

Building relationships to connect local Black-Owned businesses with university resources

Alexandra Howard

Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville,
Alexandra.Howard.1@louisville.edu

Introduction

Outreach and relationship building are key to successful librarianship and an invitation for innovation. I began my first librarian position in October 2020 as the Business Librarian at the University of Louisville. While I knew I needed to build relationships with students, faculty, and staff in the College of Business, I wanted to be innovative and mindful of where else I could establish connections and provide research support. I moved to Louisville during a global pandemic and during national civil unrest due to the pattern of Black citizens being killed by police officers, including Louisville's own Breonna Taylor. It was important to me to figure out how I could utilize my new position to help address injustice and provide support to the Black communities of Louisville.

Before becoming a librarian, I earned my bachelor's degree in Africana Studies and worked in the criminal justice system. I knew the support and guidance I could offer in my new role would look different than it did in the past, and I decided to focus my efforts on connecting local Black-owned businesses with library and university resources. This was an asset-based, actionable approach to provide research support to entrepreneurs that aligned with University of Louisville's commitment to community engagement and anti-racism. This was one way I could work towards addressing systemic injustice facing my Louisville neighbors - the racial wealth gap. There is extreme racial wealth inequality in the United States (see figure 1).

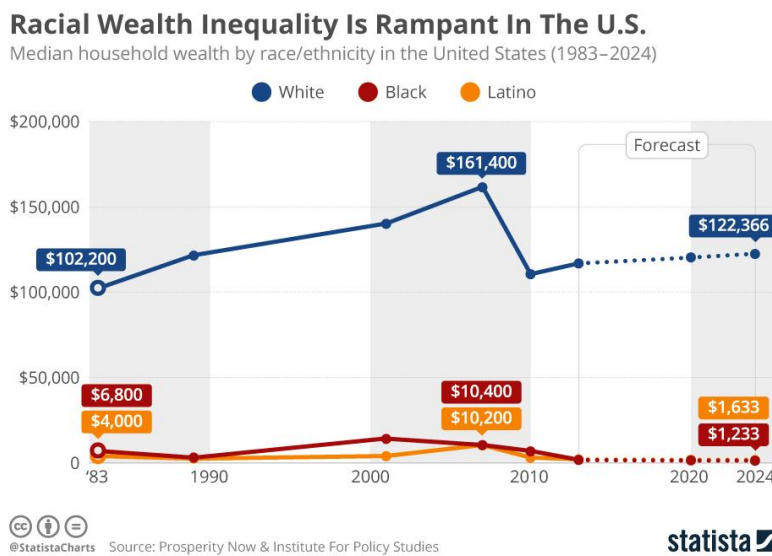


Figure 1. Statista infographic, “Racial Wealth Inequality is Rampant in the U.S.”

A. Howard

Entrepreneurship is a key driver of building generational wealth. In December 2020, Louisville's local newspaper published the article "200 years behind": Racial wealth gap impedes Black business ownership in Louisville" which discussed addressing the racial wealth gap through supporting Black entrepreneurs, stating "to overcome that disparity and create a stronger, more equitable economy, leaders say the city needs to support Black companies through business accelerators, technical assistance and significant financial support" (Gardner 2020). While library research and university resources were not included in this list, these are another important avenue that can be used to support Black companies. This article is a call to action for academic business librarians to utilize the resources at our universities to help respond to the racial wealth inequality in our local communities. We are uniquely positioned to provide access to research and expertise that can benefit minority-owned businesses surrounding our universities. This article will introduce some of the ways I've started to do this. While I've taken a couple steps in the right direction, the work is still evolving. I hope that this article will be an invitation for us to start a conversation and see how we can collaborate and work together to support entrepreneurs and respond to our nation's racial wealth inequality.

Outreach

The first step in connecting local Black-owned businesses with university resources was to do outreach and start developing relationships on campus and in the community. I was completely new to the university and the city and needed to understand what was already happening on campus and in the community. I began researching who on campus may already be working with local Black-owned businesses and initiated introductory conversations. Some of the potential campus partners I first reached out to were:

- Community Engagement Librarian, University Libraries
- Family Business Center, College of Business
- Forcht Center for Entrepreneurship, College of Business
- Entrepreneurship Clinic, Brandeis School of Law
- Office of Community Engagement
- Office of Diversity and Equity

These initial conversations gave me a better idea of the campus landscape and what resources, services, and expertise may be available to community entrepreneurs. There was no initiative or program I discovered in these conversations specifically geared towards supporting local Black-owned businesses, but I did find avenues of support that I could further explore.

One of these avenues was a connection between the College of Business and a local nonprofit community development organization working to sustainably develop Louisville's West End, an area of several predominantly Black neighborhoods. The Director of the Forcht Center for Entrepreneurship introduced me to the Director of Business Development at OneWest who was working with local entrepreneurs in West End neighborhoods to develop business plans and secure commercial space. I presented about our library resources and my hopes for this initiative at a OneWest staff meeting which led to a few important community outreach opportunities.

My first concerted effort at community outreach was to attend two local marketplaces featuring Black-owned businesses with a University of Louisville student intern at OneWest and a West

End neighborhood representative serving on OneWest's Board of Directors. These marketplaces are both Black-led and operated:

- Opportunity Corner, Black Development Corporation, <https://www.blackcdcky.org/opportunitycorner>
- MELANnaire Marketplace, <https://melannaire.com/>

I created flyers which I handed out at both marketplaces (see figure 2). I spoke with over 30 entrepreneurs. This outreach was a good start and will need to be an ongoing effort.



Figure 2. Outreach flyer

Research Support

My first goal was to hold research consultations in the library with local entrepreneurs. I already offered research appointments to students, faculty, and staff in the College of Business, and our library is open to the public. This was the lowest barrier way for me to start connecting local Black business owners with university resources, by providing access to our library's databases.

A. Howard

I followed up with the entrepreneurs I met doing my initial outreach to schedule research consultations. I also had entrepreneurs referred to me by the Director of Business Development at OneWest. As she worked with entrepreneurs on their business plans, she recommended they come meet me in the library to do market research. These referrals accounted for the majority of my library research consultations with local business owners.

Instead of continuing outreach to increase library research consultations, I decided to pivot and explore how I could connect my work as a liaison to the College of Business with the work I was doing providing research support to local Black-owned businesses. I was providing much of the same types of research support to community entrepreneurs as to students working on hypothetical research projects for classes. A new goal developed to work with faculty to design community-engaged research projects in which students do research based on the goals and needs of local Black business owners. The first pilot project happened in the Spring 2022 semester between an undergraduate Business Communication course and a local business owner I held multiple research consultations with in the library. The professor and I met with the entrepreneur to better understand his current goals and needs for his business and developed six research projects for the students to work on: a business structure report, fundraising report, hiring and onboarding manual, market research report, membership plan, and SWOT analysis. I developed a research guide to assist the students and met with them in the library to discuss their research. The entrepreneur and I will be attending the last day of class where the students will be presenting their projects.

Next Steps

This is a brief overview of evolving work addressing a complex topic. I hope to publish a longer article in a peer-reviewed journal which will provide further detail and context to this work. I plan to submit an IRB proposal this year so I can hold focus groups and conduct interviews with local Black business owners and College of Business faculty and students to better understand local needs, resources, and how best to construct community-engaged research projects that are mutually beneficial to entrepreneurs and students. As a new librarian, I welcome feedback, ideas, and collaboration from my BRASS colleagues.

References

- Gardner, H. (2020, December 14). *'200 years behind': Racial wealth gap impedes Black business ownership in Louisville*. Louisville Courier Journal. <https://www.courier-journal.com/in-depth/news/local/2020/12/14/black-louisville-business-owners-start-behind-due-to-wealth-gap/6507785002/>
- Statista. (2017, September 15). *Racial Wealth Inequality Is Rampant In The U.S. [Infographic]*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/chart/11096/racial-wealth-inequality-is-rampant-in-the-us/>