

Recruiting the minority librarian

The secret to increasing the numbers

by Patricia Robles

Historically, racially and ethnically diverse peoples in the field of librarianship have been underrepresented. In spite of the call for action over the years to remedy this situation, and the strides accomplished, the number of minority librarians today remains low.

ALA's Office of Library Personnel Resources (OLPR) reports the following statistics for 1995-96: 90.1% White, 3.8% Black, 3.85% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.6% Hispanic, and .4% American Indian/Alaskan Native.¹

Kathleen de la Pena McCook reports that the Association for Library and Information Science Education's figures for 1991-92 on the degrees awarded and the number of students enrolled in library schools haven't changed much. Overall, gains in the number of diverse librarians have been very slight: minorities represented 9.9% of the total library school enrollments for fall 1992 and 8.5% of the total accredited library school graduates for 1991-92.²

Whether it is the ALA parent organization, library schools, librarian associations, or the individual librarian, the library profession must aggressively initiate and emphasize minority recruiting efforts earlier, specifically at elementary and high school grades, and not as college undergraduates or graduate-level students.

Why are the numbers so low?

A literature review illustrates the serious commitment the profession has made in improving the

number of minority librarians. Joyce C. Wright provides a good historical overview of minority recruitment efforts, listing a host of internship programs, as well as scholarship opportunities, offered to minorities who wish to pursue librarianship. She describes internship programs at UCLA, SUNY at Stony Brook, and Ohio State University as just a few examples of what has been accomplished in this area of minority recruitment.³

Yet despite the many collaborative and varied efforts (including internship/scholarship incentives) the profession is still overwhelmingly white and has remained so, despite the added emphasis on minority recruitment over the past 20 or so years. So why are the numbers still low?

Early recruitment is key

The number of minorities represented in libraries and library schools is low because the profession is starting recruitment efforts too late. Not too late in terms of the library profession, but rather in the individual's life. By the time a person enters graduate school, he or she already has a career goal in mind, so recruitment shouldn't be as necessary at this point. Recruitment into the profession therefore must start well before the person is enrolled in an MLS program.

Early recruitment as a means to increase the number of minority librarians should be explored and expanded more actively to attract diverse candidates to the profession. At the minimum, re-

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cruitment should begin at the high school level and, preferably, earlier.

Children are exposed to libraries at an early age, particularly after they reach school age. As they progress through their schooling, libraries normally become an integral part of the student's education: library tours/visits, homework assignments, research papers, library programs (e.g., storybook time, seminars, summer reading, guest authors), etc.

The profession must more aggressively take advantage of the close tie between elementary and secondary schools and libraries in its recruitment efforts. It is especially important that outreach to the underrepresented groups begin at this early age, since dropout rates among ethnic/racial groups continue to remain high and, regrettably, rise in the later grades. Therefore, if the profession is to attract minority students, outreach must begin early.

Recruitment/retention strategies

So what can the profession do to start this early recruitment? We can actively pursue the following strategies now being used for library school recruitment/retention and aim these strategies at younger audiences, as well:

- *Publicizing the profession.* Kriza Jennings, formerly of the Association of Research Libraries' program officer for diversity and minority recruitment, says there are two major stumbling blocks related to recruitment into the profession: 1) the lack of knowledge about library careers and (2) the stereotypical image of librarians and libraries. A concerted effort needs to be made to provide younger people (preschool through college) with accurate information.¹

- *Mentoring.* Kathleen M. Heim and William E. Moen in their benchmark *Occupational Entry: Library and Information Science Students' Attitudes, Demographics and Aspirations Survey*, discovered that among minority librarians, a librarian was one of the most influential reasons he or she entered the field; a public librarian accounted for 10.9%, a school librarian 9.9%, and college librarian 8.7%.² Their findings further support Barbara Dewey's conclusion that "students are primarily influenced to pursue a career in librarianship by librarians themselves."⁶

So beyond the mentoring incentives offered by library schools, when interacting with patrons, librarians as individuals should actively cultivate the idea that librarianship is a career

to be considered. This type of mentoring is more informal than those offered by library schools, but they can be effective.

- *Career day.* Almost all high schools (and most junior high and middle schools) have some type of career day, as do all colleges and universities. The number of library schools have dwindled in the last few years, so it is somewhat difficult, if not impossible, for library school representatives/recruiters to participate in every career day event possible. Because of this, the focus for library school recruiters should naturally be on college and university-level career days. However, I believe both libraries and individual librarians can and should make a greater effort to actively participate in the career day activities at local elementary and secondary schools.

The profession has clearly demonstrated a commitment to diversifying its ranks. Maybe now is the time to refocus the emphasis and begin recruitment efforts at an earlier stage in one's educational life; that is, at the elementary and high school grades.

Notes

1. "Degrees and Certificates Awarded by U.S. Library and Information Studies Education Programs, 1995-1996." American Library Association, Office for Library Personnel Resources (Fall 1997).

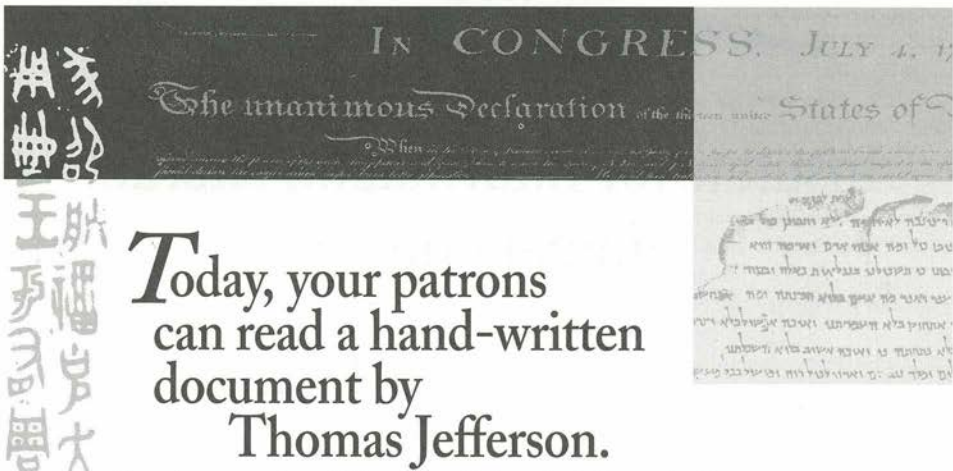
2. Kathleen de la Pena McCook with Paula Geist. "Diversity Deferred: Where are the minority librarians?" *Library Journal* (Nov 1, 1993): 35-38.

3. Joyce C. Wright. "Recruitment and retention of minorities in academic libraries: A plan of action for the 1990s." *Illinois Libraries* 72 (1990): 621-625.

4. Kriza Jennings. "Advancing Diversity in the Library Profession: Developing the Action Agenda." Presented to the ALA Board November 1, 1995. Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 1995.

5. Kathleen M. Heim and William E. Moen. *Occupational Entry: Library and Information Science students' attitudes, demographics and aspirations survey*. Chicago: American Library Association, Office for Library Personnel Resources, 1989.

6. Barbara I. Dewey. "Selection of librarianship as a career: implications for recruitment." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 26 (1985): 16-24. ■



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