

Reason and Respect

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Spring 2005*

Article 6

1-22-2008

The spectrum initiative : affirmative action in the library profession

Barbara Kenney
Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr>

Recommended Citation

Kenney, Barbara (2005) "The spectrum initiative : affirmative action in the library profession," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol1/iss1/6>

Copyright ©1-22-2008 by the authors
Reason and Respect is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.



The Spectrum Initiative: Affirmative Action in the Library Profession

Barbara Kenney

Assistant Professor, Information Literacy

In 1998, the American Library Association realized its long-awaited dream—a major diversity initiative which would address the rapidly changing ethnic and cultural environment of the nation by reaching out to underrepresented minority students and encouraging them to become leaders in the library profession. The Spectrum Scholarship is intended to address the special needs of minority populations by recruiting and training ethnic librarians to better serve their constituencies. The scholarships target Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos and Pacific Islanders, who are recruited while still in library school, given a \$5,000 award and, at the end of their scholarship year, participate in a three-day training program in leadership development. Opportunities accrue and, theoretically, the scholars graduate, find meaningful employment, and begin to serve and mirror the face of diversity in the United States.

While a student in the Masters Program of Library and Information Studies at the University of Rhode Island, I applied for and was awarded one of the first fifty Spectrum Scholarships. I was *eligible* to apply because my parents were born in Puerto Rico. I was *awarded* the scholarship on merit, based on my academic performance and my community involvement. The year before, I had graduated *summa cum laude* from URI, walking across the stage a few paces ahead of my daughter as the first person in my family to obtain a college degree. At that point, I had no intention of continuing on to graduate school. It was time to get a job and begin paying back my school loans.

I began a part-time position with my local library where I met a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at URI. At his suggestion, I took a course in Reference Services during the summer semester and in September, my instructor in Business Reference told me about the Spectrum Scholarship, encouraging me to apply. In a last-minute flurry of applications, resumes and letters of reference, I was not able to fully appreciate the groundbreaking nature of the Scholarship. I only knew I was looking at the possibility of receiving some financial help for graduate school.

When I received my congratulatory letter in April 1998, the faculty members at URI with whom I'd become acquainted were ecstatic and suggested I apply for the URI Foundation Diversity Fellowship, which I was awarded and which paid my tuition and provided me a stipend. I was the first GSLIS student to receive this award and it was my second win in the scholarship lottery. Within a year, I received the Spectrum Award, the URI Foundation Fellowship, and scholarships from the New England Library Association, the Rhode Island Library Association, and the Medical Library Association. I was on a full-ride to becoming a librarian.

At the end of my scholarship year, I flew to New Orleans to participate in the Spectrum Leadership Institute, where I met my fellow scholars and distinguished librarians of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds who had worked tirelessly for years to finally see the first class of Spectrum Scholars. It was in New Orleans where I finally began to understand what Spectrum really meant to a profession whose primary mission is to serve their communities. I met a colleague who serves as the tribal librarian on a Western reservation. There were Spanish-speaking men and women who would be serving the Hispanic/Latino populations in California, Texas and New York City. I met Martin

Gomez, who at that time was the Director of the Brooklyn Public Library. BPL, the library of my childhood, serves over 2.5 million residents, and its Multilingual Center provides material and resources in Spanish, Hebrew, Russian and Chinese.

The Spectrum Initiative isn't simply about diversity for diversity's sake. It's about the immigrant families streaming through the doors of our nation's libraries in hopes of learning to be American, and being able to participate in the democratic process. It's about building a community of fellow travelers determined to enrich our culture by valuing the diverse backgrounds of our citizens and citizens-to-be. Spectrum is about being a mirror to that community, a familiar presence who speaks the same language and understands the culture. Spectrum is also about sensitivity to those who don't look or speak like the majority. This sensitivity often takes shape in having been an outsider once and knowing viscerally how that feels.

Several years ago, while working at URI, I had the pleasure of knowing a Chinese student in the Library Program. Her name is Wei Min. While working with her one day, we began to talk about film and I mentioned Fred Astaire. It astonished me that she didn't know this icon of American dance, and it was at that moment I realized how extraordinarily difficult it must be to come from another country and become a professional in information services. It reminded me of something said about Astaire's partner, Ginger Rogers, which I paraphrase here: Everyone made a big fuss over Astaire, but Rogers did everything he did, backwards and on high-heels. Wei was the Chinese Ginger Rogers, learning the context and content of the American culture she had embraced, but without the history and struggling with the language. I knew that she would be an exceptional librarian, not because she is Chinese, but because she has a real understanding for and appreciation of the immigrant experience and the informational needs our new citizens require in order to be active participants in the American experiment.

The Spectrum Scholarship opened many doors and afforded unique opportunities for me. My being hired as the Information Literacy Librarian at RWU was not the result of an affirmative action initiative at RWU; however, without the Scholarship and the opportunities made available to me as a result of being a Spectrum Scholar, I would not have acquired the qualifications to be considered for the position. Much of my background and experience for the position was directly related to my receiving the Spectrum Scholarship. I'm proud that I wasn't a token to diversity, and I am equally proud that, because of my unique perspective born on the streets of Brooklyn and honed in the world of "difference," I am able to serve RWU well. A week ago, a student from Africa with a sound command of English was at a loss working on an assignment. After speaking with her a while, I realized that she didn't have the cultural background to understand what she was being required to do. In her homeland, she had no experience with dictionaries and encyclopedias or any reference material. She explained how difficult it is sometimes because people assume that she has the language, so she must be able to understand the work. This student is not alone in her frustration.

We are a nation in a hurry, overwhelmed and anxious about our present and our future. Post 9/11, we are a people who oftentimes do not embrace diversity as much as fear it. I do not mean to say that I, a Puerto Rican and Spectrum alum, have more sensitivity or a better understanding of the issues minorities and immigrants face than my colleagues. It is simply impossible for me to see the world through the majority lens. Growing up in Brooklyn, I was lucky not to be raised in the ghetto in which my cousins lived. I was raised in a white, Irish and Italian working-class neighborhood. I went to Catholic schools and was blissfully unaware of being different, until the blue-eyed, red-headed boy I adored spat out the word "blackie" at me. It was clear from his expression and attitude that this was not a good thing. The humiliation and hurt will never be forgotten.

The Spectrum Initiative changed my life, but what does it mean for Roger Williams University, my students, colleagues, friends and the library profession? It means that the kid from Brooklyn who received her undergraduate degree at age 46 is now an Assistant Professor at RWU. It means

that my experiences have raised my consciousness and that my voice will always speak from a broad perspective that embraces difference and understands the value of diversity. And it means that affirmative action can produce significant positive changes over time, not just in one life, but in the larger communities that touch all our lives.