

## **Equity and Access in Higher Education and Academic Libraries Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has exposed deeply rooted inequities and the precariousness of institutional structures across all socio-cultural and geographic spaces. Overwhelmed by the public health crisis, governments and non-governmental organizations have introduced numerous policies to stem the spread of COVID-19 with varying degrees of success at the local, national, and international levels. Similarly, academic institutions have responded to this crisis by developing policies that address the immediate needs of their respective constituencies and institutional partners. Although these policies vary in scope and intent, we are troubled by developments on a number of fronts. These include:

- Marginalization of institutions with limited resources, underrepresented communities, and indigenous voices in the post COVID-19 institutional frameworks;
- Promotion of “e-first” collection development strategies that are governed by licensing law that disrupt the flow of information and undermine indigenous publishing cultures around the world, especially in the Global South;
- Over-reliance on large-scale, dominant publishers and distributors of academic content, thereby intensifying the marginalization of small and traditional publishers and of scholarly communities based in other parts of the world;
- Over-reliance on large-scale commercial publishers whose profit-driven business models endanger the collection, preservation, and distribution of robust ephemeral materials such as those generated by emerging political and social justice movements, subaltern groups around the world, and by non-governmental organizations and other advocacy organizations that support them. As a result, these primary source materials will likely disappear, even though they will be indispensable to the research and teaching of these events in all disciplines; and
- Disparities in online teaching and access to learning environments that disproportionately affect communities of color, people with disabilities, and students from rural and low-income areas.

We acknowledge that academic institutions and associations, as well as library consortia, are facing budgetary constraints in their efforts to maintain services and programs during the time of COVID-19. Furthermore, administrators are managing expectations from local constituents while acknowledging that more needs to be done to improve conditions nationally and globally.

Global collections have become a distinctive corpus that showcases the value and identity of academic and special libraries while supporting their missions on research and instruction. Recently, specific academic groups like the Association of Jewish Libraries ([AJL](#)), the Africana librarians Council ([ALC](#)), the Committee on Libraries and Information Resources ([CLIR](#)) of the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies ([ASEEES](#)), the Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation ([CONSALD](#)), the Committee on Research Materials on

Southeast Asia of the Association for Asian Studies ([CORMOSEA](#)), the Middle East Librarians Association/ the Middle East Studies Association ([MELA](#) / [MESA](#)), the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials ([SALALM](#)), have crafted and approved statements in response to these policies and their particular impact for each area. In addition, the Council on East Asian Libraries ([CEAL](#)) is drafting a similar statement on collection development and acquisition amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in collaboration with the North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources ([NCC](#)), the Society of Chinese Studies Librarians ([SCSL](#)), and the Modern Greek Studies Association Library Committee ([MGSA](#)).

We support the efforts of these groups without any reservations and further recommend the following steps to help alleviate shared areas of concern:

- Provide temporary membership fee waivers to historically Black and Hispanic-serving colleges and universities, lesser-resourced institutions, and indigenous organizations to participate and access resources available from large-scale digital depositories (e.g., HathiTrust Digital Library) and international consortia (e.g., Center for Research Libraries);
- Reevaluate “e-resources first” strategies and other current collection development policies, including a recommendation to incorporate in-country publishing data to formulate long-term collection development policies, and to support library and archives-based special collections;
- Increase access to online teaching and learning tools, and to resources for communities of color, people with disabilities, and students based in rural and low-income areas;
- Selectively redirect funding from the purchasing and licensing of mainstream commercial academic content to the collaborative acquisition, preservation, digitization, discovery and open-access dissemination of endangered content and marginalized voices from the world’s social justice movements;
- Increase partnerships with in-country publishers and memory institutions to increase and highlight marginalized voices and groups; and
- Develop diverse staff with relevant linguistic and cultural competencies to promote equity in librarian hiring/retention and collections at all levels.

Written by Joint Area Studies Task Force members, July 31, 2020, on behalf of the following associations:

Africana Librarians Council (ALC) Jessica Martin (Michigan State University)  
Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) Executive Board  
Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) Amalia S. Levi (HeritEdge Connection)  
Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) Rachel Leket-Mor (Arizona State University)  
Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Anna Arays (Yale University)  
Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Thomas Keenan (Princeton University)

Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) / Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM)/ Liladhar R. Pendse (University of California, Berkeley)

Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Joe Lenkart (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Committee on Research Materials on Southeast Asia (CORMOSEA) Jeffrey Shane

Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation (CONSALD) Ellen Ambrosone (Princeton University)

Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation (CONSALD) Aruna P. Magier (New York University)

Council on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) Hana Kim (University of Toronto)

Librarians Association of the University of California (LAUC)

Librarians Association of University of California-Berkeley Division ( LAUC-B)

Middle East Librarians Association (MELA) Guy Burak (New York University)

Middle East Librarians Association (MELA) Laila Hussein Moustafa (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Mortenson Center for International Library Programs Clara M. Chu (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Music Library Association (MLA) Susannah Cleveland (University of North Texas)

Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM)

Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM) Paloma Celis Carbajal (New York Public Library)

Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM) Patricia Figueroa (Brown University)

Society of Chinese Studies Librarians (SCSL) Xi Chen (University of California, San Diego)

We, librarians, students, faculty, academic organizations, executive boards and committees, and professional organizations, endorse this statement.

**Please add your names, institutional and professional affiliations to sign below:**

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Ksenya Kiebusinski, University of Toronto (ASEEES)

Adan Griego, Stanford University Library (SALALM, REFORMA, ACRL-ESS)

Ernest Oppong, African Publishers Network (APNET)

Miguel Torrens, University of Toronto (SALALM)

Alla Roylance, New York University (ASEEES)

Steven Seegel, University of Northern Colorado (ASEEES)

Gayle Williams, Florida International University (SALALM)

Daniel Arbino, University of Texas at Austin (SALALM)

Socrates Silva, Columbia/Cornell University (SALALM)  
Annika Frieberg, San Diego State University (ASEEES, GSA)  
Vitaly Chernetsky, University of Kansas (ASEEES)  
Manuel Ostos, The Pennsylvania State University (SALALM, CIFNAL, ACRL-ESS)  
Jin Moon, University of California, San Diego (CEAL)  
Yunah Sung, University of Michigan (CEAL)  
Hyokyoung Yi, University of Washington (CEAL)  
Anna Rakityanskaya, Harvard University (ASEEES)  
Martin Heijdra, Princeton University (CEAL)  
Jianye He, University of California, Berkeley (CEAL, SCSL)  
Antonio Sotomayor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (SALALM)  
Claude Potts, University of California, Berkeley (CIFNAL, ACRL-ESS)  
Lynn Shirey, Harvard University (SALALM)  
Taylor Leigh, University of Kentucky (SALALM, ACRL-ESS)  
D Ryan Lynch, The University of Texas (SALALM)  
Candice Wing-yee Mack, Los Angeles Public Library (APALA)  
Jennifer Osorio (SALALM)  
Kathia Ibacache, University of Colorado Boulder (SALALM)  
Orchid Mazurkiewicz, Hispanic American Periodicals Index, UCLA (SALALM)  
Ruth Haber, University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley Library)  
Irene Münster (SALALM, AJL)  
Barbara Alvarez, University of Michigan (SALALM)  
Seonaid Valiant, Arizona State University (SALALM)  
Gautham Reddy, Emory University (CONSALD)  
David Faust, University of Minnesota (CONSALD, MELA)  
Keiko Yokota-Carter, University of Michigan (NCC, CEAL)  
Laura Martin, University of Wisconsin-Madison (SALALM)  
David Eifler, University of California, Berkeley (AASL)  
José Adrián Barragán-Álvarez, The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley (SALALM)  
Naomi Shiraishi, C. V. Starr East Asian Library, UC Berkeley (CEAL)  
Richard Phillips (University of Florida)  
Ramona Collins, Berkeley Law Library, UC Berkeley  
Kendra K. Levine, Institute of Transportation Studies, UC Berkeley  
Lillian Castillo-Speed, Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley  
S. Lief Adleson, Selgar Corporation (SALALM)  
Julie Lefevre, Institute of Governmental Studies Library, UC Berkeley  
Christina Velazquez Fidler, The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley  
Kahlila Chaar-Pérez, University of Pittsburgh (SALALM)  
Noriko Asato, University of Hawaii (CEAL)  
Jeffrey Shane, Ohio University (CORMOSEA)  
Winnifred Wong, National University of Singapore Libraries  
Fabiano Rocha, University of Toronto (CEAL, SALALM)

Rachel Stein, The Latin American Library, Tulane University (SALALM)  
Catherine Essinger, University of Houston (AASL)  
Helen Tang, University of Toronto (CEAL)  
Debbie Jan, Optometry and Health Sciences Library, UC Berkeley  
Kristen LaBonte, University of California, Santa Barbara Library (IAMSLIC)  
Timothy Vollmer, University of California, Berkeley  
Susan Xue, University of California, Berkeley (CEAL)  
I-Wei Wang, University of California, Berkeley  
Kristina Chamorro, Berkeley Law Library, UC Berkeley  
Ying Liu, University of Victoria (CEAL, SCSL)  
Virginia Shih, University of California, Berkeley (CORMOSEA)  
Susan Powell, Earth Sciences & Map Library, University of California, Berkeley  
Mohamed Hamed, University of California, Berkeley (MELA)  
Sean Swanick, Duke University (MELA)  
Caroline Miller, University of California, Los Angeles (AJL)  
Chiaki Saki, Columbia University (CEAL)  
Zoe Borovsky, University of California, Los Angeles  
Courtney Dean, University of California, Los Angeles  
Michelle Brasseur, University of California, Los Angeles  
Miki Goral, UCLA (ALC)  
Monique Grenier, University of Victoria  
Janine Henri, University of California, Los Angeles  
Diana King, University of California, Los Angeles (ACRL-WGSS)  
Tomoko Bialock, University of California, Los Angeles (CEAL)  
David Woken, University of Chicago (SALALM)  
Christine Sala, Columbia University  
Rick Prelinger, UC Santa Cruz  
Osman Celik, University of California, Berkeley  
Katherine Kapsidelis, University of California, Los Angeles  
Miriam Stark, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa  
Nina Mamikunian, University of California, San Diego  
Karen Bouchard, Brown University (ARLIS/NA,VRA)  
Heather Saunders (ARLIS/NA)  
Jana Krentz, Yale University  
Zoë McLaughlin, Michigan State University (CORMOSEA, CONSALD)  
Sam Dunlap, University of California, San Diego  
Michael Biggins, University of Washington (ASEEES)  
Ana Diab, Emily Carr University of Art + Design (ARLIS/NA)  
Jesús Alonso-Regalado, University at Albany, SUNY (SALALM, ACRL-ESS)  
Maria Alejandra Aguilar, Florida Atlantic University  
Amanda M Lowe, University at Albany, SUNY  
Abby Adams, University at Albany, SUNY

Dawn Wharram, University at Albany, SUNY  
Richard S. Fogarty, University at Albany, SUNY  
Walter E. Little, University at Albany, SUNY  
Alanna Aiko Moore, UC San Diego, CA  
Michitake Aso, University at Albany, SUNY  
Jean-Francois Briere, University at Albany, SUNY  
Alejandra Bronfman, University at Albany, SUNY  
Jeannine Berroteran, Independent Scholar, ACRL-ESS  
Paula Carns, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ACRL-ESS, CIFNAL  
Carl Lehnen, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Brian Vetruba, University of Minnesota (ACRL-ESS, GNARP)  
Lynn Cunningham, University of California, Berkeley  
Jeremy Ott, University of California, Berkeley (GNARP, FCLSC, AIA)  
Deb Raftus, University of Washington (SALALM, CIFNAL, ACRL ESS)  
Shannon Tanhayi Ahari, University of California, Los Angeles  
Tara Murray Grove (Penn State, GNARP)  
Sarah Sussman, Stanford University (CIFNAL)  
Jennifer Nelson, University of California, Berkeley  
Thomas Keenan, Princeton University, (ASEEES)  
Cody James Inglis, Central European University  
Melissa Gasparotto, New York Public Library Research Libraries, Pratt Institute (SALALM)  
Julianne Haahr, University Wisconsin-Madison, (ACRL-ESS, CIFNAL)  
Todd Michelson-Ambelang, University of Wisconsin-Madison, (ACRL-ESS, CONSALD)  
Teresa Chapa, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Holly Ackerman, Duke University Libraries, SALALM  
Marisol Ramos, University of California, Santa Barbara  
Isabel Espinal, University of Massachusetts Amherst (SALALM, Reforma, AILA, ACRL AFAS)  
Darlene Hull and René Grullón, Libros de Barlovento, SALALM  
Gabriel Hetland, University at Albany, SUNY  
Emilie Songolo, University of Wisconsin-Madison (ALC, CIFNAL, CAMP)  
Mary Ruple, University of Kansas, (SALALM)  
Yu-Hui Chen, University at Albany, SUNY  
Kristin Conlin, University of Baltimore, USMAI  
Brendan Nieuburt, University of Michigan (ASEEES)  
Ellen Jaramillo, Yale University (SALALM)  
Susan Gilroy, Harvard University Library  
Erin Durham, University of Maryland Baltimore County (ACRL)  
Emily Kilcer, University at Albany, SUNY  
Fan Pen Chen, University at Albany, SUNY  
Christine Vassallo-Oby, University at Albany, SUNY  
Adam H. Lisbon, University of Colorado Boulder  
Christine Turner, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries  
Robert Garzillo, Rhode Island School of Design Library

Miguel Angel Valladares Llata, University of Virginia at Charlottesville (SALALM, CIFNAL)  
Bill Maltarich, New York University  
Roberto C. Delgadillo (SALALM)  
Stacy Reardon, University of California, Berkeley  
Esmeralda M Kale, Northwestern University (ALC, CAMP)  
Anne K. Knafl, University of Chicago  
Adnan Malik, University of California, Berkeley (CONSALD)  
Toshie Marra, University of California, Berkeley (CEAL)  
David Rios, University of California, Riverside (SALALM)  
Emily Una Weirich, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona  
Ian Kinzler, University of California, Los Angeles  
Rhea K. Lesage, Harvard University (MGSA Library Committee)  
Harold M. Leich, The Library of Congress, European Division (retired) (MGSA Library Committee, ASEEEES)  
Rebecka Lindau, University of Cincinnati (MGSA Library Committee)  
George I. Paganellis, California State University, Sacramento (MGSA Library Committee)  
Dia Philippides, Boston College (Prof. Emerita) (MGSA Library Committee)  
Sarah Aponte, CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, The City College of New York (SALALM)  
Gary Hausman, Columbia University, New York (CONSALD)  
Peter Magierski Columbia University Libraries, New York  
Andr as Riedlmayer, Harvard University (MELA)  
Ana s Salamon, McGill University (MELA)  
Iman Dagher, UCLA (MELA)  
Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, University of Toronto  
Araba Dawson-Andoh, Ohio University (ALC, CAMP)  
Deborah LaFond, University at Albany (ALC)  
Ayman Eddakroui, Effat University, KSA  
Neda Zeraatkar, Emory University (MELA)  
Martin J. Brennan, University of California, Los Angeles  
Anlin Yang, University of Wisconsin-Madison (CEAL)  
Ian Goodale, University of Texas at Austin  
Eleanor Peers, University of Cambridge, UK  
Kim Ammons, Mount Holyoke College Library  
Jef Pierce, University of Pennsylvania (CONSALD)  
Naila Al Atrash, New York University (NYU)  
Vickie F. Doll, University of Kansas (CEAL)  
Joshua Seufert, Princeton University (CEAL, SCSL)  
Nelson Santana, Bronx Community College of the City University of New York (SALALM)  
Yao Chen, University of California, Santa Barbara (CEAL, SCSL)  
Robyn Jensen, Pomona College (ASEEEES)  
Erica Camisa Morale, USC (ASEEEES)  
Kevin McMahon, Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc)  
Sandy Enriquez, University of California, Riverside (SALALM)  
Liangyu Fu, University of Michigan (CEAL, SCSL)  
Margarita Nafpaktitis, Stanford University (ASEEEES)

Emily Wallis Hughes, Rutgers University - New Brunswick (Fence, an independent literary nonprofit publisher)

Heather Smedberg, University of California, San Diego (LAUC)

Triveni Kuchi, Rutgers University - New Brunswick (member CONSALD, ACRL/AAMESIG)

Kevin M. Kurdylo, University Wisconsin-Madison, (ACRL-ESS)

Anjali Nerlekar, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Benjamin Koerber, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Ryan Womack, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Jawid Mojaddedi, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Karen Thompson, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Alamin Mazrui, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Sonia Yaco, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Abdulla, Mohamed, Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University - KSA

Amy J. Higer, Rutgers University, (PTLFC-AAUP-AFT)

Kayo Denda, Rutgers University - New Brunswick Libraries

Fernanda Perrone, Rutgers University - New Brunswick Libraries

Jonathan Saucedo, Rutgers University - New Brunswick Libraries

David Fernández, University of Toronto

Dan D'Agostino, University of Toronto

Roseli Golfetti, Rutgers University, (PTLFC-AAUP-AFT)

Deborah Schlein, Princeton University (MELA)

C.G. Häberl, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Pauline Lewis, Stanford University (MELA)

Molly Schoen, SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology (ARLIS/NA, VRA)

Robert S. Boikess, Rutgers University-New Brunswick

Bronwen K. Maxson, University of Oregon (SALALM, ALA/ACRL, ACRL-OR)

Deepa Banerjee, University of Washington (CONCALD, AAMESIG)

Vanessa Arce Senati, Lehman College - City University of New York (SALALM)

Marybeth Gasman, Rutgers University - New Brunswick

Lisa Gardinier, University of Iowa

Benoît Vallée, University at Albany, SUNY

Feather Crawford, University of Oregon (CLLAS)

Eli Meyer, University of Oregon (CLLAS)

Betsaida M. Reyes, University of Kansas (SALALM)

Ilka Kressner, University at Albany, SUNY

Elizabeth Pettinaroli, Rhodes College

James P. Cassaro, University of Pittsburgh (MLA, ALA, AMS, SAM)

Liza Vick, University of Pennsylvania (MLA, AMS)

Jennifer Nardine, Virginia Tech (ALA, ACRL)

Daryll Stevens, Colorado College (MLA, ACRL, ARSC)

Wade Kotter, Weber State University (MPMLA, ALA, ACRL, ACRL-ANSS, ACRL-PPRIS)

Sarah Buck Kachaluba, University of California - San Diego (SALALM)

Casey Mullin, Western Washington University (MLA, ALA/ALCTS)

John Shepard, University of California, Berkeley

Philip Vandermeer, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (MLA, SEM, Appal.Stud.Assn)

Reed David, Washington State University (MLA, SAM)

Matthew Ertz, University of Louisville (MLA, MWMLA)  
Francois Berthiaume, Rutgers University - New Brunswick  
Alison Hicks, University College, London  
Timothy Neufeldt, University of Toronto (CAML, MLA)  
Hélène Huet, University of Florida (CIFNAL, GNARP)  
Anne Shelley, Illinois State University (MLA, MWMLA)  
Rebecca Fitzsimmons, Illinois State University (SAA)  
Diane Steinhaus, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (MLA)  
David Hunter, University of Texas at Austin (MLA)  
Matt Testa, Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University  
Corinne Forstot-Burke, University of Texas at Austin (MLA)  
Hsi-chu Bolick, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (CEAL, SCSL)  
Jennifer Sharkey, Illinois State University (ACRL-ULS)  
Janice Gill Bunker, Brigham Young University (MLA)  
Greg MacAyeal, Northwestern University (MLA, SAM)  
Gabriela Martínez, University of Oregon (IAMCR, LASA, ICA)  
Z. Sylvia Yang, DePauw University (MLA, MWMLA)  
Angela Hackstadt, University at Albany SUNY  
Moon Kim, Ohio State University (APALA)  
Lisa Hooper, Tulane University (MLA, ALA)  
Laurel Diskin, Glendale Public Library (MLA)  
Keith Knop, University of Georgia (MLA)  
Sandy Lemmon, Eastman School of Music (MLA)  
Charles Roush, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (MLA, TMLA)  
Kerry Masteller, Harvard University (MLA)  
Elisa Sze, University of Toronto Libraries  
Elise Rotchford, Naval Postgraduate School Special Collections Archive (MA)  
Olha Aleksic, Harvard University (ASEEES)  
Mara Thacker, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (CONSALD)  
Jeffrey Martin, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (CONSALD)  
Elliot Montpellier, University of Pennsylvania  
Karen Stoll Farrell, Indiana University-Bloomington (CONSALD; CORMOSEA)  
Andrew H. Lee, NYU (AHA, ASPHS, IALHI, OAH)  
Xiuying Zou (CEAL, SCSL)  
Laura Ring, University of Chicago (CONSALD)  
Angela Zsiga, Rutgers University  
Malaika Grant, University of Minnesota (ALC, CAMP, ACRL AASLIG)  
Fe Susan Go, University of Michigan (CORMOSEA)  
Lauran R. Hartley, Columbia University (CEAL, CONSALD, TRWG)  
Stephen Maher, New York University  
Amanda Watson, New York University  
Monica Ghosh, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i (CONSALD)  
Wafa Isfahani, Rutgers University (MELA)

Ashley Toner, Rutgers University  
Chloe Hovind Clinkenbeard (MLA, ALA-WLA, ACRL)  
Brian Vivier, University of Pennsylvania (CEAL, SCSL)  
Michael Scott, UCLA (SALALM)  
Philip McEldowney, University of Virginia (CONSALD)  
Kirstin Dougan Johnson, University of Illinois (MLA)  
Kendra Smith-Howard (University at Albany (SUNY))  
Kelli Trei, University of Illinois (AAAS)  
Robert Geraci, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (ASEEES)  
Pamela Graham, Columbia University Libraries (SALALM)  
Rhonda Neugebauer (SALALM, ALA)  
Kent Underwood (New York University)  
Samayra Crooke-G, State University of New York (SUNY-Albany)  
Derrick Jefferson, American University  
Ashley Larson, The Claremont Colleges Library (SALALM)  
David Leyenson, Harvard University