Diversity

It's not just the right thing to do

by Harold Goss Jr.

I t is a troubling reality that our current librarian ranks do not represent the communities served by libraries. Data collected by the Office for Research and Statistics in 1998 indicate that 87 percent of both academic and public librarians are white, and the most recent data collected on school librarians by the National Center for Education Statistics (1993–94) show that 90 percent are white. ALA's Office for Human Resources Development and Recruitment's analysis of statistics from the Association for Library and Information Science Education indicates that graduates from ALA-accredited MLS programs from 1991 to 1997 range from 88 to 92 percent white, with the 1997 to 1998 (the latest available data) class being 89 percent white.

Because diversity is a value and key action area of ALA and recruitment is the shared responsibility of our profession, recruitment for diversity to librarianship strengthens the design and delivery of library and information services to the corresponding diverse population of users and potential users of libraries in the new millennium.[1]

Why should we be concerned about a culturally diverse workforce? Why is it even an issue? Librarians are retiring faster than new one's are graduating. Why do we care what color the new librarians are or what culture they represent? There are the social implications. Society tells us it's the right thing to do. As stated above, ALA says it's a value and key action area. Why? It's the right thing to say at administrative meetings. Then there are the legal reasons. Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity plans keep most organizations honest. They've got to at least appear to be concerned with their hiring practices as they relate to minorities.

That is all wonderful, but I think there is an even more fundamental reason we should make diversity a priority. It's good for business. It's good for business in the private sector and I submit it's good for business in our profession. In a nutshell, that is what this article is about. I'll touch on a few reasons why diversity is a good thing and then highlight a few activities libraries can do to make progress.

The case for diversity

It has been stated that different opinions offered by diverse groups make for better-quality decisions. The library profession is about ideas, innovation, and making decisions that best meet our patrons' needs. We claim to be on the cutting edge of technology. We talk about digitization, user education, and improving customer service. All ideas. In fact, one study found that over time, ideas produced by ethnically diverse groups were judged to be of higher quality than ideas produced by a homogenous group.[2] If this premise holds true, then diversity must be a priority.

It has also been found that a diverse workforce will tend to attract more female and minority job applicants. One study found that 16 percent of respondents looked at a diverse workforce as a

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key indicator of a company's commitment to diversity. One-third of respondents indicated they eliminated a company from employment consideration because of a lack of gender or ethnic diversity. So right off the bat we could be losing people because they don't see a diverse workforce when they walk into our libraries and meet the employees.

The fact that Auburn University (AU) doesn't employ a faculty that looks like the population makes it difficult to sell to African American professors and librarians as a place to work. I'm sure this is true of many academic libraries. According to 2000 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, African Americans make up 26 percent of the population in the state of Alabama and 12.3 percent of the U.S. population. Our profession looks nothing like our population. We are missing the mark at the entry level and the numbers at the management level are even more disturbing. According to 2000 Association of Research Libraries statistics, African Americans were represented at 3.7 percent in the management ranks. We can do better!

One study reported that 44 percent of the African Americans surveyed eliminated employers from consideration because of their lack of ethnic diversity. Even more telling, almost half of African American candidates won't even consider an organization if they don't see diversity.

What does this mean? We've got to not only hire minorities who are interested, we've got to keep them to attract future candidates. Only then will those minority candidates on the fence feel comfortable.

The fix

The way I see it, AU Libraries is definitely moving in the right direction. It is one of several universities around the country with a minority residency program. Speaking from firsthand experience—it works. Had AU not offered this unique opportunity, I probably would not have considered them as a place to begin my career.

The residency program provides an excellent opportunity for the early professional. The exposure is wonderful for the individual, but the potential benefit for the host university is clear. Yes AU is doing a wonderful thing for the profession as a whole, but AU is also creating an in-house pool of candidates for future tenure-track positions.

One of AU's goals is to fill future tenure-track positions with qualified African American candidates, and this program is one of the most effective tools at AU's disposal to do just that.

The emphasis on diversity will not just help with recruiting, but will also enhance retention efforts. Speaking from experience, I am much more comfortable working in an environment with people of a diverse background.

There are definitely other activities that can attract minority candidates into the profession. In 1997 ALA established the Spectrum Initiative, a national diversity and recruitment effort designed to address the specific issue of underrepresentation of ethnic librarians within the profession while serving as a model for ways to bring attention to larger diversity issues in the future.

The University of Rhode Island started the Prism Fellowship program, which gives future professionals from underrepresented groups work experience and library school tuition.

The University of Arizona has had success with its Peer Information Counseling program. They recruit undergraduate minority and international students and provide them with technology training. The students are also trained to do a number of tasks, including instruction, presentations, and reference. Many of these students wouldn't have been exposed to our profession without this program.

Conclusion

So let's stop talking about diversity and let's do something about it. If diversity is an issue at your institution and progress isn't being made, then try one of the ideas mentioned here. All of these programs are important and must continue until our profession looks like the communities we serve. Our business is to provide the best service possible to the faculty, staff, and students at the institutions that employ us. We can best do that with a dynamic, out-front, diverse workforce. The way I see it, we've got a problem and there are steps we can take to fix it. Not only is it the right thing to do, it's good for business.

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2003–04 ACRL chapter conferences/events

Chapter	Date	Description of Event	Location
New Mexico	Oct. 17, 2003	NMLA Mini-Conference: "Libraries: Weaving the Fabric of Community"	Gallup
	Apr. 21–23, 2004	2004 Annual Conference: "Libraries: The Wow! Factor"	Las Cruces
Eastern New York	Oct. 10, 2003	"2003: A Library Space Odyssey"	Utica
Metro New York	Nov. 21, 2003	"Operation Intellectual Freedom: Librarians on the Front Line"	Baruch College
Western New York/ Ontario	Oct. 17, 2003	2003 Fall Conference: "The Current State of Information Literacy"	Ontario
Ohio	Nov. 14, 2003	2003 Annual Conference "Information, Innovation, Inspiration Making the Connection"	Dublin
Oklahoma	Nov. 14, 2003	2003 Fall Conference: "Creativity in the Workplace: How to be Your Creative-Best in Today's Challenging Information Environment"	Oklahoma State University
Oregon/ Washington	Oct. 23–24, 2003	2003 Fall Conference: "Changing Needs, Changing Roles: Redefining and Promoting the Academic Library"	Pack Forest, Washington
South Dakota	Oct. 15–18, 2003	2003 Annual Conference: "Creative Partnering"	Sioux Falls
Utah	May 5–7, 2004	ULA Annual Conference	Ogden
Wisconsin	Oct. 28–31, 2003	WLA Annual Conference	Milwaukee
	Apr. 21–23, 2004	WAAL Annual Conference	Elkhart Lake

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Notes

1. See www.ala.org/spectrum.

2. P. L. McLeod, S. A. Lobel, and T. H. Cox Jr., "Ethnic Diversity and Creativity In Small Groups," *Small Group Research* (1996) 27: 246–64. ∎