUCTURE OF CLRG**

Because the program has a large online student population, the CLRG met primarily via Zoom. We met monthly over two semesters and on weekends to accommodate our students who worked full-time. Meetings were structured around shared readings, multimedia content, and facilitated discussion. The group began with foundational texts such as Ijeoma Oluo’s *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2019), selections from [critlib.org](http://critlib.org), and a discussion on intersectionality. Over time, the group shifted toward shorter, more accessible resources rather than books to accommodate participants’ time constraints while maintaining a focus on rigor and depth. These choices reflected an intentional effort to balance academic demands with inclusive pedagogy. Members emphasized that “critical” should not mean inaccessible or exclusionary, an ethos that shaped the group’s format and content.

In shaping the content and direction of the CLRG, facilitators grappled with the complex balance between providing foundational critical theory and responding to the immediate, practice-based concerns of participants. Early sessions intentionally focused on structural and institutional racism rather than personal bigotry to reduce defensiveness and invite deeper engagement. However, tensions emerged as participants expressed a desire for actionable strategies, asking questions like “What do I say when I’m confronted with this in the library?” This prompted the inclusion of bystander intervention training, especially in response to high-profile incidents in the library profession, such as the verbal attack on April Hathcock in 2019. These moments shifted the group’s content, centering allyship and intervention. Yet, intervening without a foundational understanding of social justice risks harm, so inclusion of foundational works such as Oluo’s was imperative. The rotating nature of participation heightened the challenge; each meeting might include a new mix of students, requiring repeated revisiting of core concepts. This made it difficult to build momentum but also underscored the importance of

designing each session as a standalone opportunity for both learning and growth. Facilitators learned to guide discussions with grace and intentionality, cultivating patience for the learning curves of others while modeling a form of allyship grounded in humility, accountability, and care.

One of the most notable outcomes of the CLRG was its ability to create a safe space for risky conversations. Ground rules, community agreements, and intentional facilitation helped foster trust. White participants were encouraged to confront discomfort and take responsibility for their own unlearning without centering themselves or relying on colleagues of color for guidance. BIPOC students, meanwhile, described the space as affirming and necessary, though emotionally demanding at times. The presence of a faculty member offered not only theoretical context but also institutional cover, an important consideration if this group were to occur in this current political climate when social justice discourse is increasingly surveilled and politicized. To maintain privacy and encourage open dialogue, the group was not recorded. The group offered a rare sight of cross-role dialogue between students, a librarian, and a faculty member, which was both critically reflexive and theoretically grounded.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper identifies four key findings related to the creation and impact of the CLRG: the necessity of intervention in LIS education, student agency in curricular augmentation, the importance of brave and reflexive learning spaces, and the impact and fragility of grassroots efforts.

### **The necessity of intervention.**

Despite many LIS programs expressing a commitment to DEI, students often experience a disconnect between institutional values and classroom practice. This gap was particularly salient for students seeking deeper engagement with critical theories such as CRT, LatCrit, feminist theory, and disability justice. Similar to earlier findings by Pawley (2006), students observed a reluctance among LIS faculty to name or address race directly, and, as Gibson et al. (2018) noted, libraries continue to be perceived as unwelcoming spaces by patrons of color. Within the program under study, while electives addressing diversity were offered, these were inconsistently scheduled and often insufficient to build a strong foundation in DEI. The CLRG emerged as a necessary curricular intervention, supplementing the formal curriculum with critical theoretical frameworks that would otherwise remain peripheral or absent.

### **Student agency in curricular enhancement.**

The CLRG originated from the determination of a single student who sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice in LIS education. Her initiative demonstrates how students can lead curricular enhancement, acting as co-producers of knowledge and community. Working collaboratively with a diversity resident librarian and a faculty member whose research centers critical race theory, the group's founders built a non-hierarchical structure that welcomed participants from varying backgrounds and levels of expertise. Consistent with Cooke et al.

(2016), the CLRG's design as an extracurricular space allowed for more expansive and nuanced discussions than those often possible within traditional classroom constraints. It also highlighted how LIS programs' reliance on student-led or voluntary spaces to advance social justice work is both a strength and a vulnerability. Without systemic integration into required coursework, such initiatives remain optional, unsupported, and ephemeral.

### **Safe spaces for risky conversations.**

Perhaps the most compelling outcome of the CLRG was the cultivation of a safe space for risky conversations – discussions that interrogated whiteness, white fragility, systemic racism, and microaggressions. The group fostered vulnerability among white participants, who learned to decenter themselves and recognize the emotional labor often extracted from colleagues and mentors of color. These dynamics were approached with care and critical self-awareness, avoiding the pitfalls of performative allyship. Ground rules were established to ensure confidentiality and reduce the risk of harm, especially given the emotional weight of the topics discussed. The presence of a faculty member with expertise in CRT and DEI offered both theoretical grounding and a protective buffer should institutional pushback arise.

However, while the CLRG was successful in its time, the authors caution that such spaces are increasingly under threat. Since 2021, a rising tide of anti-DEI legislation has emerged across the United States, with policies banning the teaching of CRT, limiting discussion of LGBTQ+ identities, and threatening faculty autonomy. Trump's executive actions against racial sensitivity training (Haberma & Karni, 2020) and the more recent coordinated efforts to defund DEI offices (White House, 2025) have created a chilling effect in higher education. Faculty and staff involved in social justice work may face increased scrutiny, while students may fear reprisal or surveillance. As a result, it has become harder to create spaces where honest and critical dialogue about systemic oppression can thrive. The very conditions that made the CLRG possible, a supportive department chair, relative institutional latitude, and a self-selecting group of students, are increasingly rare. Institutions must do more to protect and legitimize such spaces, which serve as incubators for critical consciousness, professional growth, and equity-centered practice.

### **Impact and limitations.**

Despite many LIS programs expressing a commitment to DEI, students often experience a disconnect between institutional values and classroom practice. This gap was particularly salient for students seeking deeper engagement with critical theories such as CRT, LatCrit, feminist theory, and disability justice. Similar to earlier findings by Pawley (2006), students observed a reluctance among LIS faculty to name or address race directly, and, as Gibson et al. (2018) noted, libraries continue to be perceived as unwelcoming spaces by patrons of color. Within the program under study, while electives addressing diversity were offered, these were inconsistently scheduled and often insufficient to build a strong foundation in DEI. The CLRG emerged as a necessary curricular intervention, supplementing the formal curriculum with critical theoretical frameworks that would otherwise remain peripheral or absent.

Despite its successes, the CLRG also faced several challenges. The group largely attracted students already interested in DEI topics, raising questions about how to reach those less familiar or invested. Sustaining momentum also proved difficult. As participation depended

on volunteer labor and student leadership, the group lost continuity once its founding member graduated and the librarian's temporary position came to an end. The group's informal structure, while a strength in many ways, made it difficult to institutionalize or scale. Without dedicated funding, staff support, or curricular integration, the group remained fragile and temporary. The decreased need to supplement their courses with critical discussion may be another reason the CLRG ended. The LIS program as a whole engaged in equity audits of syllabi and course materials, which led to curriculum reform. The chilling effects of the current political climate on DEI discussions may be another factor that reduces the likelihood that the CLRG will return in the near future.

## **Conclusion**

Nonetheless, the CLRG had a lasting impact on its participants and program culture. The CLRG illustrates the transformative potential of student-led, justice-oriented educational interventions. However, it also underscores that such efforts cannot and should not exist in isolation. Institutions must go beyond performative commitments to DEI by embedding critical perspectives into required coursework, investing in faculty development, and providing material and emotional support for those engaged in equity work. This is especially urgent as anti-DEI legislation continues to proliferate, creating hostile environments for both educators and students seeking to name and dismantle systemic oppression.

LIS programs occupy a unique and powerful position in shaping future information professionals. As such, they bear a responsibility to prepare students not only to manage collections and services, but also to recognize and respond to the structural inequities that permeate the field. The CLRG represents one possible model for how students, faculty, and staff can collaborate to create more equitable and liberatory learning environments. Its story is both a call to action and a reminder that, even in constrained contexts, transformation is possible.

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