Unintentional Recruiting for Diversity

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Abstract

Based on interviews with Latino undergraduate students, Latino and Native American graduate students in library and information science, and Latino librarians, this paper documents some techniques librarians unintentionally use to persuade or dissuade students from becoming librarians. These techniques include developing relationships with library patrons, helping patrons become familiar with the library, demonstrating librarianship as a service profession, and demonstrating librarianship as a respectful profession. When used intentionally, those techniques become strategies which can help librarians recruit for future generations.

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Abstract

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Introduction

Library and information science (LIS) literature presents several types of intentional recruitment strategies, such as targeted marketing campaigns, scholarships, and mentoring programs. These intentional recruitment strategies are overtly used to draw students into the library profession by triggering the idea of library education in them, helping them pay for their education, and providing collegial support for them through that education. This paper deals with the topic of unintentional recruitment: unconscious strategies used by librarians and library science faculty which affect patrons' likelihood to choose librarianship as a career choice. Unintentional recruitment strategies can be positive, inducing the patron to think of librarianship as a good career choice, or negative, inducing the patron to disregard librarianship as a career choice.

Every working day, librarians have the ability to draw new recruits into the profession by the use of these positive strategies, and likewise are able to deter them through the use of negative strategies. Strategies of negative recruitment, as found in our investigation, are not the traditional "in your face" negative strategies that one might expect. We found more subtle negative strategies, including lack of communication with potential recruits, lack of visibility in the community, and lack of visible respect for the patron. Positive strategies included personal attention from library staff, providing a supportive environment, demonstrating respect for the patron, and recognizing diverse research and entertainment needs. Examples drawn from the literature and our research will illustrate how each of these strategies affects potential recruits to the profession.

The Research Projects

Our findings rose out of three separate research projects. Each of these projects used in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This qualitative method was chosen to capture respondents' own words and stories to explain their situations. We felt that this method would be more appropriate for working with underrepresented populations, because they have a story to tell about their choices which may not be the same as that of the dominant population, and which may not have been revealed in survey responses. While quantitative measures illuminate large-scale trends, they do not show the underlying drive or motivations for certain groups to pursue specific opportunities. Quantitative measures seek sufficient data to generalize to the entire population,

indicating *what* result might occur; qualitative measures focus on smaller groups, and suggest *why* a result occurred.

Interviewing is a way of answering questions that focus on 'why' or 'how' certain events happen, often within a general or personal history. 'Why' questions specifically focus on explaining a particular incident or event and look at "operational links over time."[2] In other words, 'why' questions look at histories and how individuals or groups have experienced them. Through interviews, participants are able to provide historical information from their personal and/or social point of view. Interviews provide an opportunity for open discussion where both the researcher and the interviewee can "construct meanings" together.[3] This is an important step when trying to understand 'why' an individual or a group has made certain decisions or taken specific actions. It illustrates history from unique points of view and provides rich data to help understand it.

The first project took place in Fall 2001. Eight Latino librarians were asked about their experiences and comfort levels in library science education. Questions used to start the conversations included "How might library schools improve the education process for students of color?" or "What was your experience in becoming a librarian like?" In the second project, during the summer of 2002, seven Latino undergraduate students were recruited through an e-mail invitation to interview. This invitation was sent to the director of the campus Latino Student Center, and forwarded to a mailing list for Latino students. They were asked about their contact with libraries, their career aspirations, and whether they had considered librarianship as a career

option. Discussion questions included "What are your career goals?" and "How do you feel about the libraries you visit?" The third project took place in Fall 2002; in it, two Latina and two Native American library school students were asked why they enrolled in library and information science education and what drew them to the profession. The interviews began by asking how the student became interested in librarianship and why they decided to apply to a graduate LIS program. The follow up questions were based on the individual's answer, but the students were also asked about family influence and educational background.

When we compared results, we noticed certain recurring themes. For most of the interviewees, there were certain things that drew them to librarianship or away from it. These factors tended to be similar, regardless of whether the interviewee was a librarian, library school student, or undergraduate. We also noticed that certain responses did not fit the trends portrayed in LIS literature on the subject of student recruitment. This led us to believe that recruiting for diversity, at least for Latinos and Native Americans, might be different from recruiting students from the dominant culture. In the rest of this paper, we discuss library literature and our respondents' thoughts on each element. We conclude with some suggestions that working librarians might use to promote librarianship to Latinos and Native Americans, and possibly to other students of color.

How Are Librarians Made? What the Literature Says and What We Found

Entering this profession is a choice. Very few people can say that they "accidentally" enrolled in library school, or that they didn't realize their master's degree in library science would lead them

to future library employment. Scholarship money, flexible course schedules, and distance

education opportunities are tools to make LIS education possible. By the time these

considerations come into play, though, the student has already decided upon librarianship as a

career path.[4] The literature and our investigations posit four factors involved in recruiting

librarians: knowing a librarian, being familiar with library work, acknowledging librarianship as

a service profession, and acknowledging librarianship as a respectful profession.

* Knowing a librarian

For 30 years, LIS students have indicated that they were motivated to pursue LIS education by

other librarians. The 1988 *Library and Information Science Student Attitudes, Demographics,*

and Aspirations (LISSADA) Survey suggested that 33 percent of LIS students were inspired to

become librarians by other librarians.[5] A qualitative study of school librarians in the 1990s

reinforced this: sixteen out of eighteen women interviewed had some form of encouragement and

reinforcement from relatives or friends who were librarians.[6] And in a personal "case study,"

Latino librarian Ronald Rodriguez traced his career path back to an inspirational junior high

school librarian.[7]

Our research echoed this. Knowing a librarian made a positive difference in librarians' and LIS

students' career decisions. When we asked Latino librarians what influenced them into the field,

several indicated that they had role models, mentors, and friends who advised them to pursue the

degree. The graduate students had similar stories. All of the graduate students told us how

working with librarians during their academic career helped shaped their decision to pursue a LIS degree. As children, some of the LIS students recalled that their school and public librarians knew them by name and encouraged them to spend as much time in the library as possible.

Knowing a librarian makes a positive difference, but our results also suggested that students of color may not always know their librarians. Of the Latino undergraduates interviewed, only one had a relationship with a librarian. Elena was part of a Latino book group led by this librarian, and also had informal contact with a library school student who shared her interest in juvenile legal defense. Other than Elena, the undergraduates had no positive relationships with librarians which could have been used for recruitment purposes.

* Being comfortable in libraries and familiar with the conditions of librarianship

In general, people tend to go into professions that they know something about, and in which the setting is familiar. Media research suggests that, although some children have direct experience with a limited number of professionals such as doctors and police officers, much of their knowledge of the working world is based on the careers they see portrayed on television.[8] Unfortunately, libraries don't garner the popular media coverage of courtrooms and hospitals. The Public Library Association said that one barrier to recruitment was "Inadequate Understanding of the Library Profession."[9]

Library school students seem to lack this "inadequate understanding." The LISSADA study found that over half of all library school students had previous library experience.[10] Esser's school librarian informants underwent a "cognitive apprenticeship" during their elementary years, by working as student assistants in the school library.[11] A 2001 article by Carolyn Caywood cites two librarians whose career decisions were based on library volunteer experience obtained during their teenage years.[12] Children who volunteer in their school libraries are more likely to become librarians. Teenagers who obtain part-time jobs shelving materials are more likely to become librarians.

Our research supported this. A Latino librarian described how his career stemmed from initial pre-professional library employment. "I was a library aide, a page … you just sort of realize that it's a very interesting type of work and move in that direction and before you know it, you're immersed in getting a formal education." One of the Latina LIS graduate students had volunteered at the school library during her high school years, and two others had worked in libraries as undergraduates. Two LIS graduate students ended up working in libraries as full-time paraprofessionals after graduating from college and quickly realized that librarianship was the career they wanted. Working in a library environment allows potential librarians to see the nature of library work, while at the same time promoting relationships with their librarian co-workers. Regardless, the situation with Latino undergraduates was not particularly encouraging. Of the undergraduate population, only Elena had library experience: in eighth grade, she volunteered at her school library. The other seven undergraduates had no work-related contact with libraries and, one must conclude, no ideas about the nature of library work.

Work is not the only type of experience that might draw people into a career in librarianship. When library service is visible in the community, these services might lead one progressively to a career in librarianship. However, none of the Latino librarians we interviewed told us that outreach had attracted them to librarianship. Nor did the LIS graduate students mention library programming or outreach as influential to their decision. They had enjoyed spending time in the library, but not as a result of an effective outreach program. This suggests that programming and outreach, on their own, have not been sufficient to draw people of color into librarianship; however, these experiences may reinforce motivations already brought on by knowing librarians or working in libraries.

The Latino undergraduates were likely to have participated in some sort of library outreach project, cultural or bibliographic instruction program. Of the undergraduates, Elena and Felicita had attended library storytimes as children. Four had taken a library orientation program or attended a library orientation lecture. Two had actually taken formal library skills coursework, and another two said that librarians came to their classes at the request of their teachers to discuss appropriate sources and search techniques for their subject areas. Despite their activity in these programs, students said they were not comfortable in the library nor in approaching staff for assistance. This doesn't say much for the likelihood of recruiting these students into the profession.

Two New Ideas about Making Librarians

Our studies reinforced the ideas of personal relationships and familiarity, but also found two additional factors that attract students of color: they saw librarianship as a profession in which they could be of service to others, and they saw librarianship as a profession in which people were treated with respect.

* Being of service to others

In "The Accidental Profession," Susan K. Martin says that librarianship is ripe for recruitment **despite** being characterized as a service profession [emphasis added].[13] However, we found that Latinos and Native Americans were looking for career paths in which they could transform people's lives and affect them for the better. For these individuals, recruitment needs to emphasize that librarianship is the right choice for them **because** librarianship is a service profession. As one Latina librarian said, "I didn't want to go into corporate America when I graduated. I wanted to do something to help others." She saw librarianship as a helping career, because she had been helped by librarians prior to becoming one herself. Likewise, all of the graduate students discussed their desire to use their professional training to benefit their home communities. Teresa wanted to return to her childhood library to help bring about positive change in the community. Ana had already started working in her neighborhood, acting as a literacy advocate while also serving as a role model for the community. They wanted to be positive role models within their communities, and saw librarianship as a way to reach and serve the people.

To a person, the Latino undergraduates we interviewed were all interested in taking up a service-oriented profession when they left college. Several wanted to be doctors, one wanted to be a health care administrator. Two wanted to be lawyers. And one wanted to be a schoolteacher. When asked why they settled on their specific career paths, all of the respondents echoed Berta: "More than anything, I just want to help people. I feel that [my community], they're the reason I am where, *why* I'm still here today, so I want to give back." Admittedly, these students may have been more service-minded than their peers. Unfortunately, it seems that students of color do not think of librarianship as a service profession. Stephanie Solomon's 2002 survey of African American undergraduates found that less than 30 percent of the students associated community service with librarianship.[14] These results suggest that people who want to serve the public might overlook librarianship as a possibility.

* Demonstrating respect for others

Respect is an underlying characteristic in many career and educational decisions. Individuals want to receive respect for their work and feel a sense of pride and accomplishment for what they do. In Latino and Native American communities, teachers are accorded a great deal of respect.[15] Librarians may not get this respect, but nonetheless, learning and knowledge are respected.

Several Latino librarians suggested the role that respectful treatment played in their career decisions. Their coworkers and friends provided them with a sense of encouragement and support that engaged them and brought them into librarianship. One librarian contrasted the respect from her coworkers with the lack of respect she received from faculty in her graduate LIS education. Likewise, the graduate students spoke of LIS and librarianship as a respectful profession. They were given the idea that what they wanted to do and what they were trying to learn was important. The recognition of their information needs gave them a sense of importance and worth. When they described interactions with librarians, they did so with respect for the individuals and what they did in their work.

Latino undergraduates' career choices (doctors and lawyers who garner respect on television, teachers who are respected in the community) suggest that they expect to be respected as professionals, and that they anticipate treating other people with respect. Said one woman, "I respect authority a lot, so I want to be able to [work with] someone that I respect." If they see respect between patrons and staff, undergraduates might be more inclined to see librarianship as a respectful profession. However, many of these students seemed disinclined to approach librarians, an indicator that they may not be assuming a respectful relationship between librarians and patrons.

Recruitment Strategies

Having extracted these factors from interviews with undergraduates, LIS students, and librarians of color, it is not difficult to see how librarians might use this information for recruitment purposes. We suggest four strategies which could change unintentional recruitment to specific, targeted efforts. These are not necessarily short-term solutions to a diversity crisis. However, these strategies might make it easier to "grow your own" librarians of color by welcoming them into the library and demonstrating the service and respect that they seek in a profession.

#1: Developing Personal Relationships

One of the easiest ways to get young people of any racial or ethnic background to think positively about libraries as a profession is to develop positive personal relationships with those young people. Esser cites one woman who was motivated to become a librarian because when this woman was a child, her librarian made a habit of selecting books for her to read.[16] One of the graduate students shared a similar experience. "In the sixth grade, I volunteered at the school library after class. At the end of the year, I received an award from the school librarian." The recognition and respect she received from the librarian encouraged her to think of librarianship when she sought her own career path. Some librarians might already be engaged in personal relationships with their patrons, recommending books, helping them find information, and providing encouragement in their educational aspirations. We talk to patrons every day; we can direct some of that talk toward the goal of recruitment.

Deterrent #1: Keeping to Yourself.

Where most librarians fail in this regard is in not creating relationships with people who could become librarians. This was particularly obvious when speaking with the Latino undergraduate students – only one had a relationship with a librarian; the rest did not. In some sense, not creating relationships is natural. It would be difficult to develop personal relationships with every single person who comes into the library, and it feels unfair to treat one person better than another. However, if we do not start talking with high school and college students and helping them see librarianship as a valid career choice, we risk losing these students to more visible careers such as medicine and law. Admittedly, not all students who enter college with the goals of becoming MDs or JDs actually will, but they won't get an MLS unless they know it's an option.

#2: Making Libraries and Librarianship Familiar

People look for jobs in fields they know something about. Unfortunately, libraries are rarely as familiar to people as we would like to believe. One Latina undergraduate admitted that she avoided going to the university library, and tried to use computer resources whenever possible. Another said that she "hated" the university library because it was so big and because she didn't know where anything was. By contrast, she found the smaller public library "clean, attractive, and well-organized." This suggests that librarians – particularly public librarians – need to take a much more active role in teaching young people how to find and evaluate information in the library building itself. Public librarians could build relationships with middle and high school teachers in ethnic neighborhoods, presenting information literacy programs in the classroom and encouraging class visits to the public library. This has the dual benefit of helping students

understand how to use the library while also developing a sense of relationship between the students and the public librarian. Another, perhaps more productive, avenue for garnering new recruits is library employment. Once she has established a relationship with high school teachers, the public librarian can alert teachers to position openings at the library and encourage them to recommend promising students of color. Teachers have closer contact with students than most librarians do, and can be used as allies in the recruitment field.

Deterrent #2: Waiting for "Them" to Take the Lead.

Public library work can be tiring enough without taking on the additional burdens of a library awareness campaign, particularly one which suggests no immediate measurable return for the effort. If you do not tell people about the library, you will not be making more work for yourself. Unfortunately, they also will not know what library resources are available to them, nor have a reason to visit. In waiting for "them" to take the lead, you run the risk that they will not find the opportunity to do so.

#3: Demonstrating Service

The undergraduates we interviewed almost universally wanted jobs in which they could help other people. Earning a living was not unimportant, but it was a secondary concern. One of the obvious ways to demonstrate that librarianship is a service profession is to do outreach. Librarians need to be active in the community, working with and for the people, if they want to recruit Latinos and Native Americans into the profession. Plan programs that bring diverse

groups together. Go into schools, visit classes, and show them how libraries can help them with their research questions. Partner with community service agencies and make your library a career training site. And tell people, in no uncertain terms, that librarians are there to help them.

De-cruitment Strategy #3: Not Caring, or Not Being Seen to Care

Librarianship has always been based on connecting people with information, but sometimes working with information seems to take precedence over working with people. Solomon's African American undergraduates did not perceive librarians as service-oriented. Neither, apparently, did our Latino undergraduates. In talking about her high school librarian, one woman said, "She just didn't care about helping us. I went to the city library, where at least they acted like they cared." In the rush to become an "information profession," it is easy to forget that librarianship is also a people profession and a helping profession. To attract diverse applicants to library jobs, this service orientation needs to be emphasized.

#4: Demonstrating Respect

Everyone who comes into the library deserves to be treated with a high level of respect, but patrons who are uncomfortable in a white, English-monolingual environment need that feeling of being respected even more. They need to feel that the library is a place for cross-cultural understanding, and that their information needs are as important as anyone else's. By treating each question as a 'legitimate' inquiry, the librarian helps provide a level of validity to an individual's information needs. Kathy, an LIS graduate student, commented on her experience

with the high school librarians. "I usually went straight to her … and she'd be like 'Oooh, what to we get to find today?'" Even when a question is left unanswered, individuals remember and respond to the interaction.[17] It doesn't take a lot to encourage questions, but the results can have a strong impact.

De-cruitment Strategy #4: Demonstrating Disrespect.

Librarians who have been exposed to one culture and rewarded for their conformity to that culture's values may not be able to make an easy transition to cross-cultural understanding. By marginalizing a patron's information needs, acting as if it is silly or irrelevant, librarians demonstrate a lack of respect for their patrons. In doing this, they also alienate that person from the library, instead of welcoming him or her into it. Part of respect is the recognition of different ideas and diverse needs. Librarians need to provide an open and welcoming environment, which includes respectfully helping colleagues recognize and understand their own personal viewpoints and how those may conflict with the provision of good service to all.

Summary

Recruitment to the profession begins early, and is supported by the actions of librarians. Recruitment goes beyond just offering money for someone to go to library school. Money is nice – but scholarships are not enough to encourage people to go into a profession they do not care about. Scholarship opportunities for underrepresented students are meaningful and important, but they are not the complete solution. In the recruitment process, small steps are as important as big

ones. The American Library Association's Spectrum Initiative (http://www.ala.org/spectrum/) is a wonderful big step: selected students of color, Spectrum Scholars, are provided with substantial financial aid, as well as training for leadership, networking with peers and mentors, and the support of the library community. However, Spectrum scholars cared about libraries and librarianship prior to earning their scholarships.

To get future students of color to care about librarianship, our research suggests that librarians should provide a base of support that emphasizes respect and service. Librarians should be visible as service agents within the community. Children must be able to identify "their" librarian, even if they do not visit the library regularly. Teens must understand that the library provides service without value judgments. College students must view the library as essential to mastering their information needs. This will not happen without librarians becoming active outside the library. Librarians' quotidian interactions with patrons carry messages beyond "The answer to your reference question is…." Each librarian must speculate on what messages she or he is sending to young people of color, and make certain those messages are the kind that will promote librarianship as a career option. The day is very far away when librarians will be able to say, "We've done our share; the need is filled." By using the techniques of outreach, social responsibility, and human consideration, we might bring that day closer.

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15. For examples of respect and trust accorded to teachers of Latino and Native American students, see Norma Gonzalez et. al., *Teacher Research on Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Households* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1993), ERIC, ED 360 825; Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen L. Ramos, *Together is Better: Building Strong Relationships between Schools and Hispanic Parents* (New York, NY: Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1990), ERIC, ED 325 543; or Joseph Coburn and Stephen Nelson, *Characteristics of Successful Indian Students: Research and Development Program for Indian Educators* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1987), ERIC, ED 297 909. It goes without saying that this respect and trust is conditional upon the behavior of the teacher.

16. Esser, "In Each Other's Memory," 38.