Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Moderator:

Thank you so much for joining Michigan Minds. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to talk with you today. So can you start by introducing yourself and sharing a little bit about your role at the University of Michigan?

Deborah Robinson:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. I am Deborah Robinson and I'm a research investigator at the Institute for Social Research in the Research Center for Group Dynamics, and I have several roles at ISR RCGD. I am the assistant director for the Program for Research on Black Americans, PRBA, for international programs or projects. And I'm also the faculty administrative coordinator for MCUAAAR, Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research. I should also say that I received my PhD at Michigan in social psychology, and as a graduate student, worked at PRBA. So I've really come full circle and I'm just really grateful to Dr. James Jackson for bringing me back to Michigan.

Moderator:

Thank you. And in what areas does your research focus?

Deborah Robinson:

I currently have two areas of research. One, #WeGlobal, the African Americans Living Abroad Research Project where we try and the purposes to look at the circumstances and gain the stories of African Americans currently living abroad. The other area is the Black History Month programming in public libraries project. And an interesting way they're related, I was giving talks at libraries and museums about #WeGlobal in a way to share this information but also to utilize the participants and patrons that came because they may know of, they may have a cousin, a relative, a friend, somebody they know who's African American currently living abroad because there's no list. And so we'll talk later about #WeGlobal. But it was through that work, I joined the American Library Association and the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and basically proposed this project looking at Black History Month programming in public libraries.

Moderator:

Thank you. So as assistant director for projects for the UM program for research on Black Americans, can you tell us a bit about the program's research and training?

Deborah Robinson:

Sure. Let me first say PRBA was established in 1976 at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research by an interdisciplinary team of social scientists and graduate students. The team of researchers were committed to giving a voice to a hereto four largely voiceless Black America in terms of research. So PRBA has been a leader in creating new and innovative research methods in African American communities. Dr. James Jackson was the founder and director of PRBA for many years, and Dr. Robert J. Taylor has been the director for the past 10 years. So in terms of research areas for PRBA, they're really kind of five broad areas, then somewhat overlap.

We look at discrimination and racism, physical and mental health disparities, aging and human development, politics and political participation, and identity and migration. And in terms of training, PRBA has had a long history of training doctoral students, graduate students through the work of PRBA, but also through summer workshops that focused on research on the African American population. In the past, PRBA has also trained faculty at HBCUs on research. Also, MCUAAAR is under PRBA, and the Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research has a continual training program for early career faculty throughout the year. Well, MCUAAAR has been going on for 26 years and we also have a training workshop in the summer associated with that project.

Moderator:

Thank you. Black History Month is celebrated during the month of February. Can you discuss the importance of learning and understanding the history behind this significant observance?

Deborah Robinson:

Sure. I think it's very important to first understand the history of Black History Month. Dr. Carter G. Woodson is considered the Father of Black History Month, but it also took a lot of organizations to make this a reality. In 1915, he founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and in 1926, inaugurated Negro History Week, he also founded the Negro History Bulletin, which has changed to the Black History Bulletin. But I think it's interesting that he received his PhD from Harvard and he was the second African American to receive a PhD from Harvard, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois being the first. But while he was at Harvard, one of his professors said the Negro has no history, and I think this was an impetus for him to show, "Oh yes we do," and how can he share this history with all Americans. In 1976, the organization was renamed ASALH, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

And it's interesting to note, in 2026, we'll be celebrating the 100th anniversary of Negro History Week and Black History Month. So when you ask about the significance of when it was first established, Dr. Woodson created Negro History Month in the midst of Jim Crow lynchings, race riots, segregation, and extreme inequities. The history and contributions of Black Americans were not being taught in schools or were not recognized.

So we look to now, 2023, we continue to see wealth, health and education disparities in the United States. The Census Bureau has projected that the United States will become a majority minority country by 2044, meaning that at that time, non-Hispanic whites will comprise less than 50% of the US population. So therefore it's very important to learn the history and contributions of all Americans. I would also say that in 2019, Dr. Nikole Hannah-Jones and the New York Times Magazine created The 1619 Project and her new Hulu series seeks to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative. At the same time, we've seen an enormous reaction against The 1619 Project, the banning of books, the erasure of slavery from school curriculum. So I definitely believe having a Black History Month and a time to recognize those contributions is as important today as it was almost 100 years ago.

Moderator:

Researchers at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research have received a $750,000 grant for the Black History Month programming in public libraries project, a three-year project that will be the first systematic national study to assess the content scope and factors influencing offerings of Black History Month programming in public libraries. As principal investigator of this study, can you share a bit more about this research and working with the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and the Public Library Association?

Deborah Robinson:

Sure. I should say this is actually the second grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, IMLS, which is a government entity. The first grant in 2020 was a planning grant and it went to BCALA, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. And that grant was absolutely necessary because no one had done this kind of research before on what's taking place in terms of Black History Month programming in public libraries. So the second grant is an applied research grant, and that was awarded to the University of Michigan as you said. But we have two named partners that are absolutely critical to this project. I'm the principal and investigator, but I'm not a librarian. So the Black Caucus of the American Library Association is one of the affiliate organizations to the American Library Association, it's 50 years old and clearly it's the key organization to be involved in this kind of research.

And the Public Library Association is also absolutely a critical partner. They're the voice for over 9,000 public libraries across the United States. So they are critical. I should note that we're working with the Survey Research Center and the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, ICPSR, at ISR on this grant. So this grant has two central research questions. First, what is the state of Black History Month programming in public libraries? This is an extension of the work we did on the planning grant to a nationally representative sample. Second, how are service area, library organizational and individual librarian factors associated with the existence and complexity of Black History Month programming in public libraries?

So in this grant, we're really trying to develop a model actually of Black History Month programming. In terms of service area factors, we're looking at things such as region, urbanicity and the percent African Americans in the service area. In terms of library organizational factors, we're looking at the budget, the number of full-time staff they have, whether there's an African American on the staff. And in terms of individual librarian factors, another previous study identified nine key programming competencies. So we're looking at two of those interpersonal skills and knowledge of the community. And another competency that we feel is related but was not a part of that study is cultural competency or cultural humility. So that's an overview of the current grant, and we just started as of August 1st.

Moderator:

And the Black History Month programming in public libraries research project released preliminary findings, which found a variety of barriers to the implementation of Black History Month programming. Can you highlight a few of these barriers and if there are any solutions or ways in which these barriers can be overcome?

Deborah Robinson:

Sure. Before I mentioned the barriers though, I wanted to share two kind of key findings. First, we asked in the planning grant, does your library or library system do Black History Month programming? Because we felt virtually all the libraries did Black History Month programming, but to our surprise, 22% of the branches and 13% of the library system. So a system that has a number of branches within that system, 13% did not do Black History Month programming. We also asked the respondents during the planning grant, have you heard about the Association for the Study of African American Life and Black History Month theme? And a vast majority, I think 86% of the branch level and 76% or so on the system level had never heard of ASALH or their theme. This is problematic because they're doing some Black History Month programming without knowing that history of where did this come from, what is the association and what is the theme because ASALH develops a theme every year for Black History Month programming.

In terms of barriers, respondents who indicated that their library did not do Black History Month programming were asked why not. And from the focus groups that we held previously, we knew some of the reasons were lack of interest, not sure how to, not wanting to get it wrong, a lack of African American staff to create the programs. So they were asked about those things and also asked about, well, are there other reasons? And for branches, 22% said there's a lack of interest in doing Black History Month programming, that's why we don't do it. 25% said not sure how to, and we don't want to get it wrong, so that's why we don't do it. 13% said there was a lack of African American staff and 18% said there was a lack of African Americans in the community, so that's why we don't do it.

But 22% said, "Okay, there are other reasons," and among those other reasons were things like, "We are very small rural library and I'm the only full-time librarian, so it is hard to create programs for every topic." Someone said the white supremacist mindset of library administration. Another person said, "Our Black History Month programming has been mostly limited to book displays." Another person indicated, "We used to do Black History Month programming, then the library's administration changed. The new administration along with some staff felt that the library should only do programming that includes everybody, stuff that won't offend and/or scare the white people in the community." So there are some solutions in which these barriers can be overcome. First, it's important for people to know about ASALH, go to their website and understand what the theme is for the year, and they have a lot of resources on their website. Some are free, some are for pay.

It's important to partner with the community, community organizations, there may be an HBCU nearby, there are other colleges and universities that could help you if you've never done a Black History Month programming. And they're also specialized Black American or African American resource centers around the country, and so they can be very helpful. As a part of this grant, we're developing a Black History Month programming toolkit version 1.0 for public libraries not currently doing Black History Month program in a way to assist them and help them develop those programs. We're also hoping for a third grant from IMLS, which would be an implementation grant to actually identify key models of Black History Month programming that others can use.

Moderator:

Thank you. And can you share any educational resources where people can go to learn more about Black History Month or provide ways in which people can continue learning and celebrating beyond this observance?

Deborah Robinson:

I think I've shared a number of things. Of course we have the website for the planning grant. But I wanted to speak for a moment about celebrating African American history beyond February, let's say. So we asked in the planning grant, approximately what percentage of your African American history programming is during February and what percentage is spread out during the year? And we found both at this branch and system level that basically 61% of that kind of programming is in February. A very small percent, 5% for the branches, and 1.3% for the system is spread out over the whole year.

And that kind of speaks to some discussion, maybe some controversy around Black History Month, whether we should have, what's the relevance of having Black History Month, just as a month or shouldn't Black history be incorporated in programming throughout the whole year? And I agree, Black history, history of all different groups in America should be incorporated throughout the year, but that's not what's happening, so we do need that, we do need February this month to at least look at that.

And in terms of resources or things that people can do, I think it's important to almost do a diversity audit of programs. So look at your public library, academic library, your department, even Michigan Minds, what percentage of your programming is focused on African Americans and African American history and throughout whatever you do, and what percentage of that program happens only in February? And for faculty, what percentage of your readings are by or about African American authors or researchers? And what databases are you using? The mission of the Resource Center for Minority Data at ICPSR who we're also partnering on this project is to provide educators, researchers, and students with data resources to analyze issues affecting racial, ethnic, minority populations in the United States. So data do exist and that can be incorporated into your courses and your syllabus.

Moderator:

Thank you. As the podcast comes to a close, what is one thing you hope listeners remember from this conversation?

Deborah Robinson:

I have a kind of non-original idea, but to quote Dr. Nikole Hannah-Jones, "You cannot tell the story of America without telling the story of Black America."

Moderator:

Thank you so much. It has been an absolute honor to talk with you today and learn from you. Thank you for taking the time to join us.

Deborah Robinson:

I really appreciate the opportunity to be on your program. Thank you very much.

Speaker 4:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with #umichimpact.