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Academic Libraries, Counter-Storytelling, and Minoritized Students' Scholarly Identity Development

Darren Ilett

abstract: This study uses the critical race theory approach of counter-storytelling to explore scholarly identity development among first-generation, low-income, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and women students transitioning to graduate school. Data included interview transcripts, observation notes, and student assignments from a program that supports students in completing an original research project and applying for graduate school. Findings show the frequent negative stereotypes about students that circulate in higher education as well as students' own counter-stories that reimagine academia and their place in it. Implications include ways that libraries can better support students' scholarly identity development.

Introduction

The transition from college to graduate school is daunting. It can involve extensive searches for information about multiple universities, exam preparation, essay writing, application fees, campus visits, separation from family and community, assumption of enormous debt, and (re)imagining oneself as a scholar. The challenges are compounded for the participants of this study: students with minoritized identities, including first-generation, low-income, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and women students. This is because the culture and structures of academia exclude students with minoritized identities. For example, as Lori D. Patton asserts, "The establishment of U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in racism/White supremacy."[1] The fact that 73 percent of full professors are white is one persistent consequence of that history.[2] How can students imagine themselves as scholars if they rarely or never encounter faculty like themselves? Further, how do deficit-minded majoritarian narratives about

minoritized students in higher education impact students' self-image as scholars? Majoritarian narratives are those pervasive, unquestioned stories told from a continuing-generation, middle-class, white, male, straight perspective. Students with minoritized identities often come to accept such negative stories as natural, normal, and true.[3]

The author, a teaching and learning librarian, collaborates with a support program that aims to correct this historical and continuing exclusion from academia. The program's namesake, the astronaut and physicist Ronald E. McNair, was refused service at a public library as a child. He protested and eventually succeeded in borrowing books from the library.[4] The racist abuse McNair faced persists in minoritized students' current experiences in higher education, including academic libraries. The federally funded Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (hereafter McNair Program) aims "to increase the attainment of Ph.D. degrees by students from underrepresented segments of society" and thus diversify the professoriate.[5] Eligibility requirements vary somewhat at McNair Programs across the U.S. McNair Program participants at the author's institution—a midsized, public, majority white but aspiring HSI (Hispanic-Serving Institution) university in the Mountain West of the United States—are either first-generation and low-income or BIPOC students who are underrepresented in graduate programs. Many are also women, though gender is not an eligibility criterion for this campus's McNair Program. In the program, students design and conduct an original research project with a faculty mentor and complete coursework that supports their research project as well as their transition to graduate school. With the McNair Program the author has served as an embedded librarian, taught several one-shot sessions, held office hours in the program's office, attended students' research presentations, and taken took part in social events.

The question of how students develop their scholarly identity is an integral and explicit part of the McNair Program curriculum. Students reflect on becoming scholars through assignments and online and in-person discussions. To explore the issue of scholarly identity more systematically and to learn how to support students' development of that identity more fully, the McNair Program Director and the author launched a research study beginning in Fall 2020. The project aimed to answer two research questions:

1) How does the McNair Program foster students' scholarly identity development?

2) How do participants understand their own scholarly identity development?

Findings related to the first question yielded an internal report that informed programmatic changes in the McNair Program's next federal grant proposal. The report's content is outside the scope of the current study. What follow are findings related to the second question.

This study is what Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell characterize as "a basic interpretive study," common in such applied fields as education and library and information science (LIS). It proceeds from what Merriam and Tisdell call "the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon."[6] It seeks to center participants' own understanding of their scholarly identity development while recognizing that the findings presented here are a product of the co-construction of meaning along with the researcher.

The theoretical approach of the study is critical race theory (CRT). When applied to educational contexts, CRT studies often take the form of counter-storytelling.[7] As described by Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, counter-storytelling centers students' own understanding of their academic journeys, which have been impacted by "racial, gender, and class subordination."[8] Participants' engagement in counter-storytelling serves to expose the deficit-

minded, majoritarian stories we librarians and other educators (particularly those with dominant identities) perpetuate about students. By engaging in counter-storytelling students also offer their own accounts of their experiences in becoming scholars, which stand in contrast to negative, majoritarian narratives. According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, "because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, Native American, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know."[9] McNair students' stories may help librarians with dominant identities (such as the author) understand students' experiences and then work toward social and racial justice in our field and in our classrooms.

Both the author and nearly all McNair Program students are first-generation students from working-class families. However, in contrast to most of the students, who are also low-income, BIPOC, and women, the author is a middle-class white man. What the author learned from the participants in this project continues to inform his work as a teaching and learning librarian. It helps him become aware of his unconscious biases and inadvertently harmful approaches to teaching and pushes him to work toward social and racial justice. The following presents some of what McNair Program students generously and courageously shared about their frequently traumatic experiences in academia, with the aim of spurring discussion among academic librarians about fostering students' sense of themselves as scholars, particularly those who are systematically excluded from—and marginalized and abused within—careers in higher education.

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of the fundamental elements of CRT, LIS literature that employs counter-storytelling, and LIS research into students' scholarly identity development. Together, these themes form the foundation of this study.

Critical Race Theory

Legal scholars in the 1970s first developed critical race theory in response to the continuing racial inequality in US society.[10] CRT studies generally share several features, as Delgado and Stefancic contend. The first is the ordinariness of racism. It is "the usual way society does business" and therefore frequently goes unacknowledged. The second is interest convergence, which posits that white people will work toward racial justice only when it also aligns with their own interests. Third, race as a category and particular races "are products of social thought and relations" but do not correspond to any "biological or genetic reality." Fourth, racialized categories serve the social function of retaining power and are adjusted according to the particular needs of power at a given historical moment. Fifth, BIPOC voices provide powerful insight into the workings of racism.[11]

An important part of CRT research, counter-storytelling centers BIPOC voices. It is both a way of "telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told," and of "exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege," according to Solórzano and Yosso.[12] Counter-storytelling centers the lived experiences of people harmed by majoritarian stories and legitimizes their own understandings of those experiences as the foundation for research. Adrienne D. Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau Anderson describe a range of these counter-storytelling approaches. One is the presentation of "first-hand accounts of persons of color […] as a way to counter the dominant discourse." A second approach is the creation of composite stories, which are fictionalized accounts based on data collected from

multiple research participants. In a third approach, scholars use counternarrative as a way of identifying and disrupting harmful majoritarian narratives in education.[13] Each of these approaches centers the voices of BIPOC students to question the majoritarian stories told about them that have become accepted as neutral, natural, and true. Instead, these counter-storytelling approaches offer BIPOC students' own narratives of their experiences of education. The current study takes the first of the counter-storytelling approaches by presenting participants' first-hand accounts of their educational journeys and analyzing them through a CRT lens.

Counter-Storytelling in LIS

In recent decades, LIS researchers have employed counter-storytelling to examine multiple facets of our profession, including librarians' own professional experiences, various communities we serve, and IL instruction. First, research on librarians' experiences in our profession have identified the pervasiveness of racism and other forms of oppression in librarianship. Through counter-storytelling, Shaundra Walker described the experience of racist abuse in librarianship, from library school to an internship and several library positions, and noted that such aspects of our field "have become so ingrained that they are difficult to identify and even harder to rectify."[14] Nicole A. Cooke called counter-storytelling a survival strategy for BIPOC librarians facing racist abuse in the profession, on the one hand, and a way of paving "the way for more scholars of color to follow in our footsteps" on the other.[15] Similarly, Jorge R. López-McKnight described counter-stories as both "acts of resistance" and part of the "healing process(es) against racialized violence" in librarianship.[16] LaVerne Gray focused on voice and narrative to break the silence imposed on Black women librarians and to create space for further dialogue.[17] Extending the use of counter-storytelling, Jennifer Brown, Nicholae Cline (Coharie) and Marisa Méndez-Brady highlighted "the ways in which our labor has been exploited and devalued" in libraries

and offered strategies for libraries to work toward just labor practices.[18] Finally, Ana Ndumu et al. reported on the creation of iBlackCaucus, a Black LIS student group, which represented "a counterstory to the idea that information and knowledge work is reserved for the white status quo."[19] Counter-storytelling research has exposed racist abuse perpetuated through the culture of whiteness in libraries by centering the voices of BIPOC librarians. Further, it has enabled BIPOC librarians to dream of a future characterized by racial and social justice.

Second, LIS researchers have also utilized counter-storytelling to question the ways librarians serve the needs of various communities. Harrison W. Inefuku urged librarians to showcase the value of counter-storytelling and other forms of scholarship by faculty of color—all too often devalued in academia—by engaging in such activities as "building bibliographies and databases of faculty publications" and "holding receptions and other celebratory events."[20] Miranda H. Belarde-Lewis (Zuni/Tlingit) and Sarah R. Kostelecky (Zuni Pueblo) described two projects that implemented counter-storytelling to "share Zuni cultural information and knowledge" while also protecting "sensitive and privileged information," which white scholars and librarians have often shared in harmful ways.[21] Finally, Sujei Lugo Vázquez offered strategies for challenging white dominant narratives in children's librarianship.[22] These studies have illustrated the potential of counter-storytelling to serve a range of BIPOC library users, from children to our disciplinary colleagues.

Third, researchers have used counter-storytelling to critique and reimagine IL instruction. Kafi D. Kumasi used counter-storytelling to develop INFLO-mation, a new model of information behavior drawing on high school students' information use and hip hop.[23] At the undergraduate level, Kim L. Morrison showed that counter-storytelling helped first-generation Black students flip the negative majoritarian narratives that are told about them; instead of receiving remedial

interventions, students were "doing intervention on the practice of information literacy instruction/definition for librarians."[24] Similarly, Gemmicka Piper found that counter-storytelling was "a vital portal through which students can begin to demonstrate their learning processes, and become empowered."[25] In the first of two counter-storytelling studies, Chelsea Heinbach, Rosan Mitola, and Erin Rinto "gained a much deeper understanding of [transfer students] as individuals, the strengths they bring, and the challenges they face," by offering them the space "to explore their identities as students, researchers, caretakers, and employees." In the second study, Heinbach, Mitola, and Rinto worked with first-generation students in a community-based participatory research project and encouraged them "to talk about the ways they learn things outside of the classroom as a way to decenter classroom learning and gain insight into [their] preferred learning environments."[26] At the graduate level, Nicole A. Cooke called for opportunities for students to read other students' counter-stories and create their own throughout LIS curricula.[27] Librarian researchers have convincingly demonstrated the liberatory effects of counter-storytelling for students in a variety of instructional contexts and levels.

Students' Scholarly Identity Development

LIS research exploring the scholarly identities of the students that librarians serve is somewhat limited. A few LIS researchers have focused on undergraduate students' scholarly identities. Morrison concluded that asset-based pedagogy, culturally relevant content, and counter-storytelling in an information literacy (IL) course resulted in first-generation Black students being more able to "imagine themselves as scholars," though they faced many racist majoritarian stories throughout their education.[28] Similarly, in an IL course for first-generation Latine students, Torie Quiñonez and Antonia Olivas used validation theory and funds of knowledge approaches "to empower students to realize their agency as creators of knowledge, and to

recognize themselves as valuable members of the academic community."[29] Further, Morrison and Quiñonez and Olivas shared with students their own lived experiences as BIPOC students who later became librarians, researchers, and educators, thereby providing their students role models who looked like them and creating a space in which students could discuss their own educational journeys as well.

Other studies have focused on graduate students' identity development. Rebecca A. Croxton found that work experience and connections to fellow students and faculty contributed to professional identity among online MLIS students.[30] Eystein Gullbekk and Katriina Byström concluded that citation practices in academic publishing were important for PhD students' self-understanding as scholars.[31] Finally, Linds Roberts conducted a study of PhD students in education that demonstrated that affect, community, and negotiations of power informed their scholarly identity development.[32] A common finding in studies on students' scholarly identity development at all levels was the crucial role of community. Seeing others like oneself and sharing experiences of doing research together helps students develop their scholarly identity.

This study draws from and builds on CRT and LIS research on counter-storytelling and students' scholarly identity development. It fills a gap in the literature by exploring first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students' counter-stories regarding the development of their scholarly identities as they transition to graduate school, with a focus on the role of academic libraries in supporting that process.

Methodology

Recruitment and Participants

After gaining IRB approval, the author recruited participants during the McNair Program fall orientation. The resulting sample of students included nearly all McNair Program participants

and was therefore representative of the program membership. Of the 26 students in the McNair Program, 23 provided informed consent to participate in the study. One student later dropped out of the McNair Program and the study. Some research participants had already completed McNair coursework, while others had just joined the program. Some completed the program in one year, while others took several years. Though the author did not elicit demographic information from participants, issues relating to first-generation status, race, gender, sexuality, class, and other identities arose during our conversations about scholarly identity and are reflected in the findings. Nearly all participants identified as first-generation students. Most identified as BIPOC, as women, and as low-income. A smaller number also identified as LGBTQIA+ and as disabled. Throughout the findings, the author describes students' identities as they described themselves.

Data Collection

The author collected three types of data from participants over the course of the academic year. First, the author observed the McNair Program research course eight times. The course was sometimes held in person and sometimes online. The author kept notes focusing on discussions of scholarly identity development. Second, the author collected four assignments from the McNair Program research course in which students reflected on becoming a scholar. Sixteen participants made posts to two different discussion forums, fourteen participants completed a reflection paper, and fifteen participants completed a research autobiography. Third, the author conducted one-on-one interviews with participants. Thirteen participants took part in interviews at the beginning and end of the academic year as planned. Two participants took part in interviews at the beginning of the academic year and at the end of fall semester because they were graduating at that time. Due to scheduling issues and students' workloads, four participants took part in only one interview in the fall, and one participant took part in only one interview in

the spring. Interviews were held via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only an audio recording and an automatically generated transcript of each interview were saved. No video recordings were created or saved. Participants selected pseudonyms for themselves to protect anonymity. Interview questions centered on participants' scholarly identity development (see Appendix A for interview guides for the first and second interviews). Participants received a dining hall gift card as a token of gratitude after each interview.

Data Analysis

Using NVivo, the author coded the data from the observation notes, assignments, and interview transcripts. The author and McNair Program director developed a tentative codebook based on their familiarity with the participants, the curriculum, and the research questions. Codes corresponded to various aspects of students' identities, such as first-generation status, race, gender, and socioeconomic status, with subcodes for experiences of discrimination based on each identity and experiences connecting each identity to being a scholar. There were also codes indicating key moments in becoming a scholar (presenting at a conference, writing a research report, and so on) and various sources of support on campus such as the library, McNair Program, and faculty mentors. Coding was largely deductive, but the author added codes for unforeseen themes that arose, such as religion and language.[33]

Reviewing the coded data revealed three main themes: participants' research experiences, their sense of belonging (or not) in academia, and the importance of community and family. The findings are organized around those three themes, with data from the three source types—observation notes, assignments, and interview transcripts—supporting each theme. Participants identified and critiqued majoritarian stories—those negative narratives told about them that are

often accepted as true and natural—and offered their counter-stories related to each of the three themes.

Two factors arose during data collection and analysis that led the author to choose CRT as the theoretical framework and counter-storytelling as the approach. First, the centrality of racism and other forms of oppression became evident in students' accounts of their experiences of becoming scholars. As Solórzano and Yosso explain, counter-storytelling foregrounds race and racism, but it also identifies and critiques other types of oppression based on "gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality."[34] Second, participants often used narratives to describe their scholarly identity development. The counter-storytelling approach underscores the legitimacy of the experiences of BIPOC and their understanding of those experiences as the basis of research.[35] This approach works against the majoritarian, deficit-minded stories usually told about BIPOC by centering and valuing "an individual's experiences with various forms of racism and sexism."[36] This study therefore centers participants' voices as they identify majoritarian stories and provide their own counter-stories that narrate their educational histories and imagine their futures.

Positionality of Researcher

As a white, middle-class man recounting the counter-stories of mostly first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students, the author finds it important to center students' own understandings of their experiences in coming to see themselves as scholars. As someone who benefits from the systems of oppression students described, the author works to identify his own, and the academic library's, role in perpetuating racist, sexist, classist, and other forms of oppression so that he, the library in which he works, and the profession more generally can

disrupt those systems and work toward the socially and racially just future that participants envisioned in their counter-stories.

Findings

Participants both exposed majoritarian stories about them and offered counter-stories related to the research question, "How do participants understand their own scholarly identity development?" Three main themes emerged from the data: research experiences, belonging in academia, and family and community. The following are representative counter-stories related to each theme.

Research Experiences

The barriers to becoming a scholar begin with how to talk about research. In an interview, Drew, who is Latinx and queer, communicated the impact of academia's hidden curriculum: the norms, procedures, and language that students are expected to know without having explicit instruction about them.[37] Drew described how subtle distinctions in talking about research determine who belongs in academia:

> And there's a lot of, I think, small, coded ways that it continues to be reinforced. Specifically at Ivy League colleges and universities they use a very esoteric language to see who is of the…you know, like, who belongs there and who is obviously an outsider. And that feels so trivial, like, the difference and distinction between being like, "Oh yeah, my concentration is in blah, blah, blah" versus being like, "I major in English." And, like, that in and of itself signifies so much, and I think that again speaks to those structural issues of, like, who's given that language to begin with? Who's taught that language to be able to succeed in that realm?

Drew's story indicated that the hidden curriculum of higher education not only engenders fear and doubt among first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students, but also that it plays into the majoritarian narrative that they do not belong in academia. Merely describing their studies and research presents a minefield of unknown codes.

However, in a reflection paper, Grace, a Latina woman, indicated the power of learning the hidden curriculum of academia by completing and presenting the results of her research project. Grace wrote that:

> I didn't even know what the word "dissemination" meant, and now I have participated in disseminating my findings at Research Day. Now, I feel as though I have a more holistic understanding of research, and of what it means to be a scholar.

Grace overcame barriers such as the hidden curriculum to discover that she was a capable scholar who had already produced meaningful knowledge in the form of a presentation at our campus's Research Day. Stories like Grace's demonstrated that the McNair Program's intentional combination of explicit learning about the hidden curriculum of academia with practical research experience supported participants' scholarly identity development.

In addition to the hidden curriculum, the culture of individualism and whiteness was another factor that affected how first-generation students thought about themselves in relation to research, including library use. In an interview, Beyoncé, a Latina woman, expressed the common majoritarian story that first-generation students hold sole responsibility for their library use and their success in college generally. She explained:

> I'm just not a person who's been at the library much, so I can't provide too much input [on how to improve it]. I just haven't utilized it many… And even when I do or find the opportunity it's always just…there's so much for me to do, like, the resources are there, I

> just need to get…do them. And when I have, like, it's all worked out before, so I think it's just me!

Beyoncé's account reflects the internalized majoritarian story that effort is the ultimate key to success and that any barriers are the fault of the individual, rather than of the institution.[38] After the author asked what the library can do to minimize barriers, Beyoncé continued:

> I think it's just, like, maybe building those connections with the students more because, like, I don't know anyone at the library except you! I feel like you lean towards more the resources where you have more of a connection with a person. I would go to the cultural center and print there versus going to the library, like, I know I'm gonna see people.

Challenging the majoritarian story of individual effort, Beyoncé identified personal connection as the dominant factor in determining which campus resources she used. Implicit here is also the importance for BIPOC students of seeing people who look like them in campus spaces. Beyoncé's preference for the Latinx cultural center over the library corresponds to the overwhelming whiteness of library faculty and staff and the resulting alienation BIPOC students feel in library spaces structured around whiteness. Lack of representation and the culture of whiteness impact students' access to research resources, including library resources, and act as obstacles to scholarly identity development.

Yet personal connection can sometimes counteract such feelings. Speaking of her interactions with librarians during an interview, Candy, a Latina woman, reported that, "Sometimes they're even really excited for you as well. That's kind of motivating, going, 'He's excited. I should be excited 'cause this is interesting to other people as well.'" The knowledge that their research matters to others can increase students' motivation and their likelihood of viewing themselves as scholars.

Candy went on to talk about the importance of research experiences in the McNair Program, particularly presenting her work at a conference:

> I turned into a different person, and I kind of like it…I don't know, so, like, more confident, someone who knows what they're talking about. Yeah, I don't know, I guess I'm a good presenter, I've been told. That's not something I would expect for myself or how I feel. But I don't know, I like how it makes me feel.

Candy's experience was typical for McNair Program students. Working with a faculty mentor to design a research project, collect data, write a research report, and present their findings—all with the support of McNair Program staff, a faculty mentor, and librarians—helped students change their self-image. Candy's story contained both the majoritarian story that she was incapable of presenting research results effectively ("That's not something I would expect for myself") and the counter-story that she is a successful scholar ("someone who knows what they're talking about").

Participants frequently expressed their sense of pride in completing research projects, including during a class observation early in the year in which advanced McNair Program participants described their research experiences to new program members. Natalia commented that as a first-generation, Afro-Latina student who was paving the way for the rest of her family, she had often felt like quitting because she felt she did not belong and was not smart. However, with the support of other McNair students and staff, she was able to publish an article at the age of 22. She proudly reported that she showed her younger siblings her article on Google Scholar. In that same class session, Violet, a Black and Hispanic woman, similarly expressed that she often experienced imposter syndrome and recommended to new McNair participants that they

print out their manuscripts to appreciate all their hard work and remind themselves that they were already skilled scholars and researchers.

Taken together, students' accounts of research experiences challenged the majoritarian stories that the barriers they experience during the research process (such as library use) are their own fault, that they do not know how to navigate the norms of research, and that they are incapable of completing high-quality, meaningful research projects. Participants also put forth the counter-stories that representation matters in higher education, that personal connection is important in research, and that they were, indeed, already accomplished scholars.

Belonging in Academia

As Drew's thoughts on the hidden curriculum showed, majoritarian stories often depict students with minoritized identities as outsiders. These stories take both explicit and implicit forms. In an interview, Sandra, who is a Latina woman, told of such an explicit experience she had as a child. In middle school Sandra wrote a letter in support of her principal, who consequently received an award and invited her to accompany him to the awards ceremony at a conference on music in education. As she was returning to their table, the following occurred:

> This, like, older white gentleman stopped me and was like, "Hey, where are you going?" And I was like, "To my table with, like, you know, my band and orchestra director, like, the principal." And he's like, "Oh, you're here for the *event*?!" And he was like, "Where are you from?" And I was like, "Oh, from [US town]." And he's like, "No, where are you *really* from?" And I was like, "Oh, I was born in [US city]." And then I didn't know if he doesn't know geography or something, but he was like, "What part of Mexico is that?" And I was like, "Oh wait! I know what's happening now!" And I was like, "*Deep* south." And he's like, "I'm sorry for all these questions. It's just people like *you* don't come to

> these things." And I was like, "What?!" That same guy also had asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I said I wanted to be a doctor, and he said that the closest thing that I would ever get to working in a hospital was if I cleaned one.

Sandra reported that this incident was her first conscious experience of racist abuse.[39] It therefore took a moment for her to realize what was happening. That she responded with humor—questioning the man's knowledge of geography and responding "*Deep* south"—showed that Sandra was already aware of racist majoritarian stories. Nevertheless, the message that her race made her an outsider in scholarly spaces, in her chosen profession, and in her own country, left a lasting impression. Indeed, it motivated her to go to college, pursue research, and become a doctor. She remarked, "With the newer generations, we're not just letting it be, and, so, I take joy in the change."

During a class observation, Suga, an African refugee and woman, also described an incident that impacted her sense of belonging in academia. A representative from a racist organization had spoken on campus the previous week, and students in the McNair research course were debriefing in class about their experiences at the event. Suga then shared that racism was not surprising to her because it was her everyday life. She therefore thought it odd that others were surprised by the event. Suga went on to say that it was hard to trust people because even if they were nice to her in classes, she never knew what they really felt. She expressed that she was happy to be leaving our campus but that she also worried about being at an even more white campus for graduate school. Suga's remarks demonstrate the pervasiveness of racism and some of the difficulties BIPOC students face on majority white campuses. Though their white classmates may treat them "nicely" in person, those same students may threaten BIPOC students' sense of safety and belonging on campus by supporting racist organizations and policies.

The message of not belonging takes more tacit forms as well. During an interview, Violet noted the whiteness of staff and faculty, both in the McNair Program and the library:

> I'd love to see more people of color in libraries too 'cause I feel like that'd be beneficial. I know it's hard for me to, like…I still reach out because I know that's how the system is set up, like, I still need to reach out in order for me to become successful, but I feel like it'd just be a lot easier if I see someone who looks like me and who's gone through similar challenges…like, I grew up poor, like, all of, like, those certain things…and then look like me and have gotten that far, like, "Yes!" It's just…that would be *fantastic!*

Violet's observation showed that majoritarian stories are not just stated verbally and explicitly. Entering a space and not seeing yourself reflected there also tells the story that you do not belong. It works together with verbal narratives to make majoritarian stories seem a natural and inevitable part of the academic landscape.

In an interview, Katrina, a Latina woman, similarly detailed the impact of (a lack of) representation in academia:

> I thought for the longest time that, you know, it was only just white people that were in academia and, you know, like, on that higher tier. And it wasn't until I got to [this university] that I realized that that's not totally true. Like, when I first saw [a Professor of Mexican American Studies] on my first day of school…I saw, like, the name on the syllabus and I misread it, and I was like, "Okay, I guess it's going to be, like, this white guy that's, like, super, you know, interested in our culture." And, yeah, because I've never had a person of color as a teacher before. And, like, who comes walking in? This short Brown woman, old as heck, that gets up to the front of the classroom, and I honestly

> thought, I was like, "Is she lost?" And then she started talking and introducing herself, and I literally, like, I cried.

Katrina's experience of persistent lack of representation at all levels of education supported the majoritarian story that BIPOC women do not belong, making it appear natural and true to the point that Katrina internalized that narrative. She could not imagine a Latina woman as a professor. The joy was palpable in Katrina's voice as she narrated the moment of realizing her professor was also a Latina woman. Working with this professor and other Latine faculty impacted Katrina's choice of major, research topic in the McNair Program, and career. Representation and opportunities to learn about and research racism in her coursework made possible the counter-story that Katrina could belong in academia as a scholar.

Along the same lines, Barry, a Latina woman, described in a reflection paper that the McNair Program "has taught me that there are other scholars like me and that my interests are essential." Further, Barry claimed that "Knowing that there are others like me makes me feel better about my future concerning education." Participants often cited both their classmates with whom they shared many identities and the validation of their research interests—often tied to their identities and communities—as integral in their coming to view themselves as scholars who belong in academia.

Despite, or more likely because of, majoritarian stories of not belonging, some students told counter-stories about becoming the faculty members they had lacked in their educational journeys. Violet shared the following narrative during an interview:

> The world is against me. I faced all of the challenges! I'm first-generation, me being who I am—I'm mixed, I'm Black and Hispanic, a woman—you know, like, all of the things are put in place for…to see me not succeed. And that's, like, that's what made me

succeed even more. I'm assuming that's why I have all these tattoos too because, like, I love tattoos and I want to be the one, like, all cool, like, all wrapped up in tattoos, but I have my master's degree, like, "I'm a Doctor, like, call me this," you know? Like, everything's just put in place to, like, not see us succeed, but I'm here to, like, break down those barriers.

Tellingly, Violet emphasized the impact she wants to have on the collective "us," emphasizing the success of her community rather than her own individual success. She wanted her future students to see themselves reflected in her as a faculty member and to change the narrative of who belongs in front of classroom teaching and doing research. Violet's presence in academic spaces will help tell that counter-story of belonging for first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students.

In an interview, Ingrid, who is white and queer, described a very different experience than the BIPOC students, and the differences highlight both the potential and failure of libraries to foster belonging:

> The library was actually the reason why I figured out my identity, because the library…You know, my parents can look up what I was looking up and so that's where I was Googling questions about, like, gender and sexuality because my parents would let…I lived at the library as a child! My parents were like, "Okay, I have to go run errands. I'll be back in two hours!"… [Later], as an adult, having that physical space where I could go in and know that it was other students, other scholars, other researchers in that space, you know, doing something similar to me, even if it's not even on the same topic, you know? The other part I want to talk about is like physical resources… So having access to, you know, books and periodicals that I would have never would

have…even known existed, unless I was in the library. I would never have been able to afford those on my own.

Multiple aspects of Ingrid's identity came together to make them feel safe in libraries: socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and race. As a child, the public library offered a safe space for Ingrid when their parents needed short-term childcare. It also allowed Ingrid another form of safety, namely the ability to explore their gender and sexuality without fear of surveillance. Ingrid's later sense of belonging in academic libraries also stemmed from the physical space dedicated to research and study, filled with others doing similar work, and from having access to electronic and physical resources that were otherwise prohibitively expensive. What remained unstated in the story, though, is that Ingrid also felt safe in the library because they felt reflected in library personnel and in the culture of whiteness that informed library spaces. Symptomatically, Ingrid was the only research participant who spoke at length and with only positive affect about libraries. BIPOC students instead spoke briefly about libraries, sometimes mentioning the lack of representation and frequently repeating the internalized majoritarian narrative that they are at fault for not using library resources, services, and spaces, as illustrated by Beyoncé's story. When they did speak positively about libraries, it was to tell stories of connection with individuals, as with Candy's story of a librarian's enthusiasm for her research. In general, however, the academic library was not a safe, welcoming space for BIPOC students.

Students' stories showed that academia is often marked, both explicitly and tacitly, as a place in which first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students do not belong. Further, representation is a major factor in creating a sense of belonging. Finally, libraries often

offer a sense of belonging and safety only for white students because of the pervasive culture of whiteness and lack of BIPOC representation.

Family and Community

The relationship between academia and community proved to be an integral but tense part of students' stories about themselves as scholars. Katrina shared in an interview that:

> When I'm around my family, like, I can't really talk about my research because they don't really get it. And then, like, when I'm around my mentor I feel like, you know, I'm, like, running so fast to try and catch up. But the McNair space makes me…I think that's where I feel the most like a scholar 'cause I'm around other people that are doing it, I'm around other people that are like me. And, like, [the McNair Program staff], like, they all take us very seriously and, yeah, so, like, that's where I feel the most, like, capable and safe to, like, view myself as…like "All right, like, I'm a scholar and that's what it means and this is how I come up with that."

Katrina's experience of tension with her family reflected the majoritarian narrative that first-generation students' families and communities are obstacles to higher education and research.[40] She also felt unsure of herself around her mentor because of his command of the subject area and of the research process. However, Katrina discovered a sense of community among other emerging scholars in the McNair Program. Learning "how I come up with that"—her identity as a scholar—came more easily to Katrina in an environment where she could do so alongside people like her and with the help of supportive McNair Program staff who took students' research and identities seriously. Many students similarly cited the importance of a research community in learning to think of themselves as scholars.

In contrast, Raven, a woman of Southeast Asian heritage, shared in an interview that her family encouraged her pursuit of further education despite their unfamiliarity with it and the cost of higher education. She began engaging in informal research projects starting in the fifth grade. Raven's parents recognized her enthusiasm for research and therefore offered her supportive messages:

> "No matter what you want to do, we'll support it. If you want to go to college, we won't feel like you're abandoning us. We'll work on a way of communicating." Because we're a very close, communicative family, so moving away was really a struggle for all of us. But my mom was like, "We're not gonna let our family hold you back from becoming better." They're like, "You have a passion for scholarship, so go for it because we know you're going to have…like, be miserable if you don't."

Raven also explicitly identified the majoritarian narrative that first-generation families act as an obstacle to success in college, saying "I know that's a consistent issue with other first-gen students, but I was very fortunate in a way that my parents are very supportive." Raven's counter-story revealed that the typical narrative about parents of first-generation students does not always hold true. Despite unfamiliarity and the financial burden, they supported their child's journey toward becoming a scholar.

Another common theme among students was the goal of using research to help their communities. In two discussion posts, Ann, a queer, disabled, Indigenous, and Latina woman, shared her motivations for pursuing her research topic:

> I am interested in studying trauma, chronic pain, and executive functioning. My overall interest in these topics stems from a desire to better understand intergenerational trauma in U.S. Latinx communities […]. Not surprisingly, intergenerational trauma among other

things lies at the core of my identity. […] My work makes me proud because I am serving my community. I am laying a foundation in the field […] that could lead to another path towards healing for myself and others.

Ann, like many other participants, found meaning in connecting her research to the needs of her family and community. Students often strove to make a material difference in others' lives. Doing so combatted what they saw as the individualism and culture of whiteness of the academy.

Despite their successful completion of research related to issues faced by their communities, tensions remained for students. During an observation of the last class session of the academic year, Beyoncé shared that she felt selfish for focusing on her studies. Her father had been in a serious car accident the previous week, and she felt torn between advocating for his care and translating for him in the hospital on the one hand and studying for finals and finishing her McNair Program research project on the other. In the face of her father's suffering and the inadequate care he was receiving, Beyoncé questioned the purpose and impact of her research project on health disparities in the Latine community. Though her research was directly connected to her family's experience, she felt that it was not creating change as she had hoped it would and that it was, in fact, pulling her away from her family when they needed her.

During a course observation at the beginning of spring semester, Vanessa, a queer Latina woman, also expressed doubt about academia. She shared that her research was about how educational institutions oppress people of color. However, she wondered how she could write something that helped the community if it hurt them along the way by excluding them. She felt forced to write for white readers, though that was not the audience she wanted to write for. During an observation of the last class session of the year, Vanessa further explained that she planned to take a break after graduation because she recognized that college had "taken a lot

from me in terms of community." Vanessa felt she had lost touch with her family and community and wanted to spend more time with them to (re)discover who she was. The institution of higher education had taught her about individualism, whiteness, and success, she said, but she wanted to return to her family, community, and values before deciding about graduate school.

During that same class session, Suga shared that she had been confronted by the individualism of white academic culture in college, which was different from her home culture. In white culture, Suga explained, people want to stand out. In contrast, she wanted to be with her community and church to provide mutual support. Suga had lost herself and felt disconnected from her community while at a majority white college. For first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students, success as a scholar often also meant alienation from family and community.

Students' counter-stories revealed the tensions between the culture of academia and the values of family and community. Some students felt they could not share about their research projects with their families because of a lack of familiarity. Others drew strength and inspiration from their families. Also, their communities were central in their thinking about the purpose of research, often to effect change. Yet they doubted whether research was truly able to do so. Participants identified the white, individualistic culture of academia and its push for them to focus on themselves and their own personal achievements rather than on their families and communities.

Discussion and Implications

The McNair Program participants revealed the majoritarian stories they had encountered in their educational experiences and presented powerful counter-stories in which they reimagined

academia as more inclusive and relevant to the issues they and their communities face. They pointed out the importance of research experiences, representation, belonging, and community to their understanding of themselves as scholars. Their stories provide implications for librarianship, particularly instruction and collaboration with support programs. The following summarizes and discusses the aspects of instruction in the McNair Program, including library instruction, that participants identified as helpful to them in their scholarly identity development: learning about the hidden curriculum, support for their research projects, the pursuit of research related to their communities, opportunities to reflect explicitly on scholarly identity, and the emphasis on community building among the cohort. Teaching librarians can incorporate such elements into their teaching to support minoritized students' scholarly identity development.

Both the McNair Program curriculum and library instruction purposefully incorporated instruction on the hidden curriculum of higher education and research, which increased students' likelihood of figuring out how to successfully navigate graduate school and consequently see themselves as scholars. In addition, such instruction engaged students in identifying and challenging unspoken norms that discriminate against minoritized scholars by enforcing a culture of whiteness, such as those relating to what counts as professional attire, behavior, and tone in writing. Librarians can partner with support programs such as McNair to demystify and challenge the unspoken norms of academia, scholarship, and libraries that reinforce and naturalize whiteness.

Integral to students' scholarly identity development was doing the work of a scholar: designing, conducting, writing, and presenting the results of their own original research projects. Importantly, students received many types of support. McNair professional staff taught the research and graduate school preparation courses; graduate student staff helped one-on-one with

research, professional, and personal challenges; faculty mentors supported their research projects from start to finish; the McNair Program librarian taught one-shot sessions on multiple research topics, held office hours in the program's office, and was embedded in the course management system; subject librarians met with students one-on-one for research consultations; and the Office of Undergraduate Research provided financial support for their projects. Students often emphasized the importance of these sources of support in their reflection assignments, course discussions, and interviews with the researcher.

The types of research projects that McNair Program students often chose also informed whether and how they thought of themselves as scholars. Many conducted research on issues that directly impacted themselves, their families, or their communities, such as inequities and injustices in immigration, education, and healthcare. Pursuing research related to real-life problems increased motivation and helped students recognize the potential of research to effect change, as other LIS scholars have also found.[41] It also worked against the individualistic culture of whiteness in academia, which students challenged as detrimental to their own values of community and service. Participants viewed themselves as activist scholars who could have a direct positive impact on their communities and, in the process, also change the culture of academia to focus on the real-life impacts of research.

The McNair Program curriculum also offered participants several formal and informal opportunities to reflect individually and in groups on their journeys in becoming scholars and how scholarly identity related to their other identities. Though students often felt hesitant to use the term "scholar" to describe themselves, especially at the beginning of the year, these reflective assignments and discussions planted the seed early on that they were indeed scholars. However, asking students to share about their educational experiences can be retraumatizing, particularly

with instructors who have dominant identities.[42] Therefore, instructors should first focus on building relationships and trust before attempting such activities. Instructors should also share about and interrogate their own experiences before asking students to do so, as did LIS scholars and teaching librarians Morrison and Quiñonez and Olivas.[43] Instructors and students can also negotiate the terms of such an activity—What is the purpose? Is it required? Is it graded? Will it be recorded in some way? Will others read or hear it? Is it in small groups or in front of the whole class? —to help prevent further trauma.

As the participants of this study underscored, community building was another central aspect of the McNair program. Though many events had to be canceled or altered because of COVID-19 during data collection for this study, the McNair Program typically includes a retreat at the beginning of the year, group trips to conferences, a series of social events, and a cozy program space where students can socialize. Seeing fellow students who looked like them do the work of scholars convinced participants that they could do the same. They also expressed how important it was to interact with first-generation, BIPOC, and women faculty in the form of faculty panels and as research mentors, and they imagined a future where they could themselves serve such a function for later generations of scholars. Libraries can partner with programs like McNair and academic departments to facilitate or host such experiences and should compensate first-generation, BIPOC, and women faculty for their time and expertise as panelists or mentors. Further, teaching librarians should emphasize community building in their own courses and when they collaborate with programs like McNair already doing the work of community building on their campuses. For example, Akua Agyen et al. described how librarians fostered community among BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and disabled students in a research and writing training program by

allowing time for rest, not overpacking the schedule, and incorporating social bonding activities and spaces into the curriculum.[44]

Though the participants successfully completed the work of scholars and though they identified many ways in which the McNair Program and the academic library supported their scholarly identity development, they continued to feel alienated by the lack of diversity in academia and its culture of whiteness. They cited the relative lack of BIPOC representation among faculty mentors, McNair staff, and librarians. Further, when research and coursework responsibilities pulled them away from family and community, students were less likely to identify with it. Several questioned whether their research—which dominated their daily lives and prevented them from seeing their families—could bring about the real-world change that they sought. Some doubted whether 'scholar' was an identity they wanted to pursue.

It is tempting to propose diversification of librarianship and academia generally as a solution to the alienation that McNair Program students expressed. Yet diversification efforts, even if successful, will not make first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students feel safe and welcome in library spaces and elsewhere in academia if those spaces continue to be structured around whiteness. We must work to decenter whiteness in libraries, librarianship, and the larger institutions of which we are a part. As Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight pointed out, librarianship often limits itself to discussions of "diverse representation of racialized bodies, rather than […] racialized power, domination, and privilege."[45] Similarly, David James Hudson argued that "an LIS foregrounding of race as a historical construct […] would enable deeper inquiry into the complex ways in which our field aligns […] with the operations of contemporary regimes of racial subordination in the first place."[46] That is, we should contend with our own historical and current complicity with the racism and white supremacy that

characterize our society, higher education generally, and libraries specifically. An engagement with the counter-stories of first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students is one place where we can engage in that work. Students can help us identify the majoritarian narratives about being a scholar and succeeding in academia that we have come to view as a matter of course, such as those that promote meritocracy, neutrality, and individualism. They can also help identify counter-narratives that include the values of minoritized students, such as the importance of community within and outside academia and the application of research to alleviate issues faced by students' families and communities.

Conclusion

This study brought together two strands of LIS research. First, it built on the limited conversation about students' scholarly identity development, and, second, it extended LIS researchers' use of counter-storytelling to explore racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression in our field. The contribution of this study is the use of counter-storytelling to explore the scholarly identity development of first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students as they transition to graduate school. Findings revealed the importance of the research experience, belonging, and community for students' scholarly identity development. The implications of those findings included practical steps teaching librarians can take to improve instruction—such as teaching about the hidden curriculum of the research process and creating space for community building—as well as the need for more fundamental changes to our field, particularly the decentering of the culture whiteness in librarianship.

A key takeaway is that first-generation, low-income, BIPOC, and women students are continuously oppressed and alienated by higher education. Though they may eventually come to think of themselves as scholars through achievements—attaining high grades, publishing and

presenting their research, being accepted into graduate school—the effects of racist, sexist, classist, and other forms of abuse remain. Indeed, the racist abuse that the young Ronald E. McNair experienced at a public library continues today. Since librarians and scholars with privileged identities created and continue to benefit from these oppressive systems, we must work to change them. Librarians would do well to listen to and believe students when they identify oppressive practices and narratives in academia and then follow their lead when they offer counter-stories about a more racially and socially just future. As Violet pointed out, echoing several other students' views of their generation, they know what they are doing: "We're already so out of pocket, and I love it! I'm like, 'Good for us!' I feel like this generation is gonna be the one to change things."

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Appendix A

First Interview Guide

1. What made you interested in joining the McNair Scholars Program?

2. What do you think it means to be a scholar?

3. In what ways do you feel you are becoming a scholar?

4. What experiences have been important in helping you to become a scholar?

5. What people have been important in helping you to become a scholar?

6. How has the McNair Scholars Program affected your development as a scholar?

7. How has the University Libraries affected your development as a scholar?

8. What challenges have you faced in becoming a scholar?

9. How has being a first-generation student affected your development as a scholar?

10. How does your identity as a scholar relate to your other identities?

11. How could the McNair Scholars Program, the University Libraries, or other campus resources better support your development as a scholar?

Second Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your journey in becoming a scholar. In what ways have you transformed from a student to a scholar?

2. What were key learning moments in becoming a scholar?

3. What was an obstacle you had to overcome to become a scholar?

4. How does your identity as a scholar support, conflict, or otherwise relate to other identities that are important to you?

5. How has becoming a scholar changed your life outside of college?

6. What advice would you give students who would like to become scholars?

7. What will you take with you into the future?

8. What aspects of the McNair program helped you in becoming a scholar? What could be improved?

9. What aspects of the University Libraries helped you in becoming a scholar? What could be improved?

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