

Roundtable

Diversity in research and practice: What have we learned and how do we move forward?

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Despite the seemingly constant talk about diversity in the library profession since the 1960s, there has been limited progress in increasing racial and ethnic diversity of librarians and library school faculty. One of the obstacles to significant progress is the lack of research on diversity that goes beyond documenting levels of underrepresentation to engage deeper issues of race and affirmative action as well as the practical concerns of providing diverse library services and resources (Winston, 2008). As multicultural communities are increasingly found not only in urban areas, but in suburban and rural towns as well, the need for a diverse work force to serve diverse populations continues to grow in urgency. We propose a roundtable discussion by library leaders and educators to talk about how we can tackle the challenges of serving multicultural populations from both the research and practice perspectives, with a specific focus on what we have learned from past efforts and identifying the obstacles to moving diversity efforts forward.

The product of diversity efforts has been the creation of national recruitment programs such as ALA's Spectrum Initiative, or fellowship programs sponsored by ethnic library associations. As many of these efforts enter their second decade, what have we learned? What has worked and – equally important but hardly discussed – what *doesn't* work when it comes to recruitment and retention of diverse professionals and educators? In 2006, the IMLS-funded "Recruiting and Educating a Diverse Workforce" program, a partnership between the New Jersey State Library and Rutgers University School of Information and Communication, identified several key obstacles to the success of recruitment efforts in New Jersey's urban public libraries including: the need for financial support during enrollment in masters programs, the promise of job security and advancement after the masters degree is obtained, and the importance of a cohort experience. These lessons were then directly addressed in the next round of recruitment efforts. The first part of the roundtable discussion will ask: what have participants learned through their own recruitment efforts that the profession at large can benefit from knowing?

The second part of the roundtable discussion will address the point at which research and practice most directly meet: the LIS curriculum. The European Curriculum Reflections on

Library and Information Science Education (Kajberg & Lørring, 2003) outlines three main challenges for the library in the multicultural information society: being competent in multicultural communication in all dimensions of library work; giving cultural groups the ability to survive linguistically and culturally and to develop services tailored to the information needs and barriers of specific groups; and to serve as a meeting place that can facilitate cultural integration and community. While students with an interest in serving diverse populations will seek out courses that have a cultural perspective, the majority of students do not do so and may find themselves unprepared for working in multicultural environments upon graduation (Gollop, 1999). Successful training of librarians of color and white librarians alike lies, in part, in equipping them to be able to face these challenges. Do LIS curricula adequately address these challenges? What are the different approaches to curricula that participants have experienced and how effective are they in preparing librarians to serve multicultural populations and diverse user groups? Is multiculturalism-focused course work or field work with diverse populations necessary, or is it more effective to incorporate multicultural user-centered perspectives into existing course work?

This roundtable discussion provides an opportunity for the convergence of perspectives from the practitioners, researchers, and educators on the challenges of recruiting and retaining a multicultural work force and serving multicultural user populations. We invite participants to share their successes, lessons learned, and obstacles to diversifying the work force so that practitioners, educators, and researchers can make a concerted effort to facing the challenges of serving multicultural populations.

References

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