

Dear esteemed colleagues,

I write this resignation letter with immense regret. As I stated in my formal resignation email to the college, I have nothing but wonderful memories being a member of this department, working with all of you, the fabulous music library team, and our incredible students. However, over the last two years since I began this position, the environment at the college, and within the libraries and IT, has become increasingly hostile, and as a person of color, I no longer feel safe or welcome at this institution.

As many of you have most likely gathered, I am a fierce advocate for DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), perhaps partially because I am a person of color and bisexual, but also because these values are essential, especially in academia. These values have been an integral part of the work I did at St. Olaf, as well as in my professional work, such as presentations and publications. In fact, my job position lists “diversifying the music collection” as one of the key responsibilities of this position, and the job posting two years ago listed DEI as a vital part of both this position and the college’s mission. Thus, I began this position with a hopeful outlook, looking forward to the discoveries I’d make and the connections I’d build to make our libraries and spaces more inclusive and welcoming.

What I met, however, through every step of the way, was extreme reluctance and a lack of willingness towards the values of DEI, as well as dishonesty and distrust. In the first few months of my job, accessibility issues regarding Catalyst, our online library catalogue, was brought to my attention. My immediate response was to state that this was unacceptable, and that I’d do everything in my power to remedy this. But shortly after sending this response in an email, my direct supervisor emailed me and told me there was nothing I could do to solve this issue, and that I’d need to tell any future patrons that there is no solution to this problem.

From here, these negative responses became more frequent. When I began tackling the music library collection, I was told right away that there was no budget for purchases unless they would be directly used in a course and listed in a syllabus, and I received no support in my efforts to collect music by Black composers, for instance, or non-classical recordings or scores. When I argued that our music library should be able to put textbooks on reserve, citing extremely inequitable textbook prices, I was severely scolded, informed that SGA’s textbook initiative was sufficient, and that it was Libraries policy to not put any textbooks on course reserve for any reason whatsoever. When I visited some courses to teach about the values of DEI as related to specific fields, there were students who laughed, or showed racist images or inappropriate messages on Zoom courses (once we switched to online teaching). Each time my efforts to implement

DEI values into my work resulted in being reprimanded, denied, or humiliated. But I continued my efforts anyway, because I knew it was important work.

But in late February, when the COVID-19 virus first began to rear its head, I began experiencing extreme microaggressions from some of my Libraries colleagues. At a time when Asians were being blamed for the spread of the virus, I had colleagues treating me like I had the plague, or humiliating me in front of my coworkers, aggressively yelling at me to wash my hands or stop touching my face. When these unacceptable microaggressions were occurring, not one LITS colleague present stood up for me, and when I reported these issues to the LITS CIO, I was told that nobody would be reprimanded or fired, and that I could chat with Bruce King about it if it was that upsetting, since “he’s also not white.”

This series of events was the first time I considered resigning, but at the time, I thought of the colleagues I loved, like the music library team, or the incredible legacy that Beth, my predecessor, had left behind, and overall, my experiences with LITS had been positive, even with the microaggressions or unpleasant conversations. So I told myself that I would need to stick around. Since February, however, almost a year has passed, with no indications of the college improving. In the early summer, seeing Michelle Gibbs and Lisa Moore’s resignation letters resonated within me. They were tenure-track faculty, not staff, like me; yet they also experienced the same issues, and decided that leaving the college was the only solution. A few weeks later, I was furloughed for several weeks, even though I was slated to work with several music courses that summer. This news came as a shock to me, when just one week before, I had heard my white LITS colleagues talking about how they were playing video games at their desk during work, because they had “nothing to do” (these same colleagues were not furloughed at all). But the news of my furlough seemed welcomed by other LITS colleagues: maybe because they were worried that I carried the virus?

During my furlough period, I reflected heavily on my position here and my career aspirations, and found that I no longer enjoyed librarianship or this job. My experiences at this college had traumatized me beyond belief, and I had lost my passion completely. But I told myself then that if I resigned, the music library could be at risk of being absorbed into the main library, and so I mustered the strength to carry on. But upon my return, I was still met with the same issues as before, amplified even greater. Although LITS began important DEI initiatives that were relieving to see, it still felt like I, as the person of color, was having to do most of the work of educating my white colleagues, or heavily responsible for the legwork of making change. But when I made these types of remarks, I was scolded for making my white colleagues “uncomfortable”.

All of this culminated in one final disaster a few days ago, when just two hours before my bi-weekly check-in with my supervisor, he informed me that an HR representative would be joining us. Though his email had made it seem like the meeting had been set to finally address all of the experiences I had endured, instead, I was scolded and reprimanded for an hour and a half. Apparently, this meeting was scheduled as a response to a conversation I initiated two weeks ago during a Research and Instruction (R&I) team DEI meeting. At this meeting, I had brought up the Institute for Freedom and Community's Summer Fellowship program and its questionable reading list, which contained articles that questioned concepts such as racism or microaggressions. In this DEI meeting, I stated that white supremacy and systemic oppression at this college was real, and there were both current and graduated students from the college that were white supremacists and Proud Boys, boldly displaying content on their social media pages. I also stated that it was dangerous for the ICF to present readings like this without contextualizing the information, and that I had serious concerns that the ICF was not involving research librarians, for instance, or having important conversations about fake news and misinformation with their fellows.

During my "check-in" with my supervisor and HR, I was told that it was unprofessional for me to bring up "personal opinions", and that strong words like "white supremacy" or "Proud Boys" make my colleagues in the R&I team "uncomfortable", and thus it is unfair to them for me to initiate these conversations. I was also told that two of my R&I colleagues had complained to my supervisor about this conversation, and I was thus encouraged to set up a separate "social hour" if I wanted to have chats specifically for these discussions, so as not to place my colleagues in a position where "they don't know what to say or contribute to the conversation".

I don't think I need to lay out why a response like this, let alone having a surprise HR session sprung on me, is unacceptable in every way, but the meeting was the straw that broke the camel's back. When I went into this meeting, I had told myself that if there was a genuine apology for the abrupt nature of the HR invitation, or if the meeting was actually productive, that I'd continue working at this college. But receiving no apologies, and sitting through this scolding, I knew afterwards that the college was no longer a safe place for me, and understood that it was time for me to resign. I fully recognize that my resignation could put the music library at serious risk, and this means an unfair amount of work for my music library colleagues. I weighed these risks, and determined that my personal health and happiness meant more. Please forgive me.

There were many non-DEI-related issues with this position and the relationship of the job with LITS, such as the obvious fact that this position entails the work of two or three full-time positions (yet I made less than 50K a year). There are unclaimed FTE resulting

from Inga's retirement that have not been filled. The shock of being told that I'd be able to attend only one conference a year (when during my interviews, I was assured all conference attendances were fully covered, and that I could attend as many conferences as I wished to), and then having to beg to the CIO to let me attend a virtual conference I was slated to present at, is one I have not fully recovered from. We still have yet to receive a fire extinguisher for the music library (a plea I have made at least five times, including to the CIO), and the physical spaces are not accessible. I wondered throughout these trials, "If I was a white man, would I be struggling this much?"

I love this library, and this music department. I love the music library team, and our hardworking and earnest students. And I had so many good moments in LITS, too, and do like many of my LITS colleagues, who I will miss dearly. But I cannot, in good conscience, recommend this position to a single soul in the Music Library Association, especially any individuals who are early-career or from marginalized groups. The college is not ready to welcome us, and serious leadership and management changes need to occur for this space to become one that respects all voices, not just a select few. I do not wish the experiences I had on anyone.

As my final statement, I plea to all of you, especially our white colleagues: advocate fiercely and actively for the music library, and for all the marginalized groups and silenced voices on this campus. Demand meaningful change, and hold leadership accountable. There are strength in numbers, and I know that there are few departments on campus as tight-knit as ours. Check in frequently with your colleagues and students of color. Advocate loudly for accessibility, both of physical spaces and in online settings. Read the stories on the @stolafanonymous Instagram account, and the testaments on mycollegeisprotectingrapists.wordpress.com .

I am heartbroken, and sorry that my time here at St. Olaf had to end this way. I will sorely miss all of you. If you feel so inclined, you can reach me at [REDACTED] my personal email account. Despite the unfortunate experiences, my memories of this department will forever be wonderful ones. Thank you for everything you did to make me feel welcome and truly a part of our music community.

Warmest regards,
Ellen Ogihara
1/29/2021