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Critical information literacy at the crossroads: An examination of pushback from implementation to praxis

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Abstract

In this article, the authors explore whether academic libraries are truly capable of implementing a critical information literacy (CIL) praxis and if there are inherent threats to critical librarianship when incorporating CIL into the curriculum. The survey instrument in this study gathered data from 92 academic library instructors based within the United States. The study identified that 41% of question respondents had received negative comments or criticisms about including CIL in their library curriculum through various formats: online modules, one-shot instruction, course-embedded units, and credit-bearing courses. In addition, 29% of question respondents felt that pushback from academic teaching staff, other librarians/administration, and students threatened the integrity of CIL. This research helps to illustrate the fragility of CIL and how librarians have faced pushback when critical content is incorporated into the information literacy (IL) curriculum.

Keywords

academic libraries; critical information literacy; critical librarianship; information literacy; one shot; silencing; US

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1. Introduction

Critical information literacy (CIL), while it has been discussed in library literature for the past two decades, is still a contentious topic. There seems to be a debate on how to define CIL and why it should or should not be practiced. Drabrinski and Tewell (2019) describe CIL as a "theory and practice that considers the sociopolitical dimensions of information and production of knowledge, and critiques the ways in which systems of power shape the creation, distribution, and reception of information. CIL acknowledges that libraries are not and cannot be neutral actors, and embraces the potential of libraries as catalysts for social change." While this definition has largely been accepted, it is arguably too convoluted as it can be both inclusive and exclusive and can focus too much either on the theoretical or the practical. More importantly, because CIL examines how libraries engage in oppressive systems, it may face the same criticism or objections as critical race theory and even threats of eradication (Kelly, 2023). This then raises the question of whether librarians will be able to fully implement a critical library curriculum or if criticality is even considered essential to the work of librarians.

The study detailed in this paper is meant to explore various types of pushback librarians have received from proposing or implementing elements of CIL into their library curriculum. Although

this survey represents a small sample size, it serves as a starting point for conversations about particular modes of pushback to CIL. Part of this research comes from the personal experiences of one of the authors, Elizabeth Kamper, Information Literacy Librarian and Assistant Professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Throughout their time teaching, they have delivered information literacy (IL) instruction in one-shot and embedded unit form. The delivery modes for their teaching have been face-to-face, online, hybrid, and asynchronous through online learning modules. Elizabeth's identities play a role in their pushback as well as their privileged position in the classroom. They are a white, female presenting, seemingly straight presenting, tattooed, pierced librarian.

They started teaching CIL as part of their curriculum in the summer of 2018 and immediately received both overt and covert pushback from campus faculty and instructors from departments that will not be named specifically in this paper. While some campus partnerships proved to be supportive of CIL, many used strategies to try to eliminate CIL from the curriculum. Elizabeth received questions and comments like, "can you just stick to teaching them about the databases?" and "well, we don't want to dwell on the negative" while trying to discuss privilege in academic publishing. There are some instructors who have stopped requesting library instruction after offering verbal pushback to critical themes during instruction sessions.

In one particular instance, during a freshman level (first year of tertiary education) instruction session, a student chose a research topic relating to Indigenous cultures in the midwestern United States. The student was frustrated with the lack of information and scholarship available for their topic. Elizabeth worked with the student and briefly discussed privilege and marginalised voices in scholarship and the history of colonialism in academic publishing. The instructor hurriedly advised the student to change their topic, noting that the student didn't want to "deal with all of that" and completely dismissing the conversation.

Topics that have received the most obvious pushback relate to white-centric scholarly publishing and the exclusion of BIPOC scholars in academia, critical scholarly evaluation, and topics including LGBTQIA+ themes. While their library colleagues have been mostly supportive of their CIL efforts, there seems to be a lack of emphasis on critical pedagogy and a lack of energy for what could be seen by some as "radical" IL updates, i.e. the rejection of white supremacy in all forms.

The authors of this paper wanted to explore whether other academic librarians in the United States were being confronted by the same or similar negative reactions to CIL. This survey was meant to extend an invitation to share whatever librarians felt comfortable disclosing about their own experiences. While we collected basic demographic information from our participants, we chose not to gather information about those who gave pushback, knowing that the survey respondents would have to make assumptions about those individuals that might not be accurate.

2. Definitions

In this paper we refer to "silencing" as any overt or covert negative response intended to quiet or stop the efforts of critical librarianship or more specifically CIL. Silencing can include forms of harassment, such as gaslighting, bullying, providing unrealistic expectations, and alienation.

In this paper we refer to "pushback" as the most observable form of silencing besides outright prohibition, however, we wanted to leave the term open to some amount of interpretation. In the

survey, we offer three possible examples of pushback, as well as an option for participants to describe the term themselves. Our examples included obstruction, negative reactions, and denial. We were interested in discovering if CIL was weakened enough if it would decrease its effectiveness or lead to prohibition. Therefore, we used the concept of pushback to inform our survey results.

3. Literature review

Over the past 20 years, CIL has been grounded in IL literature. More importantly, CIL has required library professionals to reexamine how we practice IL instruction. (Tewell, 2015; Tewell, 2018). However, this re-examination has not been without its challenges. For one, creating a CIL practice unveils the liminal and marginalised space in which academic librarians function. Libraries often function within an institutional space that removes librarians as producers of knowledge or in which they have little involvement with pedagogy; "teaching faculty" are perceived as responsible for both. Librarians still have to work with teaching faculty to be considered experts and ultimately derive any power to interrogate oppressive structures from those same faculty. They also cannot effectively convey that knowledge to students without the consent of teaching faculty (Almeida, 2015; Einsenhower & Smith, 2010). Therefore, practicing CIL has become shaped by barriers, and this can negatively impact it and can lead to silencing.

In examining the literature to look for a correlation between inclusivity and the silencing of critical librarianship or CIL, there are indications of a correlation between the implementation of CIL and silencing. According to Tewell (2016), there are several barriers that librarians who practice CIL face that can ultimately lead to silencing. For example, Tewell identifies one-shot instruction, resistance from students, pedagogical challenges, faculty expectations, and the corporatisation of academic learning that does not allow for critical thought as critical barriers to critical library instruction. Hudson (2017), on the other hand, views CIL or critical librarianship as ineffective if it does not include theory. According to Hudson, librarians are too concerned with practice, and that practice can serve to neutralise (silence) criticality and uphold existing power structures.

Research also examines the broader impact of CIL and silencing. Almeida (2018) examines the role of CIL and silencing through the lens of community. While Almeida envisions a critlib community as helping to make systemic changes within LIS, she also realizes that community is a social construct that can disrupt social justice movements or uphold oppressive systems. Beilin (2018) argues that there is an inherent dilemma with framing critical librarianship since it contains too many disparate concepts, and it has mostly been confined within academia although it is more broadly used within LIS. Beilin considers the rootedness of critical librarianship in academic spaces and academic modes of discourse to be alienating as this would exclude or silence most librarians or other LIS scholars, who are often less fully acculturated in the world of academia: "even librarians with PhDs can feel marginalized by their primary status as librarians" (p. 204). Seale (2020) argues that while critical librarianship has been institutionalized, it is still marginalised within the profession and in institutions since library instruction is devalued. In other words, while critical librarianship is seen as legitimate, it is practically toothless in helping to dismantle policies and practices that reproduce inequities. Ferretti (2020) argues that while CIL is helpful in teaching IL, it has little impact on power relations in academic libraries among colleagues. Ferretti further argues that "the words 'critical librarianship' or 'critical pedagogy'" provide "a status that can shadow the work of interrogating power and privilege and actively working toward dismantling structural inequities inherent in our workplaces. This includes further marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Colour (BIPOC) colleagues by those who claim the critical librarianship identity" (p. 137). In this instance Ferretti is speaking of how the mainstreaming of CIL can lead to silencing or

performativity because it excludes those who identify as BIPOC from the process and most CIL instruction is typically done by non-BIPOC library faculty and staff.

4. Methodology

To better analyse whether inclusion of critical librarianship leads to silencing, we created a survey to measure the threat levels to implementing CIL at academic institutions in the United States. We decided on a mixed methods approach collecting both qualitative and quantitative data.

We also collected demographic data about the respondents to see if they identified as BIPOC, LBTQIA+, or as a member of any other marginalised group (we asked participants to identify how they are marginalised). We asked questions regarding the scope (e.g., 2-year private or public universities) and location of the library in which respondents worked. We asked these questions to analyse whether race/ethnicity, sexual orientation/gender identity, or disability, etc. had any impact on respondents' perceptions about CIL and to analyse whether location had any impact on how academic institutions responded to CIL being taught in the classroom. The survey questions were multiple choice, closed-ended, and open-ended (see Appendix 1).

We contacted several academic library associations and regional consortia, including the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Illinois Library Association (ILA), and the Consortium of Academic Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI). The survey was administered using Qualtrics. Although our survey provided quantitative results, this research relied heavily on qualitative data.

While analyzing the qualitative data, answers were grouped using identifiable themes. For example, when coding short answer responses to covert pushback to CIL, themes emerged such as: delegitimising rhetoric, ideas about "traditional" IL, and using time constraints as a barrier or excuse to cut CIL. These were coded as pushback based on rhetoric, institutional "role" as librarian, and practicality. These themes began to span across qualitative questions and overall pushback themes for the study.

5. Results

After sending the surveys to various consortia and library associations, we received a total of 92 surveys. Because of the way we set the survey questions, participants could opt to skip questions if they did not feel comfortable answering. This meant that we had 45 respondents who completed every single question provided on the survey (including qualitative short answers), and 47 respondents who answered some questions while choosing to skip others. While an argument can be made that this makes the quantitative data unreliable, the purpose of this survey is to start conversations, so any detail may be useful for future research.

Most of the survey participants who responded to Q2 (figure 1) live in the Midwest (62%, n=43). Approximately 15% (n=10) of participants live in the Northeast, while approximately 10% (n=7) of participants live in the South. Approximately 13% (n=9) of participants live in the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest.

46% (n=32) of respondents worked at public 4-year institutions (figure 2), and 35% (n=24) worked at private 4-year institutions. 19% (n=13) worked at public 2-year institutions.

Figure 1: respondent location

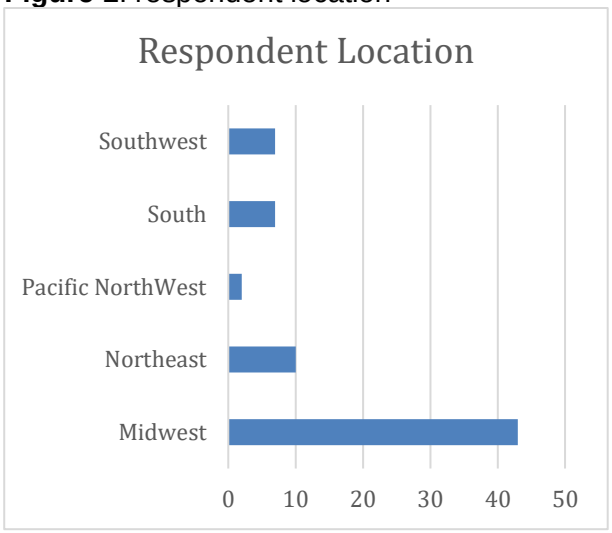
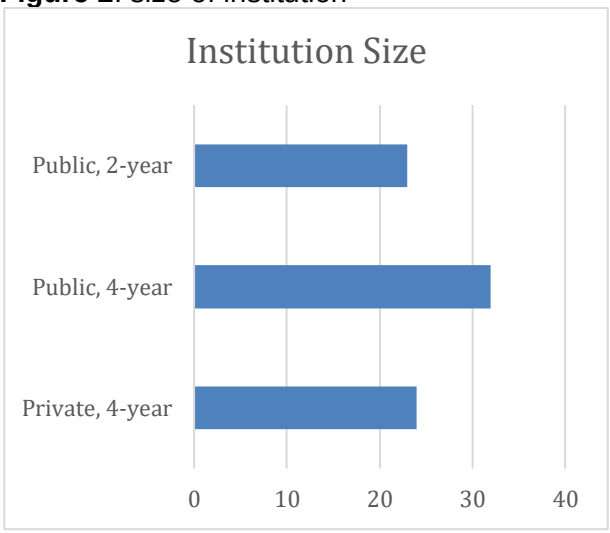
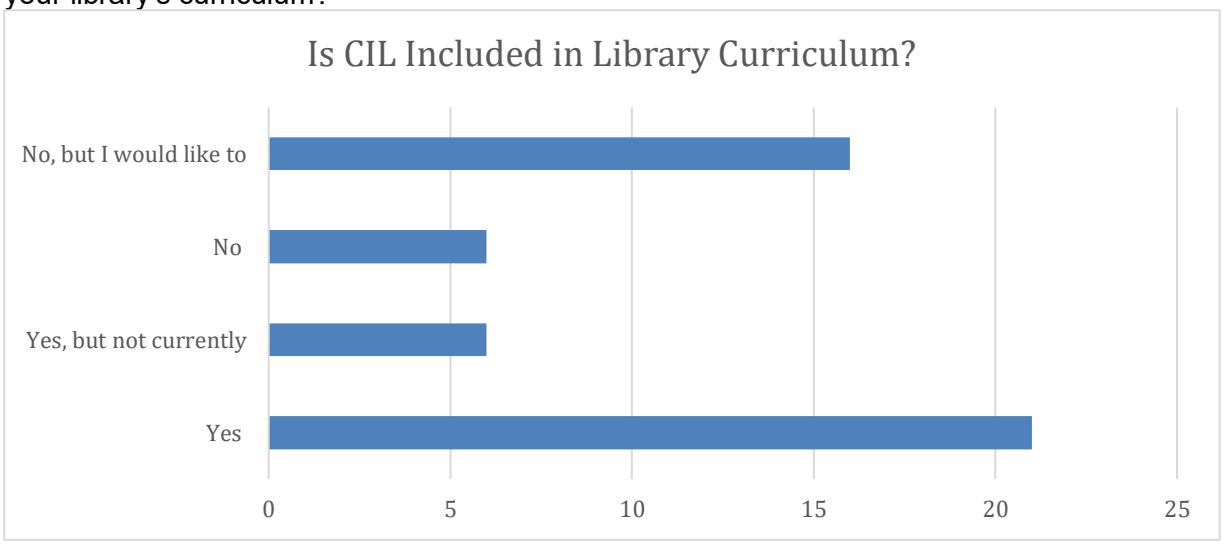


Figure 2: size of institution



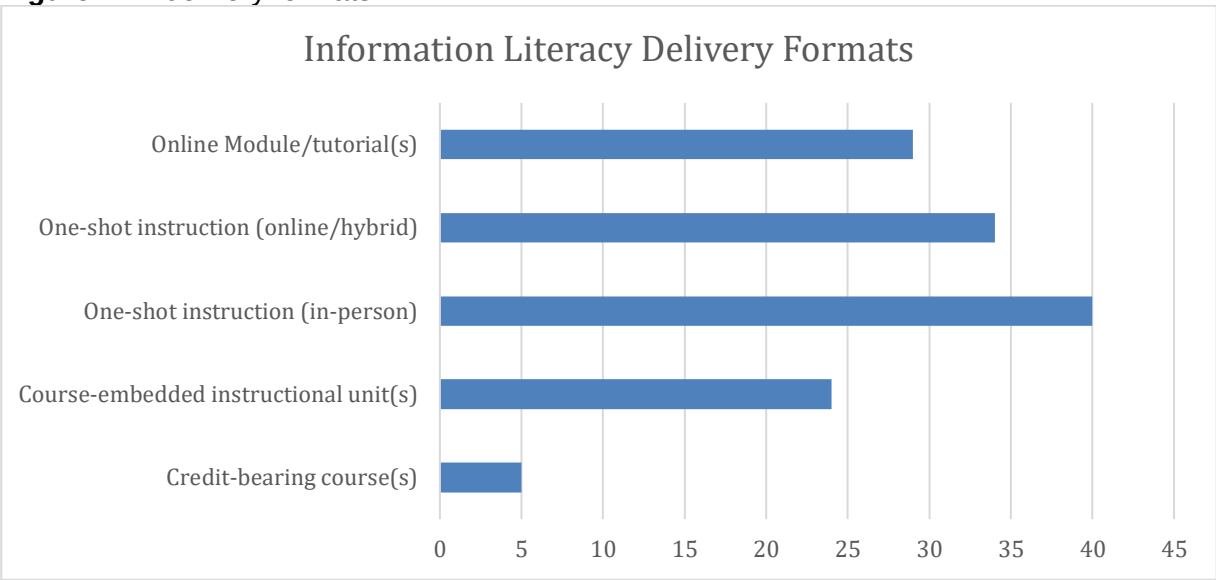
81% (n=56) of participants identified as non-BIPOC, while 19% (n=13) identified as BIPOC. 70% (n=48) of participants identified as non-LGBTQIA+, and 30% (n=21) identified as LGBTQIA+. 76% (n=52) of participants did not identify as being from a marginalised group, while 24% (n=16) did. When asked to specify their marginalised identity, over half of the respondents self-identify as either a person with disabilities or neurodivergent. Other participants identified their specific ethnic identities.

Figure 3: responses to question “Are you teaching Critical Information Literacy (CIL) as part of your library’s curriculum?”



We asked several quantitative questions about CIL and IL delivery. First, we asked participants if they included CIL in their curriculum (figure 3). 43% (n=21) of those who responded replied yes. 12% (n=6) replied that they had included it in the past. 12% (n=6) replied that they had never included it in the curriculum, while 33% (n=16) said that while they had not included it in their curriculum, they were interested in teaching CIL. When asked how they taught IL (figure 4), 30% (n=40) of participants who responded replied that they do or had done a one-shot, in-person instruction, while 26%(n=34) had done a one-shot that was either hybrid or online. 22% (n=29) of participants had done online module tutorials, and 18% (n=24) of participants had taught a course-embedded instructional unit. Only 4% (n=5) of participants had taught CIL in a credit bearing course.

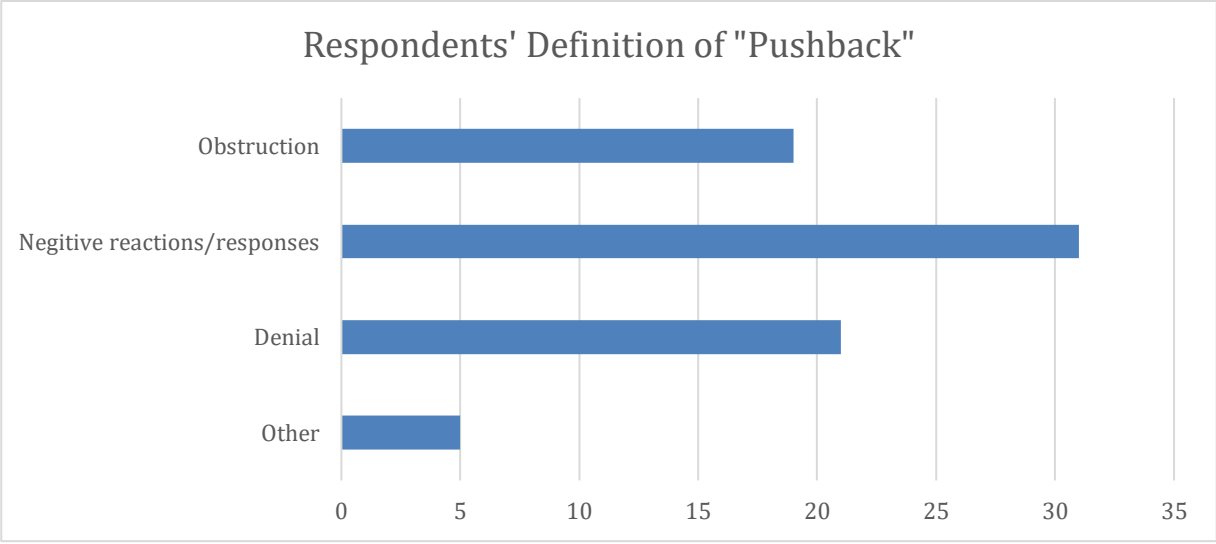
Figure 4: IL delivery formats



When attempting to assess threats to implementing CIL into the curriculum, we asked participations questions concerning the pushback that they have received. When we asked our participants to define how they interpret pushback, 41% (n=31) of those who replied said that they had either received negative comments or responses about including it in their curriculum (figure 5). 28% (n=21) stated that pushback took the form of denial (e.g., CIL was not considered practical in terms of the course material or there was not enough time to devote to CIL instruction, etc.). 25% (n=19) of respondents stated that they had faced obstruction, and 7% (n=5) replied other. When asked to expand on "other", we received the following replies (all listed responses are direct quotes):

1. Passive.
2. Overemphasis on outdated ideas of library orientation or stick to your area of expertise (librarianship) although you may have experience outside librarianship or within the field you are providing instruction.
3. Why not just show students how to use the libraries resources?
4. Career skills replaced information literacy in many undergraduate courses.

Figure 5: definitions of "pushback"



When asked to describe who they received pushback from, 50% (n=8) of participants who replied said they had received pushback from faculty/instructors. 25% (n=4) received pushback from other library faculty or staff. 13% (n=2) received pushback from campus administrators, and 6% (n=1) received pushback from library administrators and students respectively. This question had, by far, the least number of respondents that chose to answer. This could be due to feelings of fear or doubt regarding the identification of those who push back on critical themes in the classroom.

We also asked participants to describe any overt or covert pushback to CIL they had received. While some participants who responded claimed they had not witnessed any overt pushback, others had. Some of the replies ranged from being asked not to mention CIL, through lack of cooperation, to students claiming that algorithms cannot be racist.

The participants had varied replies to the covert pushback that they had received. Some of these responses ranged from librarians or faculty thinking that CIL was not important or secondary to traditional library instruction, to CIL being too vague and having no quantifiable benefits. Additionally, respondents felt that their institutions were not committed to or have a limited scope of EDI (equality, diversity, and inclusion) in general so CIL is not prioritised. One respondent stated that a faculty member accused them of “pushing an anti-white agenda” when they suggested that the professor change language to better represent CIL concepts, such as evaluating information for privilege or identifying underrepresented voices in the literature. Other respondents stated that they were discouraged from using language associated with CIL or that that it was a waste of time. One respondent also worried that BIPOC students would not be attentive to receiving CIL instruction from a white librarian while being concerned that white students would not be receptive to concepts of race. Three themes emerged from the qualitative responses to overt and covert pushback to CIL: rhetorical pushback, pushback based on the historical “role” of librarians in academia, and pushback based on practicality (e.g. time constraints).

When participants were asked if they believed that pushback threatened CIL, 29% (n=10) of respondents who chose to answer said yes, 25% (n=8) answered no, and 47% (n=16) answered maybe. We also asked participants to share any efforts they had made to incorporate critical information literacy into their curriculum. Some of the replies we received were:

1. The amount of emotional labor (on top of drafting a lesson plan, currying faculty relationship to be invited to class, reaching out to explain how libraries have evolved and still evolve and need to adjust further) is completely covert--there's no space to acknowledge it in the faculty activity reporting system for tenure and promotion.
2. My critical information literacy lessons were only possible after I developed significant relationships with my collaborating faculty. My best work towards critical perspectives on IL occurs in at least two sessions with a class and there is always an element of flipped, asynchronous work associated with the lesson.
3. Because CIL is taught in conjunction with my one-shot research methods classes, it's something that I can incorporate to varying degrees and I'm learning which professors will not object if I shift the focus of the class more heavily towards CIL, and which would object.
4. I said that I didn't teach critical information literacy, but there are certainly places where my IL instruction overlaps with critical information literacy. Because information literacy itself, even without the "critical" designator of critical theory informed IL, is in many ways already in line with some of the concerns if critical information literacy, I'm not sure that this is really an either/or, practically speaking.

5. In my setting, I use some low key critical information literacy instruction as part of teaching source evaluation. As our information literacy instruction is not yet well integrated into our curriculum, I haven't received pushback. Most professors have indicated "oh that's good!" I suspect if our instruction was well integrated and thus more people knew of these initiatives, there might be pushback.
6. At this point, my efforts aren't systematic--I just work critical perspectives into my teaching where I can. I am a solo instruction librarian, so I have a lot of competing demands on my time, which is a poor excuse but my reality nonetheless. A long-term goal is to propose a seminar-style course for our honors program, which is interdisciplinary and exploratory in nature, that would incorporate a more critical view of how we interact with information, but that's some ways off yet.
7. I've been supported at my institution by library admin and faculty, and we have a statement that we teach it on our library website as well. I think I'm lucky, though, to be in this environment, especially in a red state.
8. I have found that it's usually well-received by my faculty, students, and library admin. Unfortunately, there are a few who are not receptive. When it comes to faculty and students, at least, I generally don't give them the heads up that we'll be engaging in critical info lit, but instead mention that we'll be "evaluating information," for example, and slip that conversation in. I haven't received any pushback when it's presented that way.
9. I'm incredibly lucky that our teaching faculty trust the expertise the librarians bring to the classroom and are willing to let us teach what we think is important. It also helps I work at a community college in an incredibly diverse area that focuses a lot of instruction on social justice issues.
10. I use CIL when working with faculty and directly with students, but this is on an individual basis. The emphasis on DEI and culturally responsive teaching is an opening and a natural place in the curriculum to insert CIL.

Based on these replies, librarians have attempted to implement criticality into their curriculum. However, these individuals have often had to use covert methods to incorporate CIL into their instruction.

6. Discussion

The results of this survey help to fill in the gaps of the previous literature concerning CIL and silencing. This work expands on the research done by Tewell who examined barriers to implementing IL. While Tewell's work was instrumental in understanding some threats to CIL, it did not explicitly examine how these barriers could lead to silencing or potential prohibition of CIL or critical librarianship. Each qualitative response to questions about overt and covert pushback to CIL could lend itself to further research studies, particularly specific rhetoric used to deter CIL efforts in freshman level courses. Several respondents mentioned freshman seminar or first-year experience courses. If CIL themes were embedded in these courses, would this normalize the relationship between social justice themes and research through a student's educational experience?

While the results of this survey confirm some of the previous arguments made by scholars, it does bring up new questions that need to be interrogated. We need to ask why most practitioners of CIL and a majority who work in the profession are white and/or do not identify with a marginalised group. Perhaps these factors delegitimise CIL since many who claim to practice it might be examining it out of context. Just within the discussion of racial identity and the development and teaching of a CIL library curriculum, we can start to ask several questions:

- Could these experts be misspeaking on behalf of communities to which they do not belong?
- How many librarians identify as BIPOC and are also teaching CIL? Are they seen as leading experts in the field of CIL or critical librarianship?
- Would adopting more activist methodologies by white or non-marginalised library instructors deflect from how LIS continues to marginalise underrepresented groups or allow for a more nuanced discussion of how oppressive systems continue to function in the presence of perceived inclusivity?

Additionally, this research demands the examination of the intersections between CIL and the already tenuous relationship between librarians/library staff and teaching faculty. Could contention around CIL lead to further professional minimalisation (Becksford, 2022)? We also must be cognizant that social justice and diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism are not priorities within academic libraries. Knowing this, can a CIL literacy praxis exist if theory, practice, and reflection are decentralised or threatened?

7. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore ideas and themes surrounding pushback to CIL. By collecting some initial quantitative and qualitative data, we feel this study has opened the door to various conversations surrounding the implementation and praxis of CIL. Some key takeaways of this research come from the respondents' outlook on the future of CIL, as many do not or may not see pushback as a threat to the continuation of their efforts. Additionally, even with the fear surrounding pushback, a majority of those who responded, 76% (n=37) said that they teach, or would like to teach, CIL in their library curriculum. From the qualitative data, future themes to explore could be campus faculty and librarian relationships surrounding CIL, CIL and competing demands of library instruction, and culturally responsive teaching efforts at institutions against critical pedagogy.

While this research is a start, we must acknowledge that further research is needed to determine the threat level to CIL. Because this research relied heavily on qualitative feedback, our collection method had its own challenges. Firstly, our sample size was too small to measure the overall threat level to CIL. Secondly, we might also have some sampling bias in how we collected our data since we did not perform outreach to a broader number of library associations and consortia. It is no coincidence that most of our respondents reside in the Midwest as we are researchers from the Midwest. Therefore, some members of our intended sample population were unintentionally excluded. Additionally, because many of the respondents were White and not from a marginalised group, they could have changed their behaviours to reflect the questions that they were being asked. Thus, the threats to CIL may be greater or lesser than described by our respondents.

We must also acknowledge a critical error when developing the survey. We did not ask participants to define critical librarianship or their practice of critical librarianship. Therefore, we were unable to assess the criticality of this library instruction. We do not know if the respondents incorporated theory or other elements of CIL into their instruction or if they simply used popular catchphrases associated with critical theory or social justice movements. This would make a difference as our respondents might not understand CIL concepts and practices and could have skewed the results of our research.

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Appendix 1

Survey Questions Distributed by Qualtrics.

1. Select the option that best describes your type of institution.
    a. Public, 2-year institution
    b. Public, 4-year institution
    c. Private, 4-year institution

2. In which region is your institution located?
    a. Midwest
    b. Northeast
    c. Pacific Northwest
    d. South
    e. Southwest

3. How do you identify?
    a. I am a member of the BIPOC community
    b. I am not a member of the BIPOC community

4. Do you identify as LGBTQIA+?
    a. No
    b. Yes

5. Do you identify with any additional marginalized group?
    a. No
    b. Yes
        i. If you answered "yes" to question 5, please share if you feel comfortable doing so.

6. Are you teaching Critical Information Literacy (CIL) as part of your library's curriculum?
    a. Yes
    b. Yes, but not currently
    c. No
    d. No, but I would like to

7. In which formats are you teaching information literacy content? (Select all that apply)
    a. Online module/tutorial(s)
    b. One-shot instruction (online/hybrid)
    c. One-shot instruction (in-person)
    d. Course-embedded instructional unit(s)
    e. Credit-bearing course(s)

8. Have you ever received pushback about teaching, or planning to teach, Critical Information Literacy from the following groups? (select all that apply)
    a. Campus Administration
    b. Campus Faculty/Instructors
    c. Library Administration
    d. Library Faculty/Staff
    e. Students

9. The term "pushback" can be defined in several different ways. How do you define pushback? (select all that apply)
    a. Obstruction (e.g. lack of financial and other types of support)
    b. Negative reactions/responses
    c. Denial (e.g. based on "practicality")
    d. Other
        i. (Short answer text box)

10. If you have received overt pushback to the content of Critical Information Literacy, what did that look like?
    a. (essay text box)

11. If you have received covert pushback to the content of Critical Information Literacy, what did that look like?
    a. (essay text box)

12. Do you find that pushback is a threat to the future of Critical Information Literacy?
    a. No
    b. Maybe
    c. Yes

13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your Critical Information Literacy efforts?
    a. (essay text box)