

The challenge to change

Creating diversity in libraries

by Martin Goldberg and Susan Hamburger

Suppose you were on a sinking boat with your spouse/partner, your mother, and your child. As the only swimmer, whom would you choose to save?

When one large audience was asked this, most responded with their mother! While this may seem odd to Americans (most would save their child), when this question was asked in the Philippines, the respondents chose their mother; after all, the thinking went, you have only one mother—you can always remarry and have more children.

This question, asked of almost 150 academic and public librarians to illustrate that people value and think differently, started a two-day conference sponsored by Penn State University (PSU) Libraries, Rutgers University Libraries, University of Maryland Libraries and College of Library and Information Services, and University of Pittsburgh (UP) Libraries and School of Information Sciences, and the Association for Research Libraries (ARL). Held

October 1–2, in State College, Pennsylvania, librarians and support staff joined nationally known speakers in an exploration of diversity issues affecting academic libraries.

Objectives

The conference objectives included a historical overview of diversity in libraries; showcasing diversity efforts at several major libraries;

examining current trends and best practices in diversity; exploring issues of organizational culture related to diversity; helping participants build effective professional relationships around diversity; discussing the expanding role of diversity in recruitment: mentoring, promotion, and retention, and

its importance in creating organizations; and giving participants a look at the future of diversity in libraries.

Topics focused on race, gender, disabilities, climate surveys, hate groups, and diversity programs at several university libraries. A



Nancy Eaton, dean of Penn State University Libraries, with keynote speaker E. J. Josey, professor emeritus at University of Pittsburgh.

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Attendees enjoy a book sale at the conference.

multicultural interaction session performed by Loaves and Fish Traveling Repertory Company engaged the audience in role-playing. The conference fostered networking among speakers and attendees with several opportunities for socializing including during a book sale and author signing after dinner.

W. Terrell Jones, associate vice provost for educational equity at PSU, kicked off the conference by describing three differing views of diversity: one in which we focus on number-counting (we have x alligators and y camels), another one driven by high morals but focusing too much on qualitative assessment and not on making things happen, and the one that works where there is a clear plan of goals and strategic issues that aims at behavioral change.

Keynote speaker E. J. Josey, professor emeritus at UP, in his address, "Whether Diversity?," spoke about the permeation of racism throughout society. He believes that "if affirmative action programs had been enforced and carried out as President Lyndon Johnson had envisioned, we would not be riding the diversity horse today." He questioned if America will do away with the barriers that plague minorities. Despite the progress we think we are making, the statistics show that minorities account for approximately ten percent of the graduates of ALA-accredited MLS programs and ARL librarians in 1996-97.

Teresa Neely of Colorado State, in the session "Unequal Opportunities: Race Does Matter," presented hard data from a recent survey that found while the percentage of female library deans at major institutions more than doubled between 1986 and 1997, few

are African American. In stating that "diversity is as American as apple pie" (and it doesn't end when you leave the library building and enter the real world), she suggested gathering credible information about colleagues of color and not believing the hype that things are working out.

In citing the ALA Spectrum Initiative, Khafre Abif of Mount Vernon PL reinforced Josey's premise of the paucity of minority scholarship opportunities. He spoke about some of the obstacles: the pecking order of what is recognized as true scholarship

(Eurocentric views) and mainstream conservative ideas in promoting whiteness over others in employment and admission to Ph.D. programs. He advocated the idea of starting early to recruit and retain librarians of color. What began in California with Proposition 209 is gaining momentum on a national basis and may result in even fewer minorities attending library school.

Kevin Harwell of PSU led an emotional session on "Hate Groups, the Internet and Libraries." Most hate groups reach large audiences and easily recruit members through the Web. Their information often relies on misquotations of the Bible, and the Web sites exhibit a similarity in choice of graphics and colors. Harvard's homepage on hate groups <http://hatewatch.org/> has helped to meet users' needs on studying hate crimes, particularly for primary source material. There was discussion of whether we should collect hate group material (if we don't, where will scholars get this in the future?) and the criteria one must use to collect material, particularly that which may greatly offend many.

In a session on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered library collections, Ellen Greenblatt of the University of Colorado/Denver, Cal Gough of Atlanta Fulton PL, and Polly Thistlethwaite of Colorado State described collection development strategies and resources to make collections more inclusive. Gough said the biggest barrier is librarians not getting necessary materials because many don't know what to purchase. He noted that many users feel confidentiality is broken when searching for this type of material. Then he asked how many libraries have displays for lesbian/gay/bisexual month in October (very

few did). Greenblatt's presentation and other resources are available at <http://carbon.cudenver.edu/public/library/libq/diversity/>.

Looking ahead

Conference participants suggested in their evaluations that future conferences focus on practical implementation strategies to improve diversity in libraries, best practices, mentoring, how to get diversity committees started, training issues, behavior modification techniques, and networking to strengthen existing diversity programs. PSU organizers updated the conference Web site <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/divers/conf/> to include abstracts, session papers, Powerpoint presentations, and links to additional diversity Web sites. PSU Libraries is hosting a diversity chat room linked to the Web site to continue discussions.

Attendees strongly recommended that ARL coordinate a biennial diversity in libraries conference that would rotate through different regions across the country. By keeping the momentum going with open communication and sharing best practices, librarians can meet the challenge to change. ■

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at this large site. Within this site the various agency divisions have their own homepages. This site also includes state and local EPA contacts. Access: <http://www.epa.gov/>.

• **U.S. Geological Survey.** A wealth of information can be found here on the earth sciences and the environment. The environment section of the site features a large collection of resources on USGS studies on policy, global change, energy and the environment, ecosystems and management, and anthropogenic and natural contaminants. Access: <http://www.usgs.gov>.

• **USAID Environmental and Natural Resources.** USAID (United States Agency for International Development) is an independent agency that provides economic development and humanitarian assistance to developing countries. Part of this effort is to encourage countries to work toward environmental protection. This Web site provides detailed information on USAID's environment-related projects, education efforts, and publications. Access: <http://www.info.usaid.gov/environment>. ■

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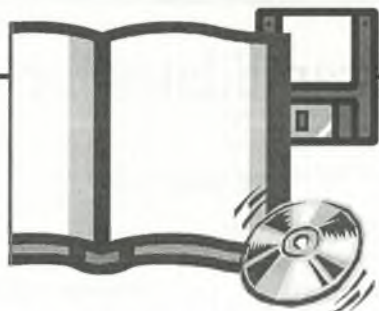
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