

Reflections on the Big 12 Plus "Diversity Now" Conference

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We were part of a group of library staff, librarians, and administrators from the University of Kansas who attended the conference, "Diversity Now: People, Collections, and Services in Academic Libraries," sponsored by the Big 12 Plus Libraries Consortium and hosted by the University of Texas at Austin on 3-4 April 2000. Information highlighting the best diversity practices in academic libraries was dispersed through a combination of keynote speakers, panel discussions, contributed papers, and table talks. As a group, we were enthused by the wealth of disseminated information encompassing all of the differences that make each of us unique--culture, ethnicity, race, nationality, gender, age, opinion, religion, belief, education, experience, sexual orientation, disability, etc. The purpose of this article is to share notes from the many meetings that we attended and to discuss some of the prevailing themes of the conference, i.e., recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce, communicating across cultures, building diverse collections, and managing a diverse workforce.

Recruitment and Retention

Several programs at the "Diversity Now" conference focused on recruitment, retention, and development of a diverse library staff. An organization is only as strong as the people who comprise it. As the composition of the workforce continues to change, the need to understand and respond to one another grows stronger. To recruit and retain employees, libraries must respond to the diversity and inclusion needs of the people who are responsible for carrying out the mission of the library.

Some institutions have developed residency programs with the intent of attracting underrepresented groups into the field of librarianship and exposing them to the profession. Presenters involved with the University of Minnesota's residency program talked about the successful and challenging aspects of their program. Many of their participants stated that the program enhanced their knowledge of library automation and technology, afforded an opportunity to develop and complete a project, and offered great opportunities for networking within the profession. Similarly, the objective of the American Library Association (ALA) Spectrum Initiative--the profession's largest diversity effort--is to expose interested individuals to the profession. Those actively involved with this initiative addressed questions regarding reasons for applying for the Spectrum scholarship, expectations upon entering the profession, and organizational response to Spectrum scholars.

Barbara Immroth of the University of Texas at Austin Graduate School of Library and Information Science reported on the Texas Library Association's efforts to support diversity in library school admissions and to support the ALA Spectrum Initiative in the wake of the Hopwood Decision ending affirmative action in college admissions in the state of Texas. Linda Musser of the Pennsylvania State University System discussed the results of a Penn State task force appointed to investigate and recommend improvements in the recruitment and retention of a diverse library staff. Polly Thistlewaite of Colorado State University presented her preliminary analysis of data on domestic partner benefits access. She argued in favor of providing benefits to nontraditional families and discussed the impact such a policy might have on employee recruitment and retention, staff morale, and university politics.

Communicating across Cultures

The long-term viability of academic libraries is dependent on the ability of its employees to communicate with one another and the clientele they serve. For this reason, library administrators seek strategies to create a climate where employees can communicate openly and honestly and are encouraged to share innovative points of view. As service providers, library staff must be able to

communicate with diverse populations of users and convey sensitivity to their needs and cultures.

In his presentation on "Communication and Teaching: Education About Diversity in the LIS Classroom," Mark Winston of the School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies at Rutgers University provided information for a better understanding of why people have difficulty discussing issues of race, racism, gender, and sexism. He contends that by identifying approaches to more productive communication, we can bridge communication gaps.

Bertie Greer of the University of Detroit-Mercy and Denise Stephens and Vicki Coleman of the University of Kansas facilitated a table-talk discussion of the effect that gender has on work role assignments, coworker relationships, etc. The objective of the discussion was to afford both genders the opportunity to value each other's cultural diversity and to transcend the negative impact of gender-role spillover in the workplace.

During the session entitled "Healing Hearts, Enriching Minds: The Multicultural Storytelling Project and the Texas A&M General Libraries," Johnnieque Love, Candace Benefiel, and John Harer of Texas A&M University offered an enlightening presentation on how storytelling can be used as an instructional tool that adds to an individual's cultural literacy, enlivens a presentation, and relates otherwise esoteric subject matter to universal themes. The session began with a report citing evidence that storytelling is an effective tool for classroom instruction and is an effective means for promoting racial harmony in the classroom. A Kamishibai story--a form of storytelling from Japan--was told to illustrate the point that stories can transcend cultures. The session concluded with a slide show and discussion of the Multicultural Storytelling Festival held at Texas A&M this past spring.

Gloria Rhodes of California State University-San Marcos, presented a paper describing the use of active learning approaches for teaching international students basic research and library skills. The success of her teaching techniques was evidenced by the comfort level exhibited by international students in finding information to support their academic research needs and the positive feedback received with regards to the effectiveness of her instructional program.

Building Diverse Collections

To support the mission of colleges and universities, academic library collections must reflect both the people they serve and the larger global community. Several papers addressed collection development issues. Elaine Westbrooks from the University of Pittsburgh discussed her research on the acquisition of African American historical documents and access to those documents through the World Wide Web. Representatives from Pennsylvania State University presented a study of their statewide library system's implementation of a diversity policy in collection development. One of the more interesting aspects of this policy is the coding of orders placed with vendors by subject selectors. By coding orders, Penn State Libraries can track the expenditure of funds on diversity and multicultural materials. Jan Paris of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discussed the cultural biases that influence decisions regarding which artifacts should receive conservation treatment. Irene Owens of the University of Texas at Austin imparted the history of ALA contributions to diversity and the history of ethnic collections, the institutions that have supported them, and the challenges to these collections in the future. At several of the sessions, the audience raised questions about opposition to diversity initiatives in collection development. In some cases, the presenters indicated that diversity initiatives and policies were met with some hostility.

Collection development issues were also addressed in several poster sessions. Carolyn Mahin of the University of Oklahoma, Anne Moore of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and Shari Clifton of the University of Oklahoma displayed information pertaining to the types of gay, lesbian, and bisexual material included in typical approval plans and published by small presses. Their research included

holdings statistics for selected libraries; results indicated that selected libraries owned, on average, about 47.4% of the titles on the list of 1999-2000 ALA Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table Book Award Winners and Finalists. Lola Willoughby of the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) presented a poster session entitled "Whose Life Is It Anyway? Selected Portrayals of Persons with Disabilities in Books and Film: 1930-1990. " This poster session described efforts by the UCLA Library Committee on Diversity to educate itself, library staff, and the campus community about issues facing persons with disabilities. The session included depictions of individuals with physical disabilities in books, posters, screenplays, musical scores, and other materials as drawn from the UCLA Library collection.

Managing a Diverse Workforce

Successful management of an organization entails bringing together the talents, experiences, and distinctive perspectives of employees. Various conference presenters discussed factors that can inhibit library leadership's ability to elicit the best from its employees of diverse backgrounds. As Joyce Thornton of Texas A&M shared the results of a survey of job satisfaction of librarians of African descent, she pointed out that the survey respondents desired to work in inclusive environments where their contributions were valued and respected. Other presenters proposed the need for evolution of the traditional hierarchical management structure to more inclusively incorporate the added value of a diverse workforce. The paramount challenge for library leadership and management is to stay apprised of diversity issues and to cultivate inclusive work environments where people are secure in the knowledge that their efforts make a difference.

Overall, the conference program was well planned and extremely informative. The combination of presentation formats and variety of subject matter made the conference very appealing. We truly feel that we increased our awareness of the best diversity practices in academic libraries and look forward to tackling the challenges ahead of us as we implement them.

For more information on the "Diversity Now" conference, see
<http://carbon.cudenver.edu/public/library/diversitynow/>.

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