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Decolonization and Reconciliation in Academic Libraries in Canada: A Review of Strategic Priorities (Paper)

Abstract:

Decolonization and reconciliation require ongoing commitments from organizations. This research examined strategic priorities/plans of 12 Canadian academic libraries to gain insight into their efforts towards decolonization and reconciliation. The findings revealed that a number of academic libraries are expressing their commitments to and setting strategies for decolonization and reconciliation, which are reflected in emerging themes such as collaboration and engagement with Indigenous Communities, improvements to virtual and physical infrastructure, inclusion of acknowledgements, focus on human resource management, reexamine collection development, program and services, support for research, and review of access and cataloging. This research will contribute to literature, and provide thoughts and ideas to other Canadian Library and Information Studies (LIS) organizations on ways to undertake initiatives towards decolonization and reconciliation.

1. Introduction

Decolonization involves the removal of visible and invisible structures and arrangements set by a colonial power (Ashcroft et al., 2001; Smith, 2010) while reconciliation is about “establishing and maintaining respectful relationships” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 p. 16). Decolonization and reconciliation are ongoing processes (Horrill et al., 2018; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) and need a long-term commitment from organizations. Both academic and non-academic organizations develop strategic plans to set directions, establish priorities (Hall & Lulich, 2021), and anchor “operational work in shared vision and measurable goals” (Bibee et al., 2021 p. 5). A university strategic plan provides insight into organizational ambitions, priorities (including specific actionable goals and objectives in a given temporal period), and aspirations to meet their “societal mandates” and signal their commitment to different community stakeholders (Sutphen et al., 2019 p. 1400). This research examines the strategic plans/priorities of 12 Canadian academic (university) libraries to learn more about the specific steps to remove colonial arrangements, to bring change in their operational practices, and to promote a new respectful relationship with Indigenous communities.

2. Literature Review

There is a growing body of literature on decolonization and reconciliation within a Canadian context in the LIS area. Researchers have reflected on diverse facets in this context such as decolonization of library services and the profession (e.g., Edwards, 2019; Million, 2021),

decolonization efforts by an university's academic support unit offering services to students (e.g., Dumontet et al., 2019), library associations (e.g., Wiebe & Rathi, 2020), public libraries (e.g., Rathi & Wiebe, 2020), and education and programs (e.g., Ball & Lar-Son, 2021; Samek, 2021; Hill et al., 2021), diverse initiatives (e.g., staffing, internship program) (e.g., Farnel et al., 2020) including support for Indigenous students (e.g., Stieglitz, 2019) by academic libraries, and decolonization of description practices in libraries (e.g., Fagnan, 2020; Farnel et al., 2018; Laroque, 2018) and in archives (e.g., Frederick, 2019).

Researchers have reflected on institutional long-term plans from various perspectives, for example: “the depth of the relationships between HRD [Human Resource Development] and strategic planning” (Knight, 2015 p. 7); the integration between the university and its academic library's plans (Davis & Helm, 1991); the current priorities of academic libraries as reflected in their plans, and their alignment “with the top trends [in the field] identified by ACRL and other professional and research organizations” (Saunders, 2015 p. 285), and; the development of “a diversity strategic plan” in the context of an academic library (Redd et al., 2020 p. 268). Other researchers like Tamtik (2023) examined strategic plans and other “policy documents” from a number of Canadian universities to understand “the complexity associated with Indigenous innovation and organizational change” (p. 348). In general, there is limited in-depth examination of long-term plans of Canadian academic libraries on matters related to decolonization and reconciliation.

3. Methodology

The researchers examined the strategic priorities of 12 academic libraries from the U15 Universities (Group of Canadian Research Universities, 2024). Academic libraries from two universities (Université Laval, Université de Montréal) were not included in the analysis because of the researchers' French language limitations, and the University of Calgary was excluded because of an inability to retrieve strategic plan/priorities document(s). Documents were searched for terms such as decolonization, Indigenous, Aboriginal, colonial, inclusion, equity and diversity (Rathi & Wiebe, 2020; Rathi, 2021). The researchers collated and analyzed the plans/priorities (Saunders, 2015) to identify thematic trends (Miles & Huberman, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and not to “make judgments about the plans themselves” (Saunders, 2015, p. 287). This research work has limitations such as analysis is based on documents posted on libraries' websites, which could possibly be synthesized versions of the actual priority documents, reliance on Google search to locate documents, and possibility of missing the latest strategic priorities, if published recently.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of strategic plans/priorities revealed that a number of academic libraries have expressed their commitment to and have explicitly outlined their priorities with goals/objectives for decolonization and reconciliation as demonstrated by the emerging facets (Rathi & Wiebe, 2020; Rathi, 2021). Representative quotes from the strategic priorities are included as evidence to support the emerging facets.

Collaboration, Engagement and Partnership: Academic libraries have plans to collaborate, engage and work closely with Indigenous community members, including students and faculty, to draw on their experiences, understand their perspectives, and learn their specific needs in different areas of library services (University of Ottawa Library, 2020; McMaster University

Library, 2024). Decolonization and reconciliation efforts require a strong partnership with community members in achieving relevant goals/objectives set in priority documents, i.e., “success requires partnership with Indigenous campus and community stakeholders” (University of Saskatchewan Library, 2018. p. 3).

Human Resource Management (HRM): Academic libraries aim to provide opportunities to employees to learn and gain skills through professional development and training relevant to decolonization and reconciliation. Such opportunities will contribute to Indigenizing of library services and resources, and strengthen employees’ cultural understanding (University of Manitoba Libraries, 2024), competencies to understand “systemic racism”, and implications of and work on colonial practices in the context of libraries (Western Library, 2022 p. 9). Academic libraries are setting plans to enhance inclusivity and employee diversity, for example, by “increasing Indigenous representation, and creat[ing] a culture of belonging” (University of Saskatchewan Library, 2018, p. 3).

Virtual and Physical Infrastructure: Some libraries' strategic plans have set priorities to work on both virtual and physical spaces. For examples, the University of Waterloo Library (2020) is aiming to “evolve *library, collections, spaces, and knowledge access systems* to make them accessible, inclusive, and respectful of the contributions of Indigenous and racialized groups [emphasis added]” (Catalyzing Learning and Research section), and the University of Alberta Library’s (n.d.) goal is to “incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into services and spaces...” (2023-24 Strategic Goals #6.)

Collections, Programs and Services: A number of academic libraries have set their strategic directions to reexamine collection development, and programs and services as the current offerings are grounded in colonial policies and practices. For example, one of the objectives of the Dalhousie University Libraries (2022) is to “cultivate events and programs that honour Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities” (p. 7). Libraries are prioritizing to work with Indigenous communities to decolonize offerings including collections and services, and making them inclusive and relevant for, and accessible to their diverse communities, particularly Indigenous communities (Waterloo University Library, 2020; University of Saskatchewan Library, 2018).

Cataloging and Access: Academic libraries have set decolonization goals/objectives in the context of cataloging practices and access to resources. For example, Western Library (2022) has committed “to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing” in the context of “collection access and classification” (p. 9), University of Saskatchewan Library (2018) has planned to review their library/archive catalogues for “colonial, out-dated, and offensive descriptions” (p. 3), and University of Manitoba Libraries (2024) will continue with their “Indigenization efforts, particularly in the provision of access to information” (Creating Pathways to Indigenous Achievement section).

Research: Academic libraries are integral to and support research conducted at universities in many ways (e.g., access to resources, research data management). There are libraries that are, for example, aligning their work to support Indigenous-focused research (McMaster University Library, 2024) and committing explicitly to “enhancing the University’s research capacity on issues of importance to Indigenous peoples and populations” (University of Manitoba Libraries, 2024, Creating Pathways to Indigenous Achievement section).

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of the ways to demonstrate ongoing commitments and efforts towards reconciliation and decolonization. Acknowledgements by libraries are done in a variety of ways. For example, some academic libraries include *territorial acknowledgements* in their documents (e.g., Dalhousie University Libraries, 2022; Western Library, 2022). Others *acknowledge the impact of colonial practices* i.e., “past exclusions and misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems, as well as the inherent and harmful gaps and oversights in library practices” (University of Alberta Libraries, n.d., Decolonization & Indigenization section). Some libraries explicitly acknowledge the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and/or the Calls to Action in the plans (e.g., University of Saskatchewan, 2018; Western Library, 2022).

Strategic plans provide insight into long-term organizational goals/objectives (Robbins et al. 1997) and apportionment of resources to accomplish priorities (Saunders, 2015), and direct libraries and employees “towards services’ development” (Kostagiolas et al., 2009 p. 254). Saunders (2015) suggested that individual strategic plans will reflect each organization’s priorities, “but a review of [strategic] plans from a sample of academic libraries can give a perspective on trends in how libraries are responding” to emerging requirements and planning for the future (p. 287). The findings emerging from the review of the strategic plans of U15 academic libraries indicate that both individual organizational priorities and the sector (academic libraries) are putting efforts toward decolonization and reconciliation in diverse ways.

5. Conclusion

The paper presents analysis of strategic plans/priorities of 12 academic libraries from U15 Universities on their systematic efforts towards decolonization and reconciliation. A number of academic libraries are explicitly taking efforts towards decolonization and reconciliation, which is reflected by the inclusion of acknowledgements in strategic plans, and in their commitment to collaborate and engage with Indigenous communities, work on virtual and physical infrastructure, focus on human resource, reexamine collection development, program and services, support for research, and review of access and cataloging. There are opportunities to further expand this research by examining strategic plans of academic libraries in the context of their universities’ strategic plans, and by going beyond U15 University libraries.

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