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The Promise of Diversity in the Library Community

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Special Reports

The Promise of Diversity in the Library Community

William C. Welburn and Janice Welburn

Dedication:

The authors dedicate this report to Virginia Lacy Jones, Arnulfo Duenes Trejo, and E. J. Josey, who pioneered efforts to bring diversity to libraries and librarianship.

In recent decades, libraries, library associations, and library and information science (LIS) educators have created important partnerships to promote diversity as a core value in education and practice. As a result of the collaborations among library and information professionals and educators, substantial gains have been made in building inclusive communities in libraries, archives, and information centers, reflecting the ideas and actions of staff and decision-makers on outreach and service, acquiring information resources, and preserving and providing access to the cultural heritage of diverse communities.

The synergy created in the library community* to recruit library and information professionals from diverse communities is also reflective of a renewed commitment to workplace diversity. What remains for the library community to consider is the extent to which changing institutional and professional practices to achieve diversity will be driven by broader social transformations, given the consistency of reportage on the speed of demographic and cultural change in large and mid-sized cities, small towns, and rural communities (Roberts, 2008), along with the limitations placed on geopolitical boundaries as a way of defining the meaning of *community*. To “think globally, act locally” is far too narrow a world view in an increasingly networked, diverse society. The challenges posed to LIS environments by such social transformations are substantially reflected in how diversity is understood in concept and in practice. Specifically, how is diver-

*By “library community” the authors refer to a broad membership that includes libraries, archives, and information centers, library and information professionals, and degree programs in library and information science.

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sity defined to meet the challenges of the first decades of the 21st century? How does diversity in practice play out in different communities and libraries? If diversity is accepted as a core professional value, then what strategies are available to transform both profession and workplace in libraries? And what evidence must we have to determine the efficacy of diversity in practice?

Definition of Diversity

There is no shortage of examples of how diversity is embraced among associations in the library community. Within the American Library Association (ALA), diversity has been listed as a key action area since 1998, when ALA Council designated diversity as “a fundamental value of the association and its members . . . reflected in its commitment to recruiting people of color and people with disabilities to the profession and to the promotion and development of library collections and services for all people” (American Library Association, 2007). The Society of American Archivists (SAA) has identified diversity as a “significant and ongoing concern of the SAA membership and the archival profession” (Society of American Archivists, 2002). Among ALA divisions, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has provided space for sections and discussion groups focusing on information resources in diverse areas of studies and has issued reports and white papers on racial and ethnic diversity in the academic library work force (Neely and Peterson, 2007). ACRL has also had in existence for nearly two decades a standing Racial and Ethnic Diversity Committee, with a charge to “initiate, advise and mobilize support for appropriate action related to issues of racial and ethnic diversity in academic librarianship including recruitment, advancement and retention of under-represented groups to academic librarianship and the promotion of quality academic library and information services for members of racial and ethnic groups.” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2006). ALA has also encouraged diversity initiatives through roundtables and discussion groups, such as the longstanding Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT); the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table (GLBTRT); and the Diversity Officers Discussion Group of its Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA). Moreover, the list of ALA-affiliated organizations—among them REFORMA, the American Indian Library Association, the Black Caucus of ALA, and the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association—continues to mature, offering focal points for organizing racialized and ethnic communities outside of the organization proper.

However, defining the meaning of diversity is more elusive in the library community, as it has been for corporations, higher education, and for government and nonprofit organizations. The efforts of associations described earlier are trend-driven, created in response to or in consideration of significant changes in demography and in cultural norms. The term *diversity* takes on different meaning as discussion deepens on how to recruit new library and information professionals or on developing programs that effectively reach various communities. In practice, diversity is more of a world view or perception of the ways in which different groups associate with one another than it is a mix of characteristics of

individual people. As organizational behaviorists Daan van Knippenberg and Michaéla C. Schippers observed:

Our review of the field [of diversity] suggests that four issues in this respect warrant attention: first, the possibility to better understand the effects of diversity by distinguishing between different types of diversity; second, the potential added value of moving beyond the study of demographic and functional diversity; third, the potential added value of conceptualizations of diversity that move beyond simple dispersion; and fourth, the notion that diversity's effects may be better understood if the influence of different dimensions of diversity is studied in interactions rather than as additive effects (van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2008).

In other words, these observations advise us to think about *diversity* as an all-encompassing word that not only takes into consideration such demographic characteristics as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity, but also less apparent dimensions, including class, educational background, and cognitive differences. The utility of diversity requires managers to "define the motive(s) behind their interest in diversity and identify the specific ways diversity will benefit their organizations" (Kreitz, 2008). Not only does the meaning of *diversity* entail association or social interaction between two or more different groups; it does not exclude or privilege any single group, and serves to countervail a sense of isolation felt by one group in relation to others, especially under conditions of social inequity.

Diversity as Characteristics of Community

Much of the focus of diversity in libraries has been aimed at population trends and changes reflected in such indicators as migration and immigration, social mobility, economic class, linguistic isolation, age, and physical disability. Regardless of type of institution, libraries, archives, and information centers are key agencies for communicating information across various communities of users, no matter how they are distinguished from one another by these indicators. In the United States substantial changes continue to be experienced in the racial and ethnic composition of communities, as evidenced by recent reports from the U.S. Census Bureau. While these changes are part of historical patterns of U.S. immigration and migration, today racialized and ethnic communities are emerging across small-town America as well as in the nation's cities, and dramatic social change is particularly evident in the numbers of households where languages other than English are spoken (Roberts, 2008).

Beyond race and ethnicity, diversity has come to signify growing challenges to the status quo on fundamental civil and human rights. This is also evident in the responses of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities seeking to secure fundamental civil rights and the removal of social barriers that affect state laws and the practices of government and private sector organizations on a broad range of issues, from health care to marriage.

The social milieu of communities rapidly changes not through the presence of distinct groups, but by their association with one another in shared spaces. Rather than focus our attention on the existence of individual cultural groups as a

point of reference for designing services, we need to look at such changes as migration and how marginalized communities efforts to assert their rights alter the way in which groups associate with one another. This association also defines the ways in which libraries and library and information professionals work with those communities on issues ranging from outreach and service to hiring practices and equity in the workplace.

Diversity as Interaction Between Groups

The association between different populations—rather than the dispersion of groups—provides a clearer pathway to manage diversity in library communities. Diversity then becomes a dynamic construct reflecting both social interactions between disparate groups and deeper-level associations beyond important demographic characteristics that include cognitive, interpersonal, and intercultural differences. Libraries and library and information professionals can further develop strategies for managing diversity by identifying points of intersection between communities or demographic groups where people share common ground, whether by necessity or by choice (Blackwell, Kwoh, and Pastor, 2002), or conversely where people from one group are substantially isolated from other groups because of cultural barriers. A remarkable example of the capacity of libraries to create opportunities in shared spaces is described by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein in *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Putnam and Feldstein, 2004). They observed the coexistence of different groups in a branch of the Chicago Public Library as a form of social benefit to the broader community. They characterized the branch library—resting between communities that were socioeconomically and culturally different from one another—as a third place that fosters social engagement away from home, school, and work. In this example, library services are affected, if not consciously reformed, by planning that takes into consideration the common interests of diverse communities in a contact zone for reading and resolving information needs (Elmborg, 2006).

Diversity and Social Inequality

A third aspect of diversity has received renewed interest (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly, 2006), that of the effect of long-term social inequality on underlying structures of organizations and societies. Social inequality establishes a basis for looking at imbalances and inequities that undermine even the most earnest approaches to promoting diversity in organizations and communities. Unfortunately, social inequalities are hard to eradicate. Sociologist Charles Tilly defined these durable inequalities as “. . . those that last from one social interaction to the next . . .” and respond to categorical rather than individual differences that separate whole classes or groups from one another (Tilly, 1999).

Social inequality represents the greatest challenge to diversity in library communities. It affects the allocation of resources for outreach programming and services; available funding to strengthen library collections; and hiring, team building, and promotion practices. It weathers leadership changes and economic fluctuations, and it survives well-intended diversity training and programming

(Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly, 2006). Leadership from frontline librarians and administrators alike is required to shift priorities, alter organizational practices, and ensure enduring changes that mirror, if not outpace, broader societal transformations.

Diversity in Libraries: Advocacy in Practice

If managing diversity means a focus on the way that groups of people connect with one another, and if the real challenge presented by diversity is to eradicate social inequality, then progress on diversity in libraries should be looked at on the basis of specific steps taken by the library community. In the past two decades, several important strides toward building an inclusive and diverse community have been taken by librarians, archivists, and other information professionals; these have involved partnerships or collaborative activity between institutions, working professionals, and professional associations, with extraordinary support from governmental and private sector institutions and foundations. Efforts toward diversity in libraries have assumed the strategic practices of advocacy (Todaro, 2007) to achieve change in three important areas: education of the next generations of librarians and information professionals, the development of librarians from diverse backgrounds who seek to advance their careers through professional growth opportunities, and redefining and restructuring outreach and services to diverse communities.

Preparing Coming Generations

Think of diversity as a continuum; not a linear path where everything follows in proper sequence, but a river much like that depicted by William Bowen and Derek Bok in the opening pages of *The Shape of the River*—a process like “nurturing talent” that entails “moving down a winding river, with rock-strewn rapids and slow channels, muddy at times and clear at others.” It is no coincidence that the authors go on to write, “Particularly when race is involved, there is nothing simple, smooth, or highly predictable about the education of young people.” (Bowen and Bok, 1998).

Whether young in age or career, the source of the river—the “cradle” of diversity—lies in recruiting and preparing new library and information professionals through programs in library and information science, perhaps in collaboration with libraries, information centers, archives, and other organizations. Yet the process of recruiting students to master’s programs poses several significant challenges. According to the 2004 annual statistical report of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE, 2005), 12.3 percent of the 16,878 students enrolling in ALA-accredited master’s degree programs in fall 2003 were age 24 or younger, approximating students from a traditional undergraduate-to-graduate population making library and information science their first post-baccalaureate career choice. A considerably larger number—22.8 percent—were students in the 25–29 age bracket. These data suggest that a twofold recruiting and marketing strategy continues to be needed to attract master’s students in LIS programs in order to increase the proportion of students recruited

directly from baccalaureate degree programs while also preserving the appeal of the master's degree to returning, nontraditional, and second-career students and to individuals recruited directly from the ranks of library staffs.

There are challenges in both groups that are especially pronounced when working with diverse communities defined by race and ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, class, and disability; challenges that are further highlighted by deep-level diversities of cognitive and social behaviors. For instance, students from racialized and ethnic communities who are also traditional-aged undergraduate students are likely to consider library and information science among an array of academic and professional options that on the surface appear to be more lucrative or ensure higher professional status—among them disciplines in which women were historically under-represented, such as the sciences and engineering. These disciplines have become substantially more aggressive in changing their gender compositions, and this competition adversely affects the chances of attracting women to information technology positions. As a result, recruiting students from diverse communities has become a more severely competitive endeavor that requires an increased investment in marketing and more rigorous recruiting.

Returning students must also weigh the benefits of an advanced degree against an array of costs, including tuition, suspending income, and personal and family obligations. The cost of graduate education has increased greatly in recent years. Especially hard hit are racial and ethnic minority students and students from low-income families for whom graduate education may appear to be financially prohibitive (Redd, 2006). The challenge, then, for LIS educators and for professional associations is to simultaneously market opportunities and options and create financial safety nets for those who opt to pursue degrees.

Several important initiatives have been introduced by LIS programs, libraries, and professional associations that serve as creative responses to the challenge of attracting and building diverse communities of students. Many present-day programs are rooted in the initiatives of previous generations, particularly in the work of Virginia Lacy Jones and E. J. Josey, in the Graduate Library Institute for Spanish-speaking Americans (GLISSA) created in 1975 by Arnulfo Duenes Trejo, and in a series of institutes created by Lorene B. Brown at Atlanta University in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These early initiatives provide an important context for observing the accomplishments of the current generation of programs centered in LIS programs and libraries. The LIS Access Midwest Program (LAMP) centered at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign brings together LIS programs and libraries throughout the Midwest to “encourage undergraduate students from under-represented populations to consider graduate work in LIS” (GSLIS Alumni Magazine, 2008) combining mentoring and financial support to create an opportunity for undergraduate students to select library and information science as a first-choice career option.

At the University of Arizona, the Knowledge River program has drawn students from Hispanic and Native American communities to the School of Information Resources and Library Science. The program not only provides financial incentives but support from cohort groups, cultural fluency, and opportunity for engagement in communities through library and related internships. The Indiana State Library has created a program, “Librarians Leading in Diversity” (LLID), that provides networking and mentoring opportunities to students from various

racial and ethnic communities across the state who agree to work for Indiana's libraries for at least two years. The Dallas Public Library, in an effort to increase the number of Spanish-speaking library professionals in the metropolitan Dallas area, has funding to create opportunities for staff to pursue master's degrees. These initiatives have a common source of external funding—the Institute for Museum and Library Services' Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant program, which has proven critical to inaugurating an array of creative solutions to diversifying the community of library and information professionals.

Associations have also developed important initiatives that provide financial support, leadership and mentoring, and programmatic involvement for students from culturally diverse communities. For instance, membership in ALA and its divisions has supported minority scholarship programs since the mid-1970s. Each year since the early 1990s, ALA's Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) has awarded two scholarships, the LITA/OCLC Minority Scholarship and the LITA/LSSI Minority Scholarship, to encourage diversity in careers in library and information technology. In 1993 SAA established the Harold T. Pinkett Minority Student Award "to encourage exceptional minority students to consider careers in the archival profession and, in turn, increase minority participation in SAA by exposing minority students to the experience of attending national meetings and encouraging them to join the organization" (Society of American Archivists, 2008). More recently, the efforts of ALA (the Spectrum Scholarship Program), ARL (Recruiting a Diverse Work Force), SAA (the Mosaic Scholarship Program), the Special Libraries Association (the Affirmative Action Scholarship), the American Association of Law Librarians (the George A. Strait Minority Scholarship), and the inclusion of library science in the Gates Millennium Scholarship Program have not only financed students' LIS educations but also offered leadership opportunities and socialization into professional life.

Finally, key support for LIS students also comes from scholarships awarded by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, REFORMA, the Asian/Pacific American Library Association, and the American Indian Library Association. These organizations are also crucial to agenda-setting on the full range of diversity issues inside ALA by providing forums to recruit and sustain librarians from their respective groups and to advocate for social and cultural change within the LIS profession at large.

Residency Programs: Launching Careers

In addition to creating new opportunities to support efforts to recruit culturally diverse communities of students to LIS programs and, specifically, to offset funding obstacles, libraries and associations have worked collaboratively to form residency programs. Although the concept is not new (Brewer, 1997) and is congruent with the goals of internship programs developed in many federal libraries, many new programs developed in the past two decades have had a specific focus on diversity. As Raquel V. Cogell noted in the introduction to a collection of essays on residency programs as a strategy for advocating diversity, "In spite of the assault on affirmative action across the country, the number of programs designed to increase the presence of librarians from the four major under-repre-

sented groups seems to be increasing rather than diminishing. There are close to 20 active minority-based residency programs, more than half of which were established between 1995–2000.” (Cogell and Grunwell, 2001).

The function of residencies, according to ALISE, is to provide “postdegree work experiences designed as entry-level programs for professionals who have recently received an MLS,” which is distinguished from internships for current LIS students and fellowships for midcareer librarians (Brewer, 1997). Residents often serve from one to two years either in rotation in a library or within an area of specialization to gain exposure to career and professional development requirements. In some instances, where there is a critical mass, residents form a professional community. In others, individual mentoring with experienced librarians is crucial, often leading to presentations, publications, and involvement in professional organizations.

Interest has not diminished, although residency programs appear to be concentrated in academic and research libraries. In November 2008 ACRL approved a Residency Interest Group formed from the Library Residency Working Group. The purpose of this new interest group is to provide “a central location for information about program availability; the creation of core competencies, evaluation and assessment standards; and the overall advancement of the quality of resident education” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008).

Diversifying Library Leadership

Not only are residencies designed to launch careers, there is some expectation that libraries, archives, and information centers are preparing the next generation of leaders. Several associations and individual libraries and LIS programs have initiated programs designed to do this. The Spectrum Scholarship Program mentioned above and the Dallas Public Library “Grow Your Own Librarian” program are both designed to develop leadership skills among participants. In addition, several important career-development programs have been created by leading library organizations since the mid-1990s. The Special Libraries Association (SLA) has a long history of efforts to encourage participation by under-represented minorities through its Committee on Positive Action Programs for Minority Groups, formed in 1973 and now called the Diversity Leadership Development Program Committee. The program provides mentoring opportunities for a population of early-career librarians who are “traditionally under-represented in the Association’s membership by mentoring them for more leadership opportunities within SLA” (Special Libraries Association, 2008). The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Leadership and Career Development Program, for the past dozen years, has selected a group of participants from under-represented populations for mentoring and professional development through attendance at national meetings and two institutes, mentoring and coaching by an ARL library director, and related activities. Many of their alumni have accepted positions of higher responsibility, including posts as library directors in college and university libraries (Offord, 2006). Finally, the American Association of Law Librarians established its Minority Leadership Development Award in 2001 to “nurture leaders for the

future and to introduce minority law librarians to leadership opportunities within the association" (American Association of Law Librarians, n.d.).

Reaching Diverse Communities

Although a substantial amount of attention has been focused on diversity in the library workplace, important advances have been made in addressing environments and cultures of communities served by libraries. Understanding the growing diversity of community life in large and moderately sized cities, small towns, and rural communities throughout the United States is key to understanding how libraries, archives, and related organizations are reaching diverse communities. Examples include efforts to better serve bilingual and multilingual communities, to work with students on college campuses, or to meet the changing needs of scholarship in historical and cultural studies.

One important avenue to assess the impact of diversity in communities is to examine library and information services through historical lenses. This provides an opportunity to examine the historical sociology of association among libraries, archives, and related institutions with community growth, social movements, and migration and changing populations. There is a significant body of research looking at issues and events in historical context by a number of researchers, including Dorothy Porter, Billie Walker (Walker, 2005), John Mark Tucker (Tucker, 1998) Cheryl Knott Malone (Malone, 1999, 2000, 2007), Michael Fultz (Fultz, 2006) and Salvador Güereña and Edward Erazo (Güereña and Erazo, 2000) who have looked at the development of services in segregated environments, libraries caught in the milieu of social change, and the efforts of individual librarians to create opportunities to serve diverse communities.

Looking at the past in association with the present can give added insight into the ways in which libraries have dealt with important social processes and conditions. Much of the cited historical research has focused on services to segregated and assimilating racialized populations and the assurance of fundamental civil rights. These historical lenses are especially useful in understanding a vast array of contemporary issues regarding populations of library users that are not only culturally diverse but differ along linguistic and economic dimensions or by physical or mental ability to use resources, services, technologies, or buildings, and that can include populations that are underserved by a full range of community and social services.

Two important yet radically different examples of our understanding of the ways in which we reach diverse communities at present involve issues of access based on disability and language. Regarding the challenges of disability as a part of the broader discussion of diversity, the question of fundamental civil rights governs much of the current focus on removing obstacles and thinking in terms of accessibility to facilities, services, resources, and technologies. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2005 nearly 1 in 5 Americans (more than 50 percent of them aged 65 or older) reported having a disability (Brault, 2008). ALA's Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) has been especially resourceful in providing guidance on legal, behavioral, and technical

issues and support for removing access barriers (American Library Association, online tutorial, "Accessibility Basics for Librarians"). Additionally, some individual libraries have given consideration to the cultures of disabilities. For instance, Rochester Institute of Technology Libraries has assembled resources on deaf culture, broken down by race and ethnicity, that provide more insight into the cultural dimensions within the disabled population (Rochester Institute of Technology Libraries, n.d.).

Service to non-English-speakers has been a part of library services in communities that have historically served as ports of entry for immigrants; however, U.S. Census data clearly supports a broader perception that language diversity is substantially more prevalent today in small to medium-sized cities and towns and rural communities. According to the Census Bureau, more than 47 million Americans (18 percent of the population) speak a language other than English at home. This represents a substantial increase from previous decades, up from 14 percent in 1990 and 11 percent in 1980 (Shin and Bruno, 2003). Despite the angst expressed in political and media debates over immigration and English-only laws, the demand for services and resources is significant. Surveys by OCLC indicate a demand for non-English-language materials by library users that transcends public, school, and community and four-year colleges (OCLC, 2008). A major study issued in 2008 by the ALA Office for Research and Statistics also found that the trends among public libraries serving populations of non-English-speakers mirror census reports, in that an increasing number of libraries in communities with fewer than 100,000 residents are serving increasing numbers of non-English-speakers. Moreover, literacy as indicated by reading and library habits is crucial to considering services to linguistically isolated communities. The marriage of population trends and evidence from recent library reports suggests that more libraries—school, public, and academic alike—are challenged to design services, provide access to information resources, and employ technologies that are increasingly sensitive to linguistic isolation and multilingualism.

Suggestions for Future Development

A review of diversity as practiced among librarians, archivists, and other information professionals, and by libraries and professional associations, gives a clear indication of an evolution in diversity as a core value. There is, however, a need to develop a better understanding of how the library community in general can improve its efforts on diversity as it addresses long-term inequality in social processes of hiring and advancement for working professionals, agenda-setting for associations, and institutional change in response to multiple publics served by libraries, archives, and other information agencies. To further our understanding of diversity and its implications at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, two needs emerge.

First, there is a paucity of research on diversity as it relates to both workplace development and association with broader community and social change (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly, 2006) (Winston, 2001). The use of historical, ethnographic, and other qualitative methodologies by LIS researchers may be increas-

ingly important to observe and analyze societal transformations that affect the library community and, in turn, the effectiveness of what the library community itself has done to affect broader social change. Second, equally important, is our opportunity to review and assess the best practices of libraries and librarians across the United States and in other countries. As Patricia Kreitz observed, there is utility in examining best practices in the absence of other research; however, best practices can also benefit from “systematic and careful reflection on hard-won practical experience” (Kreitz, 2008) and careful assessment of observations.

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