

Testimony to the Working Group on the Status of Vermont's Libraries from University of Vermont Inclusive Excellence Committee Regarding the Status of Staffing in Academic Libraries as Related to Issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

To whom it may concern:

The University of Vermont Libraries Inclusive Excellence Committee was charged in 2020 "to promote and facilitate the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) throughout the UVM Libraries." Our first activity was to investigate hiring practices that promote DEI. We were encouraged to make recommendations to our unit on best practices in recruitment, interviewing and hiring in order to encourage a more diverse body of staff as well as have an equity lens in every aspect of our work. It is with this in mind that we write you to give testimony on the status of staffing in Vermont academic libraries.

The UVM Libraries has continued to be understaffed in recent years but is currently operating well below a sufficient staffing level. At last census, we had 17 vacant positions out of a total of 68 positions, including both staff and faculty (librarians). Similar to many institutions throughout the country, the reasons for these vacancies are numerous: retirements, impact of COVID, low wages, inflation, high cost of living, etc.

At UVM, wages are low, especially for staff. Until recently, many staff members needed to work second jobs in order to make ends meet. But there have been improved conditions due to the recent unionization of staff under the name UVM Staff United and the ratification of their first contract. They have brought the minimum wage at UVM up to \$20/ hour, have seen the formation of a sick bank, increase paid time off, and parental leave. But, as is the case in many institutions in Vermont, the yearly wages are still low compared to the cost of living in Vermont, and these improvements have not entirely alleviated the financial burden of living and working in the area. Faculty wages are also low in comparison to faculty positions across the country, though because faculty at UVM have been represented by United Academics for years, the gap is not as great. But, once again, faculty salaries at UVM are low considering the high cost of living.

Chittenden County, where UVM Libraries is located, has an especially high cost of living due to inflated housing costs and is experiencing a shortage of housing. This, combined with low wages, makes it hard for new employees to find somewhere affordable to live.

This combination has become a real issue for recruitment, hiring, and retention in the UVM Libraries. Recent searches have failed because candidates compared their current salaries and cost of living to that at UVM in Vermont and simply could not make it work. One director-level candidate noted to the search committee that housing was twice as expensive as her current location, childcare was three times as expensive, while the salaries were comparable; the buying power of a UVM Libraries position is simply lower than similar salaries in other locations. We have had three failed searches and multiple searches where we were not able to get our top candidate due to the combination of low salaries and the high cost of living.

This is distinctly a DEI issue because we cannot offer attractive packages to candidates. We also will eventually end up with an inequitable and less than inclusive workforce if the only candidates who can afford to take a job at UVM Libraries have additional sources of income at their disposal. We have heard it said that not finding housing in Chittenden County just means employees should live further away from UVM. Not only does this attitude make UVM's physical campus less accessible for any number of reasons (access to vehicles/public transportation, family obligations, time constraints of additional commute length) many BIPOC and LGBTQ candidates do not feel comfortable living in rural areas, outside of Chittenden County or the Burlington area. Because the Burlington area is more diverse than other areas in Vermont, it is an attractive area to live for many relocating from out of state. In recent searches we asked candidates how important the diversity of where they work and live is to them and many indicated that it was very important. In fact, the fact that Vermont is such a predominantly white state was viewed as a challenge for candidates of any race or background. The fact is that diversity is appealing to academic library candidates and our lack of diversity can be seen as a drawback as this directly impacts our ability to recruit diverse candidates nationwide. As stated above, a major component of the work that the Inclusive Excellence Committee has been tasked with is recommending recruitment best practices for current and future staff and faculty searches. These recommendations become increasingly difficult to follow as UVM becomes less able to compete with salaries and cost of living expenses in other areas.