

Profiles

Profile of DeLa Dos and Brittani Sterling, Vision Speakers at the 39th Annual NASIG Conference

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DeLa Dos (they/them) is the senior director, Learning + DEI for ARL. In this role, DeLa is responsible for leading the Association's Learning Network and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The joint-coordination of these efforts provides cohesion across ARL learning-program curricula and reinforces the Association's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its programs.



Photo courtesy of DeLa Dos

Brittani Sterling (she/her) is an assistant professor and the social sciences and interdisciplinary studies librarian at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Her research interests include the Sociology of Librarianship, Critical Librarianship, Equitable, Diverse & Inclusive Collection Development, and Organizational Cultural Competency at the intersection of the lived experience of librarians of color.



Photo courtesy of Brittani Sterling

DeLa and Brittani will present the second business session, "A Systemic Approach to Systemic Change: In Pursuit of Intentional Strategies" at the 2024 annual conference in Spokane, Washington. I completed my interview with both on Friday, May 24.

How did you enter the field of librarianship?

DeLa: My entry into the field of librarianship occurred when I joined the staff of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in 2021—and I have never worked for a library.

Brittani: I entered the field of librarianship as I was trying to find an avenue to highlight my Sociology skills. My B.A. is in Sociology with a minor in German and Women's Studies. I never thought the academic graduate path was for me, so I laugh at the fact that I'm a tenure track academic librarian now all the time! I thought I would pursue a career in Social Work. Though I tried many different contexts for a fit—working as an AmericCorps VISTA in Trio programs at a local university and working for the Department of Social Service as a

Medicaid Analyst – nothing quite felt right until I started a temporary work assignment at my local public library. It's where I saw the communities' challenges come alive, and I knew I could actively help solve them daily. That, my friends, was the social work assignment I'd been looking for!

How did you enter the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion?

DeLa: Due to a combination of firsthand experiences and social identities, my environments and contexts made me acutely aware of difference—mine and that of others—from a young age. I received mixed messages about how differences should be acknowledged and ignored. I experienced and witnessed that I was involved with multiple DEI-centered co-curricular activities in middle and high school, a trend that continued in my undergraduate years. These experiences provided me with perspectives and connections that informed my personal and professional development. After graduating undergrad, my first full-time job was working in multicultural affairs in a division of student affairs. From there, my career path expanded to include social justice education, consulting, and teaching engagements.

Brittani: I grew up an Army BRAT, in very mixed neighborhoods, with lots of cultural exposure to many different people quite early in life. I even lived abroad and learned another language, both before I turned 18. This brought with it an appreciation that everybody matters because we all have got something to contribute, and the American perspective is not the only one that matters. Fast forward to my undergraduate experience, where I had a HUGE period of reverse culture shock I was not expecting! I attended a private liberal arts school after doing my best to navigate college applications and not much familial help – to their credit they always encouraged me, but I am the first generation in my family to attend college – and I got a quick primer in socioeconomic privilege, being a felt and seen minority at my University, “How civilian life works 101” if you will, and starting as a STEM major,

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it was VERY apparent, I'd be getting through that experience by sheer will. Thank goodness for the affinity group Concerned Black Students (CBS)! It was my university's Black student affinity group, and for the first time in life, I realized the importance of having a space to be seen and heard by people who understood, at least some of the struggle I was having as I tried to acclimate myself to the college experience. I also, after having done a field experience I loved, realized that working my days away in a Biology lab was far less interesting to me than the Sociology elective I'd stumbled into by registering late one semester, where I learned about social constructs, power dynamics, and the politics of identity. As I was making this major shift, through CBS and my sorority, Kappa Delta, I got some executive board experience. I got to help plan budgets for the first time. I served as the VP Operations in one, and eventually served as President of the other and transformed from a soft-spoken bookworm into the polished thought leader and academic activist I am today.

In your view, why is diversity, equity, and inclusion important?

DeLa: Diversity, equity, and inclusion are interrelated, individually important, frequently conflated, and—while collectively critical—insufficient alone. Although these three terms are, in many ways, interdependent, their presence does not guarantee the presence, success, or effectiveness of the others. The convenience of using the DEI acronym—which I do use—often diminishes the individuality and nuance of each of the separate terms and contributes to them being conflated and misunderstood. When effectively considered individually, strategies and actions can be intentionally designed for each of them leading to a greater likelihood of successful outcomes. This means that very rarely do singular items support DEI—with an “and;” instead, one item is more likely to support one or two of the terms. Inherently, this requires broader plans and more robust investments to effectively support diversity, equity, AND inclusion—not to mention the numerous other related, overlapping, and nested

concepts. Collectively, DEI contributes to creating, maintaining, and advancing more just structures and communities. To produce positive outcomes for broader populations, DEI must be integrated—not isolated—into organizations and systems. While leadership may be provided within an organizational structure by an individual person or department, the responsibilities related to DEI should be shared by all. In doing so, DEI are connected to other programmatic initiatives, operational practices, and strategic priorities in manners that ideally result in positive, contextualized results.

Brittani: Diversity, equity, and inclusion are important because they aren't just buzzworthy concepts that are performative, though people can think of them that way. In my opinion, these concepts are related in every way to people's day-to-day lives. Using myself as an example, two aspects of my identity I can never take off are my Blackness and my femaleness when I am going about my daily life. While I value those parts of my identity as things that give me a certain lens to my experience in the world, others have been taught to stereotype me, feel comfortable around me, or perceive what those aspects mean through socialization that may or may not be true. As a JEDI (justice is the j) scholar I feel these words have been semantically bleached, or their meaning has been reduced to the point of nothingness in the often-performative nature of organizationally addressing EDI. I've done a study about that. I've also seen this concept framed as a cherry on top or needing to produce a return on investment to be valuable, instead of the necessary lenses through which to consider actions, policies, or forward movement, and that really grinds my gears! To value diversity simply means, to intentionally include or involve people from a range of different social and ethnic/racial backgrounds, of different genders, ages, abilities, sexual orientations, etc. That's it! To value equity references the intentional centering of fairness and justice and means recognizing that we all don't start from the same place and to be equitable there must be an acknowledgement of those imbalances and room for necessary personalized or group adjustments

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that help people reach the same equilibrium as others. To value inclusion means to intentionally embrace all people irrespective of their differences, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, medical needs, etc., and it is about providing access and opportunity while removing barriers, either intended, not intended, systemic, or yet to be discovered. To value equity references the intentional centering of fairness and justice and means recognizing that we don't all start from the same place. This is not to be confused with equality, which is often an ingredient of inclusion above and more so references giving everyone access to the same resources to begin with. To be equitable there must be an acknowledgement that those imbalances create different needs and room for necessary personalized adjustments must be created that help someone reach the same equilibrium as others.

Why should libraries place value in these initiatives?

DeLa: For libraries—and other information, memory, and cultural heritage institutions—DEI are vitally important. In addition to the general reasons outlined above, an institutional mission involving the collection, preservation, and/or dissemination of knowledge is poorly served by conditions that sustain and/or promote barriers to access. DEI initiatives can help mitigate the impacts of these barriers in the short-term while seeking to remove them all together in the longer-term.

Brittani: According to the American Library Association (ALA):

"The foundation of modern librarianship rests on an essential set of core values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice. These values reflect the history and ongoing development of the profession and have been advanced, expanded, and refined by numerous policy statements of the American Library Association. Among these are: access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation,

the public good, professionalism, service, social responsibility, and sustainability.”

Now while every single librarian, and every single library, regardless of type, doesn't look to ALA as their beacon, concepts like advancing the public good, social responsibility, service, and diversity as you can see in writing, are reasons libraries should not only place value in the these “initiatives” but are responsible for adequately considering, implementing programming around, creating policies around, considering the employee experience through these lenses, and ultimately being accountable to the outcomes for how DEI is managed in their organizational and professional practice. People are affected by how we choose to embrace, remain neutral toward, or ignore these concepts, and that includes employees, not just patrons.

What is the value of allyship?

DeLa: Allyship plays an essential role in DEI efforts. As systemic challenges require—at least in part—systemic solutions, effective allyship can enable more effective, efficient processes and achieve new, more-desired results. This is because allyship is often implemented by individuals with more, or at least different, power, which can be essential in efforts to effect positive change. While the effectiveness of allyship will be informed by individual circumstances, I believe that effectiveness increases when it is conducted in community with and led by the group(s) to which the allyship is being provided in manners that can reduce the burdens of and harm to members of the group(s).

Brittani: I will be 100% honest with you. Allyship is performative if it ends up equaling lip service only. According to the Center of Creative Leadership:

Allyship is actions, behaviors, and practices that individuals and/or leaders take to support, amplify, and advocate with and for others, especially individuals who don't belong to the same social identity groups as themselves. It is not a single action; rather it is an

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ongoing action itself, with a focus on other people, not on yourself. That being said, allyship needs to start with an examination of self, to better understand the power, privilege, and access available to you as an individual, because of the different identity groups to which you belong.

How does one become an ally you ask? Well, this is partially how: By building a sturdy foundation of competencies, knowledge, and awareness one can turn allyship from a buzzword into actual, sustainable behaviors that create inclusive environments and diverse teams. Once you are more fully aware of the power and access that you have available to you, in relation to the groups you aspire to serve, you will be in a much better position to leverage those privileges to advocate with others.

Anyone can be an effective ally, regardless of their identity as we all have some mix of privilege and intersectionality. Though I've laid out here a clear definition of allyship because I think it is necessary to get past popular definitions that have trickled down from academic concepts, as for me and my fellow JEDI scholars, we are much more interested in accomplicehood versus allyship. An accomplice is willing to risk something, and embodies the ethos of Lilla Watson's famous quote, "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Where do you see diversity, equity, and inclusion in libraries in five years?

DeLa: While I am hesitant to make predictions—particularly in the current context that is highly polarized and constantly changing, I offer a few hopes. I am hopeful that libraries deepen and broaden their commitments and investments into DEI, as new and renewed challenges to DEI regularly emerge, new and renewed strategies to advance DEI are also present. I hope that strong coalitions can be forged that allow individual parties to maintain their integrity while

working together. I hope that more people recognize the inextricable connections between the missions and work of libraries and DEI. And I hope that the creativity and pursuit of excellence that I have witnessed in so many library communities and demonstrated by so many library workers continue to be cultivated and supported, allowing for there to have been significant advances in DEI 5 years from now.

Brittani: I hope to see longevity in careers for BIPOC librarians. DEI is not only about BIPOC librarians, but my research tells me we often separate these concepts, once again, from people's lived experiences, including those of our BIPOC colleagues.

In 2020, I embarked on a study as the primary investigator of the project, *We're Still Here at Midcareer: The Retention of Academic Librarians of Color and Our Lived Experiences*. What we found is that our profession does a great job of recruiting BIPOC librarians and nurturing them in early career, and because of various factors, that same cohort often can't be found at mid-career, or if they can be found, they are battle weary and often considering a career change, even after expending time, energy, and effort on "doing everything right" to sustain a career in librarianship.

I think that's really unfortunate, and not only can we do better collectively, but we all work too hard – both as BIPOC people entering the field and those who are accomplices trying to change the field – to have the level of attrition that we do. It's unacceptable!

That means there's still plenty of work ahead, so I hope we'll get to it; and by that, I mean not just me, my research team, and those who have already long been committed to this work! I hope to see new researchers come behind me with the full support for investigating DEI as an important scholarship arena whose outcomes are heralded as loudly and as often as shinier, donor funded clinical research applications in other disciplines. I hope to see implementations based on the work of the many prolific, seasoned JEDI library scholars that those of us who celebrate them already cite copiously actually

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applied to organizational solutions! As the saying goes, "We are who we've been looking for." I answer like this because what I have found amongst many studies, is that we hope things will change in 5 years, improve, be different, or at least move these conversations and discoveries into actions and when actual longitudinal evidence is captured not much has changed at all. That's a "we" problem, and I'm not sure what it will take for those in librarianship that these concepts are new for to take up the mantle, but every single one of us is needed in the fight to not only implement but maintain and refine these concepts in our libraries.

Do you have any additional comments?

DeLa: I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with the NASIG community and am eager to connect during the NASIG 39th Annual Conference.

Brittani: I think I've written enough! I know you might have to edit for brevity, but it all seemed important to say.