Preparing Future Librarians to Effectively Serve Their Communities

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ABSTRACT
The field of library and information science (LIS) continues to struggle with the issue of diversity and inclusion. As we are perpetually working to increase racial and gender diversity in the profession, the definition of diversity continues to broaden to include socioeconomic status, education, language, literacy, age, sexual orientation, ability, geography, and much more. It is disheartening that the composition of our profession does not reflect the diverse patrons and communities that we serve. In preparing the next generation of librarians, LIS programs need to be able to groom culturally competent librarians who can serve these broadening communities. In this article, we urge LIS programs to develop the audacity and desire to experiment with their programs and saturate LIS education with elements of diversity and inclusion. We call for more dialogue in the form of symposia, panels, and discussions that will transform our LIS programs to be relevant to our communities.

There is an enormous need for more discourse on diversity and inclusion in the field of library and information science (LIS). When one thinks of the intersection of diversity, inclusion, and information, the range of populations that are underserved, underrepresented, or disadvantaged in terms of information is wide. The practice of library and information professionals is an act of bridging multiple divides related to socioeconomic status, education, language, literacy, gender, age, race, orientation, ability, geography, and much more. Simply put, there is a need to adopt an inclusive and expansive definition of diversity when it comes to information.

Library and information professionals, as institutionalized by the ALA Bill of Rights eighty years ago, work from the idea of equal access to information for all. This underlying principle has extended into a prominent role in providing the means for self-education, community spaces, early childhood education, help applying for social services, job training skills, technology access, and digital literacy education, among so much else. Our field has much to celebrate in its history of supporting gender equity in the workplace, the civil rights movement, and freedom of expression, as well as its current role as the quintessence of serving the public good.
Yet we struggle with key challenges related to diversity and inclusion. The composition of our profession does not reflect the society that we serve. In the 1990s, E. J. Josey noted that the racial composition of the field had not changed much since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the mid-1960s (Josey 1999). And it still hasn’t changed much since he made that observation. This challenge has been long recognized, but there has never been sufficient concerted effort to solve it among LIS schools. Despite offering scholarship awards to minority students (such as stalwart efforts by the Institute of Museum and Library Services), LIS continues to struggle to recruit, train, and sustain professionals from diverse racial backgrounds. The focus on the issue of racial underrepresentation, however, masks the issues of the underrepresentation of other populations among LIS students and professionals. As the nation grows ever more diverse in terms of race, language, literacy, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, education level, socioeconomic status, and other factors, reflecting the diversity of society becomes ever more important for libraries to remain relevant to the communities they exist to serve.

A number of LIS schools—though unfortunately not that high a percentage of schools—have developed specific recruitment and education initiatives to draw students from underrepresented and underserved populations within the profession. Notable efforts like the University of Arizona’s Knowledge River Project and the University of Illinois’ LIS Access Midwest Program remain uncommon. Several professional organizations in the field, such as the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries, also have scholarship and fellowship programs to recruit and support these students. These initiatives obviously help to increase the diversity of the profession, but they are too small to make a large-scale change in the profession. They also are only a first step, as they do not address the issue of comprehensively incorporating diversity and inclusion into the broad curriculum.

To meet the information needs of this increasingly diverse society, all of our graduates need to be culturally competent from the moment they graduate. This means being ready to work with patrons of all the different populations noted above and perhaps others that are unique to the local community being served. The curriculum of LIS education has to adapt and evolve much faster that it has so far to ensure that our graduates are ready to serve every member of their communities. And of course these challenges must be met in times of unprecedented levels of usage of libraries and often catastrophic budget cuts (Taylor et al. 2012; IMLS 2013).

The vast majority of students graduating from LIS programs—nearly 80 percent—do not feel that they had the chance to take even one class related to diversity (Mestre 2010). Of the courses offered by LIS programs that are related to diversity, the vast majority are electives that may be offered infrequently, if at all (Subramaniam and Jaeger 2011). Among iSchools, which include many of the LIS programs with the largest enrollments and largest emphases
on research, the availability of courses related to diversity is even more limited than in LIS programs as a whole (Subramaniam and Jaeger 2010). The LIS schools must simultaneously confront the need to draw a pool of students that better represents the general population and the need to provide a curriculum that ensures that all students are ready to effectively serve the full range of populations in their communities when they start their new careers.

The drive to meet diversity challenges in LIS education is far from new. Approximately forty-five years ago, very soon after its founding, the LIS program at the University of Maryland, then known as the School of Library and Information Science, built and operated a public library in an area of devastatingly high poverty, with the staff comprised of students and faculty from the school. The library—known as the High John Library—was eventually taken over by the Prince George’s County Memorial Library System, but while it was a school-run library, graduates were prepared as directly as possible to work with diverse populations (Croneberger and Welbourne 1970; Moses 1972). Intriguingly, during its time of operation and continuing for a decade after its closure, the endeavor was highly controversial in the field, with critics asserting that an LIS program should not even be trying to provide library services to such a community or preparing students to work with patrons from such communities (Colson 1973). With the distance of many decades, the controversy seems absurd, and the project itself seems touchingly naive; for example, one student was excused from working at the library because being around poor people was simply too upsetting for her. However, the project is notable in the history of LIS education for its ambition and inventiveness in trying to prepare students to be able to work equally with all populations.

Now, the LIS program at the University of Maryland has a much more comprehensive—though not nearly as audacious—approach to infusing diversity and inclusion throughout the curriculum and the college environment. The College of Information Studies has a diversity officer to coordinate efforts related to diversity and inclusion in the college and to serve as the primary representative of the college on campus-wide and broader community initiatives. A diversity officer position is rare not only among LIS programs but also among academic units in general. The college has a diversity committee that focuses on outreach, partnership, and community activities related to diversity and inclusion for the college. The college is home to iDiversity (www.idiversity.umd.edu), an organization for students, faculty, staff, and alumni interested in inclusive information practice and diversification of the information professions. All of these groups work to present diversity-related events at the college.

The most important part of this suite of diversity efforts in the college is the master of library science (MLS) specialization in information and diverse populations, which is designed to educate students to be culturally competent information professionals. It offers an unparalleled range and depth of engagement with diversity and inclusion in a MLS degree (http://www.ischool.umd.edu/content/information-and-diverse-populations). Students in this program take a series of specially designed courses on topics ranging from human rights to
literacy to universal usability, all of which focus on the intersection of diversity, inclusion, and information. In these courses, students have the opportunity to conduct research on specific populations of interest and to work with libraries in the Washington, DC, and Baltimore metropolitan areas to complete authentic projects on the creation, evaluation, and administration of programs and services that meet the needs of diverse populations.

For example, in the “Information and Universal Usability” course, students engage in experiential learning by completing projects that involve creating accessible Maker Spaces in libraries, evaluating library websites for accessibility, creating curricula for screen-reader training, captioning videos to ensure that videos uploaded on the library website are accessible for the deaf community, and carrying out many more projects that emphasize accessible services for persons with disabilities. These courses are highly popular among the students in the college, and they are open to students from other specializations in the masters of library science and other programs within the college, such as the master’s in information management and the master’s in human computer interaction programs. Even the students who do not pursue the information and diverse populations specialization are widely exposed to diversity in the college environment as a result of other diversity initiatives in the college.

Both the High John Library and the current set of programs are experiments. It is hoped that the current experiment will last far longer than the first, but LIS schools cannot be afraid to experiment and to sometimes fail when experimenting with paths for ensuring that all LIS graduates are culturally competent information professionals. The nerve and the desire to experiment to find the best ways to saturate LIS education with diversity and inclusion and then to share and compare the successes and the failures is what every LIS program needs.

Clearly, a way to foster dialogue in these areas is for more events to follow the Symposium on Diversity in LIS Education. Future symposia could be general like this first one or they could focus on specific areas of diversity, inclusion, information, and LIS education. LIS faculty members also could put far more effort into conducting research related to diversity, inclusion, and information, and such opportunities for such research abound (Jaeger, Bertot, and Franklin 2010). A broader base of research in this area would be enormously helpful in improving recruiting and retention of underrepresented populations to the field and in creating educational programs that will ensure that all students are ready to practice in a culturally competent manner.

If our field does not evolve along with the demographic evolution of our nation, the real threat to the future of libraries will not be e-books or mobile devices or austerity measures; rather it will be the library becoming an organization that is ossified and irrelevant to much of society. Each information educator and information professional needs to remember to ask whether every member of his or her community can see themselves in the information resources, services, courses, and programs being made available.
References


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