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Diversity Matters

I know diversity matters to the Oregon library community. Numerous Oregon libraries make a difference by providing outreach services to previously underserved communities, diversifying their collections, or recruiting ethnically or culturally diverse staff. Consider these libraries as examples: The Black Resource Center, located in the North Portland branch of the Multnomah County Library, offers many library materials relating to the African American experience. Corvallis-Benton County Public Library offers “Hora Des Cuentos en Espanol” (Spanish story time) every Saturday. Southern Oregon University Library is developing the First Nations Tribal Collection, a digital collection focusing on the tribes who lived in or near the Siskiyou-Cascade-Klamath bioregion.

Diversity is a part of the Oregon Library Association’s Vision 2010. This statewide call to action urges us to create a “strong and diverse workforce” by drawing on “the broadest range of skills and abilities from people with diverse educational, experiential, and cultural backgrounds.”

While putting this issue of *OLA Quarterly* together, I queried a number of library professionals about why diversity matters to libraries.

John Helmer, director of the Orbis-Cascade Alliance, said: This is pretty simple minded, but for me it comes down to the fact that you just can’t think outside your own head. The only way to get something new in there is to keep your mouth shut for a bit and listen to someone that has a different perspective and background. Even if you forget about the fact that

it is just “right” to respect other people, on a purely self-interested basis, you do better when you draw on a wider range of human experience. The difficult part is making the time, listening, and looking for your own built-in prejudices.

Sheryl Steinke, school librarian for the Eugene 4J school system, told me: ... As a public school librarian I believe that so much of what children learn about ... happens at school. The best schools are those where people of many ethnicities, religions, ages and persuasions learn and work together. In public schools lacking diversity among the people, the books, magazines and other materials in the library can help to introduce the richness of the human condition.

Xe Yu, in Portland State University’s Cataloging Department, wrote: The most important and difficult thing to achieve, of the many dimensions of diversity, perhaps, is ethnic diversity ... Our problem is that libraries are more interested in diversifying their collections, than in diversifying their ranks. Without a major effort in human resources, libraries may not be able to provide good services to all.

Typically, when someone discusses diversity in libraries, we focus on services or collections. We are, after all, a practical profession intent on improving user services. Contributions to this issue of *OLA Quarterly* will satisfy this practical, professional bent. I hope they also will address that side of us that is needful of introspection and inspiration.

In their careful analysis of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender holdings, Gary Klein and Larry Oberg

offer a search strategy and methodology applicable to assessing collections for other subjects. Michael Shapiro explores a best practices model in his evaluation of web-based Spanish language resources offered by five U.S. public libraries. Bridging the emerging generation gap among library staff, Annie Zeidman-Karpinski and Karen Munro examine the virtues of online chat. Examining another type of gap, Jey Wann and Maresa Kirk ponder the value our profession places on educational attainment. Carolyn Avery’s thoughtful piece reminds us that embracing diversity in libraries means incorporating services and collections to support users with visual impairments or physical disabilities. Finally, Sandra Rios Balderrama’s provocative essay anchors this issue. Her vision of diversity bestows new but not effortless levels to which we should aspire—deep change above and beyond the mundane.

While we can be proud of the steps that our profession and Oregon libraries have taken to honor diversity, we should not be complacent. Respecting the diversity of opinions of others can counter political climates that measure someone’s patriotism by measuring one’s level of conformity. Enhancing our understanding of gender, ethnicity, disability, or culture can dismiss notions that make someone automatically suspicious because of physical appearance or religious beliefs. Especially in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, the health and welfare of libraries, if not our nation, may be incumbent on promoting and sustaining diversity.

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Guest Editor