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VOICES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Tough Conversations About Race: Let the Book Start the Discussion

BY CYNTHIA W. BASSETT & KARA PHILLIPS

How librarians can use their knowledge of books and reading to help communities change.

Talking about racism is tough. Not talking about it is not an option when people are dying. Across our country, people are having difficult conversations about the racism they see in their communities and the effects that systemic racism—racism that is built into the very structures of our society—have on people of color.

The University of Missouri School of Law has been having intentional conversations about the many ways that people in our country are treated as “other” for many years, but the need to talk about it in a new way surfaced after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, in the fall of 2014. Some of the University of Missouri Law School students called Ferguson home,

and his death hit them hard. Others in the school simply could not see why people were protesting and blocking highways, which seemed to be counterproductive to their cause. Tensions rose and the school needed to find a way to talk about and understand how different members of our society experience the world.

A New Initiative Is Born

Out of the need to have difficult conversations and more education about diversity, the One Read initiative was born. (Learn more about the initiative at bit.ly/JF21One.) Law School and library faculty, staff, and students volunteered to choose a common text to read and discuss together as a community. Suggestions poured in from the Law School community, indicating just

TIPS FOR BOOK GROUPS

- Decide whether participation is mandatory or optional.
- Set a budget.
- Assign an overall point person or committee to coordinate.
- Ask faculty and staff to facilitate the groups (e.g., schedule meetings, reserve rooms, and lead discussions).
- Use a survey software (e.g., Qualtrics) for organizing.
- Set up groups based on day/time preference to help with scheduling.
- Opt for larger groups as attendance may drop off.
- Use Zoom to expand participation.
- Establish book selection criteria and an approval process.
- Limit book choices to one common text or a few texts.
- Solicit a variety of book recommendations and review book lists.
- Ensure book availability in print and online.
- Choose books with discussion guides, or draft discussion questions.
- Offer complementary events and speakers.
- Ask for feedback on ways to improve.

RESOURCES FOR BOOK GROUPS

- American Library Association Book Discussion Groups bit.ly/JF21ALA
- California Council for the Humanities: Organizing and Managing a Book Discussion Group bit.ly/JF21Californiacouncil
- “News: Book Club Going Virtual? Consider These 3 Things,” Programming Librarian (A website of the American Library Association Public Programs Office) bit.ly/JF21Bookclub

how interested the school as a whole was in the initiative. The Law Library purchased copies of the selected book for the collection, and the administration required every first-year law (1L) student to come to campus the next year ready to discuss the book in small faculty-led groups during orientation. There was no expectation that any viewpoint would be silenced, but there was an expectation that everyone would be respectful.

Conversations about the book, particularly with the 1L students, is the cornerstone of the University of Missouri’s One Read program, but the learning continues into the school year with programs related to the chosen book. Programs include a mix of large

group events and small-group conversations, and they culminate with a keynote speaker on the topic. The school reaches out to their campus community to find speakers with expertise or experiences related to the book. For example, when the school read *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese American Internment in World War II*, a physician and professor at the University’s teaching hospital spoke about his experience being imprisoned with his family at a camp. Similarly, when the school read *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance, the Law Library invited rural economic development experts from the College of Agriculture to the Law School to discuss the economic challenges and advantages facing rural Missourians.

New Ways to Discuss Race

The University of Missouri’s One Read model can be easily adapted to any organization, but it certainly isn’t the only way to use books and reading to discuss racial justice topics. For example, Seattle University School of Law has adopted a slightly different approach. In the fall of 2016, Seattle University School of Law launched their Racial Justice Book Group Initiative in response to interest in additional diversity training. (Learn more about the initiative at bit.ly/JF21Racialjustice.) Dean Annette Clark explained, “My goal in inviting you to join this effort is to engage us as a community in a learning enterprise on a subject that has such immediacy for all of us, and that also has particular relevance for lawyers and law students. Being in small groups will hopefully foster conversations that might not otherwise occur, and having combined students/faculty/staff reading groups, will broaden the conversations and help us to get to know each other better.”

Seattle University Law Library has taken the lead on organizing the book groups with the Dean’s Office. Book groups are comprised of a mix of eight to 10 students, staff, and faculty who choose a racial-justice themed book from a curated reading list. A faculty or staff member is assigned to each group to facilitate discussions during spring semester. Participation is optional. Overall, the book groups have been quite successful, and participants have even had opportunities to hear some of the authors speak locally (e.g., Bryan Stevenson, Anthony Ray Hinton, Carol Anderson, and this spring, Ibram X. Kendi). Being a part of the book groups offers the law school community an excellent opportunity to discuss important topics with incredibly knowledgeable students, faculty, and staff, and to hear a variety of perspectives.

Private Law Librarians Participate

From curating diversity resources to organizing book groups, law firm libraries are actively participating in diversity initiatives. Reference librarian Jayse Sessi, at Alston & Bird,

reported that the firm's Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Committee has held several popular Racial Justice Zoom presentations and placed a Racial Justice Banner on the firm's intranet main page, which features Articles & Books, Podcasts & Videos, Pro Bono & Community Service, and Philanthropy & Fundraising. The Articles & Books section includes items from the weekly D&I Library email. Alston & Bird is one of more than 250 firms to join the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance (LFAA).

According to Mark Desierto, manager of Davis Wright Tremaine Library and Research Services, the library staff at their firm organized a book group to promote the firm's collaboration and diversity efforts and to reach out to new patrons. After much discussion from the firm's D&I Committee and others, they chose to read *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. The library held three book group sessions via Zoom and, although attendance was optional, they had an excellent turnout of attorneys and staff,

some of whom had not met previously. Desierto said, "It has been gratifying and energizing for the library team to provide a space for co-workers to have honest and in-depth conversations around pressing social issues and the role a law firm should play in the midst of these issues. We have colleagues who were directly involved in voter registration efforts in the 1960s, and colleagues directly affected by systemic racism and social injustice. Some felt so strongly about the book that they attended multiple book club sessions."

The Path Forward

Librarians can lead the way for their organizations using the tools they have at hand—their knowledge about books and readers—to create spaces where a community can change, one conversation at a time.

-  Professionalism + Leadership At Every Level
-  Marketing + Outreach



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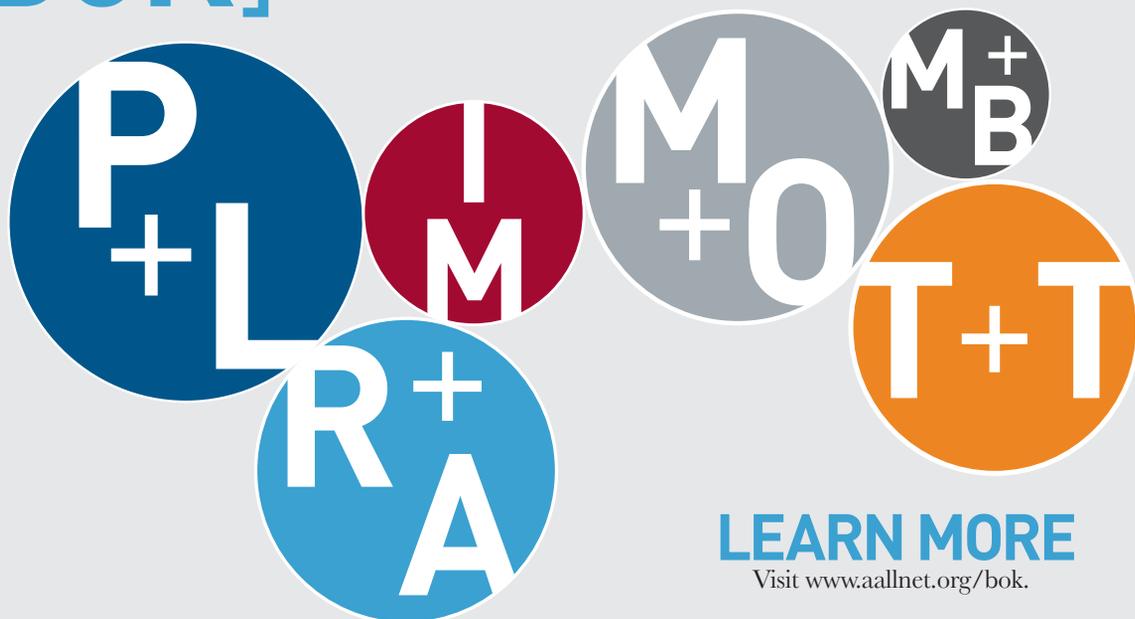
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