



Making Libraries Welcoming Places

**Interviews with
Jill Hurst-Wahl & Julie Edwards**

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KENNEALLY: As the start of another academic year approaches, the spaces and places on campus receive special attention. Classrooms and laboratories see new equipment and maybe a fresh coat of paint. Even virtual spaces are upgraded with additional features. In academic libraries, the staff will review more than the collections. Not so surprisingly, librarians today share concerns that go far beyond books on shelves.

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The university library holds first a central role as a study space. With enrollment increasingly diverse, librarians and administrators see responsibility for making that study space into a welcoming place, too. Researchers found that a sense of belonging affects a range of student success measures, including academic achievement and classroom engagement. Yet the values and assumptions many have about libraries and librarians can become obstacles. Cherished ideals of neutrality and impartiality have traditionally ignored systemic racism in libraries and the exclusion of people of color in those spaces.

Jill Hurst-Wahl is an antiracism auditor with Widerstand Consulting, which offers specific, institution-focused assessments to identify the most effective strategies for an organization to move forward in its desire to be antiracist. She is professor emerita at Syracuse University, where she most recently was director of the iSchool Public Libraries Institute. Welcome to the program, Jill Hurst-Wahl.

HURST-WAHL: Thanks for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And Julie Edwards is an instructional designer for the Niche Academy, which provides training and community engagement for librarians and administrators in academic libraries and public libraries. As a Fulbright Scholar from 2017 to 2019, she taught in the department of library and information studies at the University of Botswana. Like Jill, she is an antiracism auditor with Widerstand Consulting. Welcome to the program, Julie Edwards.

EDWARDS: Thank you, Chris. Good to be here.



KENNEALLY: It's good to have you join us, Julie. Tell us – what are students looking for in a studying and/or library space in 2022?

EDWARDS: It's a great question. I think the answer will in part depend on the student, right? Part of it is some students want a really quiet study space. Some students want maker spaces and places to interact with groups. Libraries have known that for a long time.

I think, though, in terms of what we're talking about here today, it's that sense of belonging. We've often thought of that as we want to make sure that students feel like they fit into the library, but I think we should flip that and say does the library fit the students that are coming in? Are we able to meet the students where they are, who they are, so that they have that sense of belonging, which then I think leads to a sense of safety – and not just safety in the way we use it now, but we know library anxiety is a real thing for all kinds of students. Do they feel safe coming up to a librarian and asking us questions? Do they feel safe in the space studying by themselves or interacting with a group? Do they understand what the space is for? Is it clear that the space is for them and that they're not going to be burdened by a bunch of rules that maybe they don't understand, because they're first-generation students or they're not used to an academic library for whatever reason? That sense of belonging – I think the burden becomes the librarian's to make sure that the library is fitting the student and not just hoping that we can sort of mold our students to fit the culture of the library, if that makes sense.

KENNEALLY: It certainly does. Julie Edwards, I wonder about this notion of library anxiety. Do the students recognize that, or do they just feel sort of generally uncomfortable? It makes a difference.

EDWARDS: Yeah, I think the research has shown that students don't always recognize it and that librarians don't always recognize it, but it is a real thing for all kinds of people coming in. One of my favorite interactions with a student ever really demonstrated this. I worked at the University of Montana for a long time. He was from a small, rural community. He didn't know where the books are, so he got up the nerve to come and see me at the desk. I brought him downstairs, and we opened the doors onto this floor – a solid acre of books. And he took a physical step back, because he was so overwhelmed. In that moment, I was like, oh, this is a real thing. He really needs me to help him on the level that I wasn't prepared to. So I don't think the students realize it. They may feel uncertain or unsure, but they may not know why. And it's our job to help them feel secure in the space.

KENNEALLY: What about working with the other members of the information community on a typical campus? This includes the librarians you mentioned and the students, but also



researchers and faculty, even publishers and other content providers. Do they need to be aware of these same issues?

EDWARDS: I think so, and I think they are. The faculty certainly are. They see issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism I think in a different way than the librarians do, because we're interacting with all the students across the university. We see their information needs in a way that their classroom instructors may not. So in my experience, what the faculty are most concerned about in their library are not issues of DEI, but how well does the library serve their research needs or their curriculum-building needs? And that will never go away. It's foundational to academic libraries.

I can't speak to publishers, but my hunch would be that they want to get their information out to readers. So making sure that they're thinking about who their audiences are and how they're changing and what students and scholars want to see on the shelves or need to see on the shelves, particularly as we move forward in making the library a more welcoming and holistic place for everyone.

And then librarians – I think in our work with Widerstand, we've seen librarians concerned with all of the things that librarians are concerned with, plus now these new antiracism measures. There is a real interest in making libraries more welcoming to students and deconstructing some of these structures that have been set in place that aren't serving the students or the librarians anymore. So when we talk to librarians, we hear them say we see the world moving. We want to reflect in our library that movement.

KENNEALLY: This intention to make the library a more welcoming space – help us understand how that can be accomplished. What should academic libraries do to make their spaces more inclusive, especially for people of color and other marginalized community members? Are there concrete steps?

EDWARDS: That's such an excellent question. The absolute first thing to do is figure out what your intentions are. That is the number-one thing. I think a lot of people start this work with sort of vague good intentions, and I say that having been one of them. I did diversity work at my university, and I did it because diversity's a good thing. But that's not an intention. The intention is to combat White supremacist and racist structures in our institutions, and they exist, right? Those may not be intentional, but they are there. So figuring out what it is that you want to do in your library first is really important.

I'll give you another little anecdote. I was the person who chaired the committee to write the first diversity plan for the library at the University of Montana, and I was proud of it, and it was good, and we got a lot accomplished. Then when we went to rewrite it – when it sunsetted and we went to rewrite it – we ran it by the faculty library committee, and the



person who was the chair of the faculty library committee was Tobin Miller Shearer, who is the founder of Widerstand. He said to me this is a great plan. What's the purpose of it? And I said the purpose of it is because diversity is a good thing. He said, no, the purpose is because people have been systemically excluded from libraries, so you need a plan to address that. It was like all the light bulbs went on. So this idea of being intentional – what you want to do for your students, for your library, for your staff has got to be the first step. And be honest and explicit.

KENNEALLY: You know, Julie, it's a point I've thought about, too. When we speak about diversity, equity, and inclusion, we do need to remind ourselves that there needs to be inclusion because there's been exclusion. That's an uncomfortable thought, but we need to face it.

EDWARDS: Yes, exactly. This facing thing leads to this next point of making sure you're using the same language, that everybody in your staff – when you're talking about antiracist work, what are you talking about? Because your librarians of color and your White librarians are not necessarily going to come to that word in the same way. They don't have the same experience with that word and with that reality. So understanding – developing a common language is an extremely important second step. And it's a lot of groundwork. It's not the work we necessarily want to be doing, because it's not the front-facing work. But you have to get that foundation laid before you do anything front-facing for your students. What are you doing, and do we all understand in the same way what we're doing?

And then finding your community, understanding what your community is. I'm here in Montana. Our community is made up of 12 Native American nations in the state of Montana. That's who we serve here. That's who our student body was at the university. So I wasn't going to spend a lot of effort focusing on other diverse groups – not that I ignored them, but the priority was our Native students. Librarians really need to look at who their communities are and figure out what they need and how to speak to them. Part of that comes from forming relationships with those communities. And by relationships, I mean relationships, not reaching out and asking them to do the work. This is a long process.

One of our colleagues in Widerstand likes to say these systems were built up over centuries. We're not going to take them down in a couple of days. So meeting with your communities of color, forming relationships with them, and then taking their advice and taking their nos and yeses as you move towards making more inclusive spaces is hugely important.



I think the last thing I would say is that I see librarians overcorrecting sometimes. They so want to do good diversity work that they're afraid to do anything. So I would caution against that. Take whatever small steps you can. But don't do nothing for the sake of fear that you're going to make a mistake. You're going to make a mistake, and that's OK. You can correct from that point. But don't avoid action because you're afraid of mistakes.

KENNEALLY: Julie Edwards, you're a librarian, and you think libraries matter. I probably agree with you. But why do libraries matter especially on campus? What kind of a space are they in a student's life?

EDWARDS: I always loved the library on campus because it was the place where learning could come outside the classroom. That was my focus with students, was helping them learn new things in new ways on their own time. That could be through displays. That could be through programs. That could be whatever work they were doing with me at the reference desk or in my office hours. So that idea that the whole campus can be infused with learning for students and that they can find new ways of being and new ways of knowing in their library that maybe their classroom space is a little constraining for them – the library, if it's doing a good job, can open them up to themselves and to each other in new ways.

I love libraries. They're not infallible, and they're not perfect. But I think for students, they can be a real place where if we can really respond to them, they can start to see themselves not only in the library, but in the college community and part of that community.

KENNEALLY: Julie Edwards with Widerstand Consulting and Niche Academy, thank you so much for speaking with me.

EDWARDS: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: I want to turn now to Jill Hurst-Wahl, also with Widerstand Consulting, for her own perspective as a librarian, a professor, and now an antiracism auditor. Jill, welcome back.

HURST-WAHL: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: In your 20 years at Syracuse University, what changes did you witness in the library space or in libraries' training that began to address the legacy of systemic racism?

HURST-WAHL: That's a really good question, and I think the answer's different in different types of libraries. There's been a lot of work in academic and public libraries. Academic



libraries are, as Julie said, trying to make themselves more welcoming – as Julie also acknowledged, trying not to overcorrect – but really needing to understand who comes into the library? Who should come into the library? And how can that space be better for them?

In terms of space, it's not just the physical space, but the online space. People need to see themselves there. One of my biggest criticisms of all types of marketing – library marketing, school marketing, marketing marketing, it doesn't matter – is that they will use pictures and videos that the person doing the video was able to take and thought were great, but not images, not videos that really represent who uses that space or who should use that space.

So making libraries welcoming through visuals, through content, through whatever else is really important. We see libraries increasing the types of content they have, being more mindful of having content that represents everyone on campus, maybe having content in multiple languages, not just scholarly content, but other content for people. Having staff members who represent everyone on campus. And just overall trying to make it a space that people want to be in, that they feel welcome – they feel accepted in.

As for academia, the teaching side, schools are doing things around cultural competence and around other areas that get people thinking about who they are as individuals, who they are in their social group, their – I hate to say race, because it's not always race. But if you're from Boston, there's some things about being from Boston that are unique to you. I'm from south central Pennsylvania. There's some things about being from there that are unique to me. So recognizing who we are as individuals, which helps us then recognize other people and what makes them unique. Understanding how to appropriately learn about other cultures, respond to other cultures, to interact with other cultures. So cultural competence is something that you see cropping up on many campuses these days.

Having researchers who are looking at how information's intersected with different communities – so how's information intersected with Black communities or Native American communities or Hispanic communities? We know that libraries historically were exclusionary. There's a lot of people who could not go into a public library. If you're training people to go into that space as librarians, how do you help them understand what that space has been? Because they need to understand that history in order to understand what it should be now and should be in the future. Julie and I have seen libraries that don't understand their history, and if you can't understand your history, then you can't understand what you need to do going forward. You really need that connection. And helping students learn about culture and becoming cultural competent will help them in any type of library they go to to understand the history of that library, connect with it, and make that a more welcoming space.



KENNEALLY: Jill Hurst-Wahl, you're talking about making a library a welcoming space. Clearly, this is not just about hanging a welcome sign on the door. There's a lot of work involved. It must be daunting for many librarians who have been in the profession a long time and think of themselves as good librarians.

HURST-WAHL: They do think of themselves as good librarians. It can't be us. We're not the problem. We're welcoming. We have the best of intentions. Which means that we're not actually looking at what we're doing as librarians. So we need to learn more about racism and about being antiracist. We need to maybe have someone else look at what we're doing. Having done this work now for a while, I really do advocate for having a third party, no matter who that third party is, look at what you're doing. Because you're going to say we're fine, but maybe you're not fine. And that third party will see where there are some problems in your organization.

Yeah, libraries want to say we serve everyone. We do everything. We're welcoming. It's all good. But if you ask students on campus or anyone who goes in the library, they will tell you it's not all good, and they will tell you why they don't find it a welcoming place.

KENNEALLY: Well, Jill Hurst-Wahl, do you think that professional ideals of neutrality and impartiality at libraries may have created a culture of silence that pressures students to hold back and not to speak about their experiences with racism?

HURST-WAHL: I don't think it's because of libraries being impartial. I think it's because library staff are predominantly White. So students of color, students who are LGBTQ, students who are whatever else is on your campus who are not the majority – are some ways a minority – will look at the library, look at the staff, and think I don't belong there, and because I don't see myself there, I can't tell them why I don't belong.

KENNEALLY: What role can library vendors play, do you think, Jill Hurst-Wahl? Can publishers, for example, be antiracist when it comes to their staffs and their products?

HURST-WAHL: Yes. So one of the first things they can do is to look at their staff and figure out who their staff are. How do they hire staff? How do they ensure that they're doing blind hires, which means that they're really looking at credentials and not other information about applicants, so that they have a better opportunity to hire from diverse backgrounds?

They should think about how they treat their staff. How do they treat their professional staff versus their administrative staff? If they have staff working at home now in 2022, how do they treat that staff versus the staff that has to go in the office? And who are those



people who get to work at home, versus who are those people who get to work in the office? Sometimes, it's the staff of color, the staff from diverse backgrounds, who are in the office, unable to work from home, and it's the majority White staff who have the luxury of working online, working at a distance. So look at all those things and then think about what you can do differently.

Think about your marketing, which I think is really important, because I want to see my community in your marketing. If I don't see my community in your marketing, I'm not sure I should look at your product.

And the final thing is in your product, whatever that product is, make it appropriate for my community in terms of content, in terms of usage, in terms of whatever else. We had someone we talked to recently who said the library's ILS, integrated library system, won't let me change my name in the system. My name isn't this. It's this. And I can't change it. That is really kind of a small thing, but it makes the library not welcoming. So doing those small things can be really important.

KENNEALLY: Is it important to shine a light on all of these problems, on these systemic racism problems, Jill? Is that the way to begin to eliminate them?

HURST-WAHL: I think so. I think if you start to point them out, maybe point them out slowly – again, knowing that people might be uncomfortable, they might see if they point it out, it might look bad for them. They may feel that they're at risk job-wise or whatever, because they've pointed out a problem. So find ways to make it more acceptable for people to talk about this. It's not something that's going to happen overnight.

With Widerstand, we give recommendations. We give recommendations for three months, six months, 12 months, and after 12 months, recognizing that you can't do it all at once. So if you're a library, a library vendor, library staff, and you're thinking about all the changes you want to do, you can't do them all at once. Start with the things that you can do now and then schedule when you want to do the other things. Sometimes, they have to build onto something. Make one change and then build onto it to make the next change.

KENNEALLY: Jill Hurst-Wahl with Widerstand Consulting, thank you for joining me today and opening up this discussion on a very important topic.

HURST-WAHL: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.



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