Recruiting More Minorities to the Library Profession: Responding to the Need for Diversity

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Abstract

The issue of recruiting a diverse population to the library profession has been a concern for many years. The library literature is replete with articles and reports documenting this issue. Task forces, committees, and focus groups have been formed to discuss this situation and provide recommendations. The bottom line still remains the same. Comparatively little progress has occurred regarding the recruitment of minorities into the library profession. This paper will examine some of the barriers that exist concerning more effective minority recruitment and offer some suggestions for improving this overall situation.

Introduction

For an issue that has generated so much discussion over the years, the library profession cannot speak well of accomplishing its goals and objectives regarding minority recruitment. Although there appears to be enough activity and involvement in some areas of the library profession, and ample discussion of the relevant issues surrounding the topic, the library profession continues to lack success in diversifying its ranks. Minor gains are being made, but they are not keeping pace with the ever increasing minority population in the United States.

Recent statistics compiled by the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) reveal disturbing figures regarding minority recruitment efforts and corresponding graduation rates. White students enrolled in ALA-accredited master's degree programs from 51 schools that reported ethnic data constitute 83 percent of the students. Black students accounted for 4.8 percent, Hispanics 3 percent, and Asian or Pacific Islanders 2.7 percent. In comparing census population figures with student enrollment in ALA-accredited master's degree programs, Hispanics comprise the most underrepresented.[1]

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Although some library schools have been conscientious about minority recruitment efforts, most institutions still lag behind. In fact, statistics comparing the number of ethnic minorities in ALA-accredited programs reveal marked disparities in student enrollment. Two institutions account for over 61 percent of all ALA-accredited master's degrees and certificates awarded to American Indian or Alaskan Natives in 1996/97. Just eleven library schools account for over 68 percent of the ALA-accredited master's degrees and certificates awarded to Asian or Pacific Islanders. Ten library schools account for over 56 percent of all master's degrees and certificates awarded to Blacks, while just ten library schools account for over 72 percent of the ALA-accredited master's degrees and certificates awarded to Hispanics.

The globalization of the economy has radically altered the way business has been conducted and undoubtedly has affected the field of librarianship in the process, especially regarding the provision of information services. Ironically, though, a relatively insignificant amount of change has occurred concerning the recruitment of minorities into the library profession. A more varied work force has developed during the past ten to fifteen years in the United States, but the library profession, and specifically accredited library schools have not responded to these changes by recruiting librarians who reflect this diversity. The negligible increases experienced by some ethnic populations in some library school enrollment figures is not consistent with the overall minority population explosion in the country. Blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics have been noticeably ignored and are still certainly underrepresented.

The issue of recruiting a diverse population to the library profession has been a popular and fashionable concern for many decades. It has been a concern, but unfortunately not a mandate or a high enough priority. The library literature indicates this dilemma has existed for decades. The American Library Association (ALA) and its various sections have been involved with the creation of a multitude of committees, task forces, initiatives, caucuses, and focus groups to explore diversity in the library profession. In addition, ALA has attempted to find solutions to the overall problem. Too often, these groups of professional and dedicated librarians and key administrators have failed to live up to their expectations. In many cases, goals and objectives have been developed and written down, but not fulfilled. Issues have

been discussed, subcommittees formed, recommendations made, and procedures drawn up, but a lack of continuity and long-range commitment on the part of many of these participants exists regarding minority recruitment.

Barriers to Recruitment
Library Schools and International Students
So why does this shortage of minority librarians still continue to be the norm? Part of this responsibility rests with the accredited library schools in the United States and their ineffective methods and efforts to attract a diverse minority population to their respective library programs. For many years, and until recently, many accredited library schools sought to remedy the lack of minorities by recruiting a variety of international students to their graduate degree programs. Indirectly, these international students filled the gap left open by the lack of American Indian or Alaskan Natives, Asian or Pacific Islanders, Blacks, and Hispanics. Classified as people of color, most international students satisfied the cosmetic need of many accredited library schools to fill their ranks with students from diverse backgrounds. The prestige associated with attracting international students and the funding acquired were additional benefits. Likewise, some library faculty were able to arrange various reciprocal agreements with countries who had sent their students to graduate library school in the United States.

The major difference with international students, though, is that library schools were not resolving the more important need of recruiting minorities to the profession. Foreign students often came from totally different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds in comparison to American minority students. Many international students came to the United States with the desired prerequisite lacking in American students, enough financial aid up front. This factor, coupled with the financial problems and possible school closings faced by many library schools, made the selection of international students an easy decision on the part of accredited library school administrators.

Complacency and the Status Quo
This same lack of initiative regarding minority recruitment is manifested in the way library school administrators recruit their main constituents. Library school administrators are fully aware that a majority of their prospective student population enrolls automatically into

their programs, year after year, without very little recruitment effort or intervention. The abundance of white females has been consistent for many decades. Although an integral part of the overall student enrollment picture, this steady influx of students has resulted in library school administrators becoming somewhat complacent, taking for granted that this majority group of individuals will always be there, filling the student enrollment ranks. On the flip side, this blase attitude has indirectly prevented more vigorous attempts to recruit minorities. Why bother with a system that has worked for decades, especially if no one holds you accountable. This attitude has too often been the norm with complacency overcoming more ambitious efforts. Apparently, library school administrators have yet to learn that diversity may be the panacea and not the problem.

Racism

Although many people in the library profession will deny that racism exists, especially as we approach the new millennium, it is certainly prevalent at many institutions. Major initiatives to recruit and retain minorities in the library profession are hampered by this very real problem. Many libraries and library schools try to ignore this issue at their respective institutions, but racism is alive. According to St. Lifer and Nelson, the prevalence of racism in the library profession is as common as in other professions.[2] The irony of this situation is that the library profession has sought to hold itself to a different standard, a standard which takes into consideration an individual's intellectual freedom and human rights in general.[3] Although ALA promotes the ideals behind the Code of Ethics and Bill of Rights, it falls short in actually implementing these ideals. The American Library Association has fought for years with the conflict between promoting pluralism and maintaining the status quo.[4]

Competition

Another reason for the meager attempts to recruit a diverse work force is centered on the idea of competition. A significant number of leaders in the field of librarianship firmly believe, or so they say, that little progress is being made in the recruitment of minorities because minorities basically don't want to be librarians. As a continuation of this same attitude, other individuals state that fields such as law, medicine, and business offer too much competition for attracting the best and brightest to the library profession. I maintain that this perspective is extremely inaccurate and just an excuse for not pursuing minority applicants more earnestly. Whether they are the best or brightest, or just average people like many librarians, is not really the issue. To say that competition from such fields as law, medicine, engineering, or business is responsible for the scarcity of minority library students or professional librarians is quite ludicrous. It ignores a number of basic facts. First, it doesn't take into consideration that many librarians are not the same type of individuals who end up pursuing law, business, or engineering degrees. Most librarians who pursue master's degrees still come from the undergraduate areas of English, history, education or other social sciences. More than likely, those individuals who chose librarianship would not have selected law, business, or engineering in the first place, or even been eligible to pursue graduate degrees in these disciplines. Many of the students who pursued these other disciplines have a fairly good idea, well in advance, that they will focus on law, business, engineering, or business. This is not true of many library school graduate students who end up choosing librarianship comparatively late in their careers. In fact, many library school students choose the library profession as a second career, an option not as readily available or possible in other professions because of time constraints, tuition, and prerequisite courses required for admission.

Thus, to claim that minorities are not being recruited to the library profession because of competition from other fields, or that the best and brightest are not being recruited for the same reason, is a fallacy. This display of apathy also presupposes that library school recruiters should go out and seek only those individuals who are the best. Many individuals can become excellent librarians, not just the brightest. Although I know quite a few bright librarians, I also know many others who may not be the brightest, but are certainly competent librarians.

Lack of Marketing

The lack of conscientious and systematic efforts to market existing library school programs is yet another obstacle in recruiting minorities into the library profession. Other than increasing the already disproportionate blend of students in library school, and adding more tuition dollars to the library science programs, very little attention is devoted to increasing minority student en-

rollment. Although library school administrators believe the creation of bigger programs ensures a continuing supply of qualified people into the profession, the bottom line is really increasing critical mass and university support for their respective library programs.[5]

Instead of attracting more minorities to their library programs, library school administrators seek to expand their existing programs by offering courses at various satellite locations throughout the state or country. Many of these locations, though, are not located in urban areas accessible to minorities. As a result, most individuals who end up enrolling in these courses and subsequent degree programs represent the preexisting gender/ethnic mix which already dominates the library profession. Blacks, Hispanics, Asian or Pacific Islanders, and American Indian or Alaskan Natives are virtually ignored. An inordinate amount of time is expended developing new courses for these satellite campuses, time which could have been spent on recruiting more minorities to the profession.

In addition, adjunct instructors are often hired to teach these courses. Many of these adjunct instructors are qualified, but they do not possess a high degree of commitment to the overall library science program. Because of this fact, these adjunct faculty devote little time or effort mentoring their students or guiding them through the ups and downs of a graduate degree program. Recruitment does not become a general part of their vocabulary.

Second Master's
And then there is the second master's degree, or as it is often referred to, a subject master's. Others refer to this phenomenon as credential inflation.[6] Librarians who peruse the literature have seen a second advanced degree referred to in The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *College & Research Libraries News*, *American Libraries*, and *Library Journal* job postings. Listed under desired or preferred qualifications it stands as a symbol of the library profession and a means of identification. Although second master's degrees apply primarily to academic library positions, public libraries use it as a form of credentialling, also. Library school programs give this requirement credibility by promoting its existence and availability through dual master's degree programs. Prospective employers give it importance by making it part of the position vacancy announcement. Is it really essential for practicing librarianship, though? Or is it important enough to be added to the basic requirements for employment? In most cases, no!

At best, it gives some individuals more familiarity with a discipline they might encounter as a subject specialist in various academic or public libraries. Given the time, effort, and cost factor associated with its acquisition, its advantages are practically limited.

To begin with, acquiring a second master's requires significantly more tuition dollars in order to take the additional courses needed for degree completion. Since financial aid is such a key factor in determining a minority student's decision in either attending or not enrolling in graduate school, these extra monies become a very real obstacle. Likewise, more credits mean additional time consumed completing the degree program. This translates into finding future employment later than anticipated.

Even though there may be some statistics that support the acquisition of a second degree as the road to success in librarianship, I think the jury is still out regarding its utility. Search committees may place value on achieving this plateau when interviewing candidates for particular positions, but most positions are filled by individuals who meet other selection criteria first. Most librarians who get promoted are not advanced because of a second master's degree. Librarians get promoted for more subjective reasons such as conformity, seniority, or always being a team player. Instead of placing more barriers or roadblocks in the way of attracting minorities to the profession, library administrators and library school personnel would do well by eliminating second master's degrees as requirements for success in the library profession. The time, money, and effort necessary is not worth the end result of steering minorities away from librarianship. If the profession is truly going to move ahead and prosper, it must vigorously address these issues.[7]

Recruitment Essentials
Mentoring
The process of mentoring is one of the key ingredients in attracting and retaining minorities to the library profession. Mentors serve as key advisors and role models for prospective librarians. [8] Mentoring has been shown to be the most critical factor in inflencing minority librarians to initially pursue their library careers.[9] The roles of the mentor are replete and invaluable, especially for minority librarians and students. Mentors provide access to the inner workings of the library which allows minority librarians, and librarians in general, an easy way of communication. Mentors provide a less formal way of initiating an individual into the complexities of man-

agement and the overall communication network within the library or library school. A good, effective mentor will act as an advocate, running interference as the new librarian learns the system and hierarchy of the library or institution. The mentoring relationship may give a new librarian the confidence and motivation required for continued self-growth and personal risk.[10]

This process is extremely vital at the higher education level regarding the recruitment and retention of minority library school faculty. Although the mentoring process is important for prospective library school students in high school, in preprofessional library positions, and in community college settings, it is a key factor in recruiting and subsequently retaining individuals to become library school faculty. Underrepresented faculty assist in providing minority students an opportunity to experience learning in a multicultural environment.[11] Underrepresented faculty also provide minority students an opportunity to explore the variety of issues surrounding diversity.[12] In a profession where white library school students predominate, minority librarians need a powerful advocate in the organization to guarantee that they are provided equal access to opportunities.[13]

Library administrators and graduate library school programs must be proactive concerning the mentoring of minorities. Volunteers will not always come to the forefront offering their services as mentors because of peer pressure. This is especially true in institutions where racism exists or is an underlying factor in the hiring process. In addition, library personnel must make sure there is enough financial and human resource support available to promote the mentoring process. Without these resources, the mentoring process will continue to take a backseat to other less important initiatives.

The importance of reaching out to prospective students in order to attract them to the library profession has been documented for decades, but to a large degree, ignored by library administrators and graduate library science programs. The Library and Information Science Studentst Attitudes, Demographics and Aspirations (LISSADA) Survey in 1988 confirmed this fact. The LISSADA Survey was intended to identify attitudes and aspirations of students enrolled in accredited library and information science programs.[14] The Survey revealed clearly that individualized contact is the best mechanism for attracting new entrants to the library profession.[15] What better way to facilitate the mentoring process and attract minorities than through library faculty.

Finally, we must realize that many library faculty do not fully comprehend how important cultural diversity is to the library profession. There still remains a significant number of library faculty who have not worked in any library for years, individuals who fail to understand the changing complexion of the user population.[16] Part of this problem is the result of the insulated environment in which library schools function. Guided by the dictates of academe and not the parameters which libraries operate under, library faculty are more concerned with achieving their own personal goals and objectives.[17] They do not focus on the benefits which can be derived from the recruitment of minority students. In their estimation, research and teaching consume too much time for them to be involved in other duties. Thus, it is imperative that practicing librarians and administrators work together with library faculty and assist each other in the minority recruitment process so vital to the library profession.

Financial Aid

A number of programs exist which address the specific issue of minority recruitment to the library profession. The American Library Association's Spectrum Initiative is a good example. The program is attempting to improve service at the local level through the development of a diverse work force that mirrors the communities served by all libraries in the new millennium. Started in 1998, the Spectrum Initiative is designed to serve as a model which will bring attention to numerous other diversity issues during the next century. The program provides fifty $5,000 scholarships annually to students from the four largest underrepresented ethnic groups in the United States and Canada.

The LAMA Cultural Diversity Grant, although not funds which specifically go to a minority student, is yet another example of a program that focuses on the issue of diversity. Some of the key goals of the grant program include the following: fostering and sustaining diversity throughout institutions, increasing minority representation and advancement, and establishing various partnerships between LAMA and national organizations representing minority interests. Activities which potentially could get funded are educational activities such as workshops and seminars, research results, publications, mentoring and networking initiatives, resource lists, and studies on successful diversity-related initiatives in libraries or other organizations. Since only two awards can be given annually, it is not as attractive as it could be if

more support and dollars were allocated to encourage additional applicants and promote continued research on the issue of diversity.

The prevalence of these programs and the monies made available for diversity initiatives are steps in the right direction, but financial aid at the university level in the form of scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, or other grants is still one of the most important factors in attracting minority students to the library profession. The literature is abundant with documentation that lists financial aid as a vital component in contributing to the recruitment and retention process. More financial aid sources need to be identified for prospective students so that this major obstacle can be eliminated prior to matriculation. Library school administrators should learn from programs such as the Spectrum Initiative that additional funding is available in the community and elsewhere if systematic plans are in place to acquire these monies. Likewise, state library organizations can be helpful in providing assistance. Many of these organizations are often willing to provide financial help, if they are encouraged to do so.

Recruitment from Other Disciplines

An amazing fact about the academic credentials required for getting into graduate library school is that you really don't need specific coursework. Unlike medicine where a foundation in the biological sciences is important, or business where some background in mathematics is essential, the library science curriculum is devoid of most prerequisites. Theoretically, the number of potential recruits is unlimited. Although most students who enter graduate library school programs have come from English, education, history, or the social sciences, this undergraduate training has never been required for pursuing an ALA-accredited master's degree. Even the Graduate Record Examination, if really required, has not been a factor regarding the admission of most library school students.

So why haven't library school administrators exploited this reservoir of undergraduate students, especially those minority candidates? Part of the reason is again attributable to the steady stream of traditional students who fill the enrollment ranks. Unfortunately, the end result is that potential minority candidates get overlooked since it might require too much effort. A prime source of prospective librarians who might have changed the complexion of librarianship is bypassed.[18]

New approaches are rarely implemented regarding library school recruitment. Librarians and library school administrators believe that if it has worked in the past, don't fix it. This attitude may work well with some portions of the population, but some individuals need more encouragement and assistance with the decision making process. Those individuals who might require this added inspiration could end up being the best and brightest many library school administrators are looking for. As Wheeler and Hanson state, "Librarians from a traditional background, who are white and female, have not readily recognized that the tendency of some people to gravitate toward a library setting as their natural habitat is a characteristic that crosses all ethnic, cultural and national boundaries."[19]

Conclusion

The field of library and information science has changed dramatically in many ways during the past 30 to 40 years. Library school closings and openings, advances in technology, distance education, curriculum modifications, an influx of international students, and budget crunches have all affected the overall operation of both library schools and libraries in general.

Throughout these changes, two aspects of the profession have remained fairly much the same. First, there is still a dearth of minority librarians in the profession. Raw numbers may have increased, but these figures do not reflect proportionately the increase in the minority population in the United States. The other constant in librarianship is that it is still statistically a white female dominated profession. This fact has been confirmed for decades by ALISE statistical reports, the LISSADA Survey, innumerable research articles, ALA surveys, and miscellaneous reports.

What exactly does this mean for the library profession in the near future and beyond? What ramifications result because the library profession is composed and constructed the way it is? As Joan Howland states, "It is important to note that librarianship, a white female-dominated profession, has not become any more ethnically diverse than traditionally white male-dominated professions such as law, medicine, engineering, and architecture."[20] Her comment is straightforward and honest regarding the role the majority must play in making sure diversity exists in the library profession. For too long, diversity has been an issue and not a reality. Minority recruitment into the library profession must be more than a symbolic ritual.[21]

The field of librarianship is laden with the need to conform. Conformity is not unique to the library profession, but librarians have a much richer history regarding this attitude, According to various research studies, part of the reason for this practice may be the result of the insecurity felt by many librarians. Or it may simply be because many librarians see themselves undervalued both intellectually and materially. Whatever the reasons, these attitudes play a significant role in the recruitment and retention of minority librarians. "The bottom line is that it simply is neither logical nor good business practice to recruit and hire librarians from diverse backgrounds, only to expect them to assimilate and become mirrors of the generations of librarians which have preceded them."[22]

Another important part of this scenario concerns the climate that exists in the library profession. If minorities are going to be attracted to the library profession, the social environment will have to change. Libraries are too often seen by minorities as places with an indifferent climate.[23] Library administrators must develop work environments where everyone is valued for their own contributions. The caste system in place in most libraries needs to be eradicated.[24]

Finally, it must be emphasized that ALA must be more proactive in rectifying this situation regarding minority recruitment to the profession. ALA has been a strong advocate for diversity initiatives, but it is still an organization not in step with the nation's changing demographics. Although some very positive programs have occurred, and initiatives implemented, ALA must look beyond these individual events and assess its priorities on a regular basis. According to Joan Howland, "Members of diverse populations may find ALA, outside of the ethnic caucuses, if not threatening, at least very uncomfortable."[25]

Notes

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3. St. Lifer and Nelson, "Unequal Opportunities," 43.

4. Maurice B. Wheeler and Jaqueline Hanson, "Improving Diversity: Recruiting Students to the Library Profession," *Journal of Library Administration* 21 3/4 (1995): 137–46.

5. Rosemary Ruhig Du Mont, "Recruiting Students Into Librarianship: Questions In Search of Answers," in *Librarians for the New Millennium* (Chicago: ALA/OLPR, 1988), 89–92.

6. Jonathan D. Lauer, "Recruiting for the Library Profession: 1970 to the Present," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* 44 (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1989), 277–83.

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8. Rosemary Ruhig Du Mont, Lois Buttlar and William Caynon, "Recruitment and Selection of a Diverse Staff," in *Multiculturalism in Libraries* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994), 77–92.

9. Ibid., 78.

10. Joan Howland, "Beyond Recruitment: Retention and Promotion Strategies to Ensure Diversity and Success," *Library Administration & Management* 13 (winter 1999): 4–14.

11. Kriza A. Jennings, "Recruiting New Populations to the Library Profession," *Journal of Library Administration* 19 3/4 (1993): 175–91.

12. Jennings, "Recruiting New Populations," 181.

13. Howland, "Beyond Recruitment," 12.

14. Kathleen M. Heim and William E. Moen, *Occupational Entry: Library and Information Science Students' Attitudes, Demographics and Aspirations Survey* (Chicago: ALA/OLPR, 1989), 3.

15. Ibid., 186.

16. Virgil L.P. Blake, "The American Mosaic: Mapping Curriculum Reform: An Introduction and Overview," in *Mapping Curricular Reform in Library/Information Studies Education: The American Mosaic* (New York: Haworth, 1995), 1–13.

17. Jennings, "Recruiting New Populations," 182.

18. Wheeler & Hanson, "Improving Diversity," 139.

19. Ibid., 140.

20. Howland, "Beyond Recruitment," 6.

21. Wheeler and Hanson, "Improving Diversity," 137.

22. Howland, "Beyond Recruitment," 7.

23. Roberto G. Trujillo and David C. Weber, "Academic Library Responses to Cultural Diversity: A Position Paper for the 1990s," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 17 (July 1991): 157–61.

24. Howland, "Beyond Recruitment," 8.

25. Ibid., 11.