

Guest Editorial

Diversity: More Than Just a Blip



Fostering diversity is an articulated priority in the academic library community. Unfortunately, academic librarians have not always been successful in their efforts to foster diversity. Despite examples to the contrary, these efforts have been criticized for taking the form of minimal attempts only undertaken in response to university requirements for accountability across units, celebratory programs that include ethnic foods and interesting speakers, or sincere attempts that are thwarted by the fact that “we couldn’t find any minority applicants for the position” or the subjective determinations that the “best-qualified” person happened to lead to a hire or promotion that fails to further the diversity efforts. Of course, fostering diversity is always a part of the articulated organizational mission and one of the strategic goals of most academic libraries. The question becomes whether it is really the case that we have so many other strategic priorities that limited resources, not enough minority graduates of MLS programs who are interested in academic libraries, and other limitations make progress impossible to achieve.

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Looking beyond the academic library community provides a number of examples related to the national context in relation to diversity and offers a basis for this discussion. Colleges and universities, including libraries, operate within this larger context and prepare graduates who will have a role to play in shaping that context, presumably for the better. This

context also helps to provide the justification for our ongoing focus on diversity as an organizational priority in the academic environment. As we learn of continuing evidence of the prevalence of glass ceilings in private- and public-sector organizations, a number of companies such as Texaco and Advantica (Denny’s) have been involved in high-profile racial discrimination lawsuits. There is frequent evidence regarding the use of racial profiling by police departments, including those linked to Operation Pipeline, “a program financed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and run by hundreds of state and local police agencies across the country.”¹ The program is intended to reduce drug trafficking and has come under scrutiny by the Attorney General and others for the criteria used by officers and the disproportionate number of stops of minority drivers. In addition, there have been allegations of a second Tailhook scandal and the appointment of a senior law enforcement official in Texas, who has indicated his belief that terms such as “porch monkeys” are not derogatory, depending on how they are used.^{2,3} Of course, in 1999, the radio personality Doug Tracht, “the Greaseman,” was fired after making the highly publicized statement: “No wonder people drag them behind trucks.”⁴ And the Boy Scouts of America’s policy regarding the participation of gays has come under fire but been upheld by the Supreme Court. In addition, there are examples of the racially motivated killings of individuals and bias crimes against homosexuals in a number of states.

In the higher education community, the 1997 Regents’ decision eliminated race and gender as factors in admissions decisions in the University of California sys-

tem, leading to a drop in minority admissions at the various UC campuses. Similar decisions have affected higher education in other states, as well.

The importance of diversity does not relate simply to addressing specific incidents, remarks made by elected officials, political appointees, or other prominent individuals, or well-documented discriminatory practices of major corporations and other organizations. None of these types of situations is new. These developments, among others, provide an indication of the challenges that can be reported; and they might suggest that although examples of bias are not on the decline, diversity efforts are being reduced or eliminated in response to political pressure, charges of reverse discrimination, and the desire to focus on other organizational priorities. However, a look at the private sector shows that in the year 2000, despite the above-mentioned factors standing in opposition to diversity efforts, important trends indicate "that diversity is more than just a passing blip on America's corporate conscience."⁵ For example, *Fortune* magazine's list of companies that are Diversity Leaders reports: "the nearly miraculous turnaround of Advantica, the owner of Denny's restaurants."⁶ A company that was, as recently as 1994, when it settled a more than \$50 million lawsuit, "synonymous with discrimination," has made such extensive strides that seem to go well beyond damage control, such that the company is now number one on *Fortune's* list.⁷ Certainly, a number of other companies are new to the list, which suggests that it is not only the high-profile offenders that are taking diversity seriously.

The rationale for organizational efforts related to diversity efforts often is based on the important consideration of serving the increasingly diverse population, as well as past inequities and current unfairness. Certainly, this rationale is consistent with the fact that social responsibility is a priority in many organizations. However, in many organizations, particularly in the private sector, there is the emerging realization among managers

and organizational development researchers that the reasons for promoting and fostering diversity within organizations go beyond the fact that it is a good thing to do. Cutting-edge research in the study of diversity has highlighted the documented connection between investment in diversity and organizational success and performance.

The results of a number of research studies indicate that the companies that are the most diverse, as measured by factors such as minority employment and spending with minority suppliers, also have been identified as more successful companies overall.⁸

In the academic setting, a number of similarities become apparent. First, diversity efforts continue and have led to results that are worth noting. However, the basis for these efforts seems to reflect consumer response to decisions that indicate a lack of commitment to diversity or, more broadly, social responsibility, as was the case with Advantica and others. Researchers have offered a persuasive argument regarding the impact of the abandonment of affirmative action programs in terms of admissions, but also in terms of enrollment, as the number of minority applicants declines and as those who are accepted choose to attend other institutions, which may offer more conducive, welcoming environments with greater diversity and apparent organizational commitment.⁹

In both 1999 and 2000, the number of minority students admitted at University of California campuses has risen, at this point surpassing the number, although not the percentage, of minority students admitted in 1997.¹⁰ The use of more aggressive recruitment and other outreach programs has been credited with facilitating these increases.¹¹ Obviously, there are significant implications associated with the elimination of such programs related to affirmative action, which are designed to address past inequities and current unfairness. Certainly, one caveat relates to the fact that the minority admissions are up at the less-competitive UC campuses, not UCLA and Berkeley.¹²

However, the California circumstance appears to be an example of the fact that activities undertaken by an organization that appear to indicate a lack of social responsibility also appear to have an impact on consumer choice. And, conversely, efforts to address the public's perception of the organization and the organization's desire to be viewed as more socially responsible, particularly in the eyes of well-qualified students (or other consumers who have other options), appear to lead to enhanced results.

The competitiveness and success of organizations are based largely on a well-prepared work force, which can contribute to organizational success, including competitiveness related to diversity. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure equity and to provide an educational environment that offers many opportunities and prepares future graduates to learn from and appreciate a diverse learning and professional environment. One recent and

significant finding emerging in relation to diversity in higher education is based on the Ford Foundation's Campus Diversity Initiative and other research, indicating the central role of "colleges and universities (in) prepar(ing) people to function in a diverse society."¹³ In other words, most people understand and value the role of colleges and universities in this regard. These results suggest noteworthy implications for academic libraries, as well.

Then, it is the case that "diversity is more than just a passing blip on America's corporate conscience. It has become something to compete on and to be proud of. As it should be."¹⁴ The question becomes: To what extent are college and university libraries and graduate programs in library and information science leaders in diversity within the academic environment and in the preparation of graduates for employers who are competing in relation to diversity?

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Notes

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2. Steven Lee Myers, "Accusation of Misconduct Arises at Tailhook Meeting," *New York Times*, 26 Aug. 2000, A.7.
3. Bob Herbert, "A Different Republican?" [Op-Ed] *New York Times*, 29 June 2000, A.31
4. Csar G. Soriano "'Greaseman' tries to clear air," *USA TODAY*, 4 Mar. 1999, 02.D.
5. Christine Y. Chen and Jonathan Hickman, "The Top 50: Fortune's Third Annual List of Diversity Leaders," *Fortune*, 10 July 2000, 192.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 190.
8. Geoffrey Colvin, "The 50 Best Companies for Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics: Companies That Pursue Diversity Outperform the S&P 500. Coincidence?" *Fortune*, 19 July 1999, 53-54; Sherry Kuczynski, "If Diversity, Then Higher Profits? Companies That Have Successful Diversity Programs Seem to Have Higher Returns. But Which Came First?" *HR Magazine*, Dec. 1999.
9. Gary Orfield and Edward Miller, *Chilling Admissions: The Affirmative Action Crisis and the Search for Alternatives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Publishing Group, 1998).
10. "California Sees Minority Admissions Rebound," *New York Times*, 4 Apr. 1999, 18; Jeffrey Selingo, "U. of California Sees Increase in Minority Applicants Admitted" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 46 (Apr. 14, 2000): A44.
11. Norah Vincent, "The New Math on Race," *Village Voice*, 4 Apr. 2000, 12.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Sam Fulwood III and Kenneth R. Weiss, "Public Values Ethnic Diversity, Survey Finds; Poll: By Large Margins, Americans Support Multiculturalism in Society and Higher Education, Study Says, But Fear Greater Division Along Racial Lines," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Oct. 1998, A14.
14. Chen and Hickman, "The Top 50," 192.