

The Importance of Achieving Diversity in Libraries

By Marcia Smith-Woodard

Introduction

While I have witnessed progress in my lifetime, Indiana libraries still have a long way to go in achieving ethnic and racial diversity in library staffing and in providing targeted services to diverse populations. As a native Hoosier, I have had a library card for more than 50 years. I have been a librarian for more than 31 years. I've worked in an urban library in one of the state's largest library systems serving roughly 40,000 constituents and in several state-wide library positions via the Indiana State Library (ISL). After working with ISL's diversity initiatives over the past five years, I would like to share my experiences with Indiana's Librarians Leading In Diversity (I-LLID).

I-LLID Begins

Investigating ways to recruit a more diverse workforce for Indiana libraries, the State Library surveyed libraries in 2006 to ask about the ethnic makeup of their workforce. While the surveys returned responses from a very small segment of Indiana's public libraries and fewer still from academic, school, or special libraries, there was sufficient information available to warrant a taskforce being established to study the issue. A call went out on the statewide library listservs, and 22 people volunteered to join the taskforce.

By October 2007, the taskforce, finding a need for more diversity in Indiana libraries, recommended pursuit of an Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded grant. (The IMLS is the primary source of federal support for the nation's libraries and museums. For more information check their website at <http://www.ims.gov>.) The Diversity Taskforce transitioned to become the Diversity Advisory Council (DAC) and pursued writing

an IMLS grant application for the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program. DAC had entertained several means for encouraging a statewide interest in librarianship as a viable profession among minority students but finally settled on seeking funds to recruit 30 fellows from ethnically/racially underrepresented populations. With input from DAC, ISL and the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) campus, the group partnered to develop the proposal. UPU SLIS Associate Executive Director, Dr. Marilyn Irwin, and ISL Special Services Consultant, Marcia Smith-Woodard, worked together to complete and submit the application to IMLS in December 2007.

We received notification that our application had been accepted in June 2008. The million dollar award was the beginning of the I-LLID MLS Fellowship Project. DAC met to develop the student application form and criteria for letters of recommendation as well as to refine public fact sheets that were distributed to market the project. Initially planned to attract applicants who self-identified with the race and Hispanic Origin categories as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, the final application included the following categories:

- American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN)
- Asian
- Black/ African-American
- Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI)

- White
- Other _____

I-LLID Fellowship

DAC sub-committees were formed to evaluate the applications. A total of 70 candidates applied during the four cohort rounds of applications. The I-LLID fellowship included tuition payment, a stipend, and some travel expenses. Fellows agreed to maintain a minimum 3.0 grade point average and to work in Indiana libraries for two years. The fellows graduated between May 2010 and August 2011.

The four cohorts included 32 successful applicants resulting in 29 fellows who successfully completed the fellowship project and received the MLS Degree. Not all of the applicants self-identified as one ethnicity/race. Out of these 29 successful fellows, 20 were African American, two were Asian, two were Asian/white, one was American Indian or Alaska Native, one was Hispanic, one was American Indian/Alaska Native, black, Hispanic/Latino, one was white, and one was Other-East Indian.

Post I-LLID

After graduation, most of the fellows had difficulty finding library positions. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics on data available for library careers, employment of librarians was projected to grow by 4 percent between 2006 and 2016 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008-09). In 2006, library positions were thought to be plentiful because many long-time librarians would be retiring. What we didn't know in 2006 was that the economy would soon bottom out which would have a strong impact on library careers. Today, eight librarians work in academic libraries; six in public libraries; four in school libraries; three in museums; and two in special libraries. A number of these positions were temporary, part-time, or paraprofessional. Several of the full-time positions limited library work and required the graduated fellows to work at

other types of tasks. There may have been job openings between 2006 – 2011, but many open jobs were not filled, leaving more graduates than positions available. In addition, as the economy fell so did many pensions resulting in many librarians financially unable to retire.

Some librarians have suggested another issue that could hamper employment of librarians. It is often said, "It is not what you know – but who you know." For these newly minted minority librarians that statement had been true in other professions, and they felt it would with employment in librarianship as well. Many positions never appear in the newspaper, on company websites, or any other job lists. Some people who find out about "unadvertised positions open" tend to hear about them through networks of people they know, those with inside information. Librarians from ethnically/racially underrepresented groups are often on the outside of those networks.

Lessons Learned

The vast majority of Indiana libraries do not have a diverse workforce. This made me wonder about the role of diversity in our institutions and in library education. My hope had been that libraries would have long-range plans in place to make marked improvements in diversity hiring. Race often seems a difficult subject to get people to engage in discussing. For example, while many libraries supported our survey and shared the ethnic/racial breakdown of their library staff members, many indicated that they were not comfortable sharing that data. Some felt that such information was of local interest and not important at the state level. Once the grant opportunity was publicized, library staff and students from some areas questioned why the grant was focused on diversity and not on rural or other populations of Hoosiers who also needed help paying for their library education. While some were not satisfied with the purpose of the grant, one recent demographic study of the American Library Association's (ALA) membership (61,000 members) shows that the makeup of the national library profession

also falls short of employing librarians of color. For example, a survey from the ALA Office for Research & Statistics (See <http://in.gov/library/3703.htm>.) that began in May 2005 reported in March 2011 that 69% of their membership responded and 89.3% of those who responded identified as white with only 4.2 percent responding as black or African American and 3.5 percent as Asian, followed closely by Hispanic or Latino at 3.4 percent; the other minorities who self-reported totaled less than 5 percent.

The I-LLID MLS Fellowship Project added 28 self-identified ethnically/racially diverse librarians to these numbers. But while the number of diverse librarians has increased, so has the competition for library positions. What needs to change is the availability of open positions and for those charged with hiring new talent to be open to meeting and interviewing qualified candidates who can also bring positive differences to library environments that are steeped in traditions of sameness.

Positive Outcomes of I-LLID

The I-LLID fellows had a variety of mentoring experiences with librarians representing most of the diverse categories listed above. While most of them had lifetime experiences and encounters with white librarians, most had not had such encounters with diverse librarians in library settings or as library instructors. However, a number of White librarians also provided successful mentoring experiences to the fellows. The fellows recognized that efforts are being made to hire more diverse library educators, but they also acknowledge that this shift is occurring at a slow rate. They also stated that while the fellowship made a small increase in the campus diversity numbers, their classmates remained overwhelmingly white. So what gave the fellows a sense of diversity in the program? It was their camaraderie.

Additionally, the fellows had opportunities to join listservs and library associations, to network with diverse librarians and attend conferences, and hear from diverse library leaders; all of which contributed to their

progression as students and eventually professional librarians. The fellows as a whole excelled in library school. The diversity of their backgrounds combined with the knowledge gained through their library education positions them to help any library better serve their current and future library communities.

The fellowship also introduced them to library leaders. Some leaders were mentors for fellows and others gave one-day presentations that made a lasting impact on their librarianship perspectives. They have mingled with library deans, directors, department heads, advisors, library association heads, and human resources personnel from across the state. Past President of the Kentucky Library Association and former Indiana librarian, Fannie M. Cox, was the first out-of-state presenter the fellows met. They were fortunate to also have an audience with three past ALA Presidents – Dr. Carla D. Hayden, Dr. Lorlene Roy, and Dr. Camila A. Aire.

In addition to DAC, the Administrators and Directors of Large Public Libraries in Indiana, Academic Libraries of Indiana, Indiana Black Librarians Network, Indiana Library Federation, and Indiana Special Libraries Association pledged their support to the fellowship project. The ten-year-old Indiana Black Librarians Network (IBLN) never wavered in its support of the fellowship project. IBLN is an affiliate of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) – one of five ethnic caucuses.

The fellows were also made aware of the American Indian Library Association (AILA); Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA); Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA); and the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking (REFORMA). These associations specifically provide ethnic and racially diverse librarians with resources for leadership and professional development forums for exposure, experience, and recognition they might otherwise find a long time coming in mainstream, non-diverse library environments. Like ALA, these

organizations accept membership from any librarian who supports their mission.

The Future of Diversity in Indiana Libraries

Indiana librarians and library systems need to focus purposely on recruiting a more diverse workforce. Indiana libraries that hire staff who can relate to all of the patrons they serve, that hire staff who bring differences culturally as well as other aspects of diversity, will move closer to inclusion and infusion that will enhance the services they offer. In 1980, I had to overcome what I saw as very dated thinking just to get into my first library position. The Diversity Counts Report (2007) had yet to be written. Library administrators and supporters didn't acknowledge that promoting diversity, career ladders, and professional development opportunities to all library staff would make the entire library a better resource for its users. Now we know from that report: "The very existence of libraries rests on our ability to create institutions and resource centers where would-be users see their information needs and themselves reflected."

Finally, one of the goals of the I-LLID grant was to see diversity opportunities continue in Indiana. To that end, SLIS IUPUI has established a Scholarship for Diversity. (For more information see <http://iufoundation.iu.edu/giving.html>.)

Conclusion

Recruitment to the profession cannot be the job of the library school alone. Local library leaders should know or find out where to recruit students and staff from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds for their workplaces. These leaders should partner with the secondary schools to find out which students in their communities show academic promise and an interest in a library career. If it is important to recruit from local communities then consider all in the local community. If there is little to no ethnic or racial diversity in the local community, meet the challenge to enrich your community with a fresh perspective and new

voice that working towards achieving diversity can bring your community when you diligently seek difference.

2011-2012 ALA President, Molly Raphael, focuses her presidential initiatives on advocacy, diversity and inclusiveness, and defending our core values. Her emphasis is on empowering diverse voices. If you can envision your library being more – rise to her visibility challenge!

Do you need information on where to find diverse candidates for your open library positions? Put those reference skills to good use. Ask somebody. Ask me...

REFERENCES

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BIO

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