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The underrepresented Native American student: Diversity in Library Science

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Abstract

This essay details how Native Americans are underrepresented in the field of Library Science, the possible causes behind this imbalance, and surveys programs designed to recruit Native Americans and other minority groups. The results of these efforts to bring diversity to the profession have yet to be seen. Research into recruitment techniques is presented, with the caveat that agreement on "Who is Native American?" is needed before the research can be used in practice.

Introduction

One of the hardest goals of library science is ensuring free access to knowledge for all, especially for ethnic groups with different cultures and languages, traditions and beliefs. While ethnic diversity enriches everyone by exposing us to private and public problems and offering ways we define solutions, one group, Native Americans, remains an invisible minority. Until recently, the relatively low number of

Native American MLS graduates has been largely ignored, a problem compounded by the amount of diversity within the Native American population.

The Problem

There is a comfort in approaching someone who is of one's own heritage when seeking services and that includes libraries. "When people of color do not seem themselves represented in libraries they may not approach the librarians. They may not even approach the library" (Adkins, et al., 2004, p. 52).

The library loses relevance for citizens who do not see themselves reflected, who do not perceive their heritage and values recognized and valued or their lifestyle understood by those on the other side of the desk. In a study of library science graduates from 1984–85 to 1994–95 "Rates for Asian Pacific Islanders, Hispanic, and blacks all grew slightly while the Native American rate declined to .16 of the total" (Lippincott, 1997, p. 1).

A later study showed that while the number of African American and Hispanic MLS Students increased in 1997-99 there was a decline in Native Americans enrolled in MLS programs (Adkins, et al., 2004). In 1994–2001 the percentage of Native Americans earning MLS degrees was only .38 percent

while they constitute about three times that percentage of the total population (Adkins, et al.). A more recent study, using data collected by the Association for Library and Information Science Education, indicated that the total percentage of Native American MLS graduates for 2001–2002 was half of one percent of the total (Wohlmuth & de la Pena McCook, 2004).

Sources of the Problem

Two of the most persistent and serious issues facing Native American populations are a high poverty rate coupled with a low education achievement rate. Almost one-third of the Native population live under the poverty line. The educational level of Native Americans relative to the general population is lower, with a smaller percentage graduating from high school and university (Roy, 2000). This is beginning to change as Native Americans begin to reclaim their heritage. There is a growing interest in genealogy, native languages, and preserving the knowledge of tribal elders

The business success of some tribes through gaming has increased their economic resources, which has resulted in a greater interest in providing educational opportunities for the younger generation. The Klamath Tribe is representative of many in offering full scholarships to a two or four year college in any field to any tribal member (Klamath Tribe, 2006). While this is a good beginning, it does not address those seeking advanced professional degrees, including the MLS.

Solutions attempted in the past twenty years or so, have been many and varied, but the numbers remain flat. Part of the problem may be cultural assumptions made by the mainstream culture:

Appearing in mainstream culture either rarely (literal invisibility) or inaccurately through caricature or other distortion, members of lower-

status groups become culturally invisible. Dominant culture often does not reflect the lived social reality of subordinate groups, although these groups by necessity must be familiar with it. Members of dominant groups not only participate freely and comfortably in mainstream culture, which reflects their own world-view, but they are also allowed the conceit that lower-status groups share their assumptions and that other perspectives or points of view don't exist. (Harris, 1986, p. 233)

Native Americans emphasize an oral tradition, a tradition in which stories can be transitory, changing, and adapted according to circumstances, and contain what mainstream culture sometimes views as fanciful knowledge. These stories are a mixture of personal and community history containing psychological insights and subtle humor, which requires insider information and is intended for small groups of known individuals. This contrasts sharply with knowledge that is rational and scientific, never changing words written hard and fast in books, with a mass audience.

"Constructed knowledge" resembles Native American thinking:

Constructed knowledge is a way of thought that does not split self-knowledge from other knowledge. Its basic premise is that "all knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known." It is a way of thought based in context... It is knowledge that accepts ambiguity, complexity, and contradiction. It is knowledge in which there is reflexivity and a questioning of assumptions understood both by self and others. Perhaps most important of all, it is a connected knowing and a passionate knowing... It involves attentive caring and real talk... It

involves commitment and an ethics of care. (Hannigan, et al., 1993, p. 30)

Language shapes how we view the world and what we value in very powerful ways. For example, European languages, like French and Spanish, divide nouns by gender and adjectives describing masculine and feminine nouns have different endings. In Algonquin languages, the same adjective and verb forms are used regardless of whether the subject is male or female and there are different word forms depending on whether the subject is animate or inanimate. The Navaho language is strongly verb based and has few noun-only words. These differences influence how someone understands the world and behaves in it.

The term "cultural loneliness" used by Christine T. Lowery to describe the pain of being separated from her community is both poignant and revealing (Patterson, 2000). It is a feeling anyone who has had to live in a different culture feels, a sort of homesickness for a way of life which does not exist in the world one lives in now. The fear of assimilation into the wider culture resulting in a loss of self and, in some cases, the loss of an entire culture, is a very real fear. There is often a great deal of pressure put on younger generations by their elders to not leave their communities and risk losing their traditional ways of life and ways of thinking. This, too, will have to be recognized and addressed if the goal of increasing the number of Native Americans entering the library science profession is to be successful.

Recent Action

Science's Pathways to Excellence report (1992) offered an action plan to help Native American tribal leaders develop and improve library services. It included continuing Federal library programs at higher funding levels, strengthening archival services for tribal libraries in order to

preserve Native American heritage before it is lost forever, encouraging tribal libraries to expand their programs to include literacy and basic information services and job skills training, and improving efforts to recruit additional Native Americans to become librarians including expanding financial aid.

Federal funding to improve library services to Native Americans continues. On June 8, 2006, the House of Representatives' Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Subcommittee recommended a \$10.26 million increase for the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). It included more than \$3.4 million for improving library service to Native Americans (Library Journal, 2006).

The American Library Association (ALA) has a strong commitment to diversity; this has led it to take on several leadership roles to try to increase the number of Native American MLS graduates (ALA, 2006). The ALA Task Force on Rural School, Tribal, and Public Libraries made a list of recommendations proposed as a starting point. It included creating more visibility for tribal staff within the ALA and developing an advocacy campaign to emphasize contributions made by tribal libraries.

The ALA also began the Spectrum Scholarship Program in 1997, which provides \$5,000 scholarships, leadership training, and peer mentoring to selected individuals from one of four protected minority groups, including Native Americans. Unfortunately the program does not appear to have increased the number of Native American MLS students (Adkins & Espinal, 2004).

The American Indian Library Association, an affiliate of the ALA, is yet another effort to increase the number of Native American MLS graduates. They offer a yearly scholarship for a Native American enrolled in an MLS program, provide information on how to support tribal libraries, and hold a

conference during the ALA's annual conference (AILA, 2006). They are also one of the five library science associations of color which sponsored the first Joint Conference of Librarians of Color held in October, 2006 (Joint Conference of Color, 2006).

Libraries continue adjusting and adapting to different cultural ways to serve their communities. One excellent example is the Santa Clara Pueblo Community Library in New Mexico, which offers programming designed specifically for the community including Tewa language classes and cultural activities (Anderson, 2004). As we become more multicultural, libraries and other institutions will need to find ways to view the world in various ways without losing our individual cultural perspectives in the process.

The literature shows a strong commitment by the profession to increase the number of Native American library science students but the gains have been negligible. The profession continues to lack the representative diversity to effectively serve the full range of ethnicities in North America. While there have been many efforts over the past twenty years to increase those numbers with mentoring programs, internships, scholarships, financial support, partnerships with individual schools of library science, advertising in ethnic yellow pages, recruiting trips, participation in minority career fairs, creative delivery of classes, and personal outreach, those efforts have had little effect (Lippincott, 1997).

Suggestions from the Literature

The last few years have seen several new books offering practical solutions. One suggestion for improving Native American MLS graduation rates targets early recruitment (Robles, 1998). The idea is that the exposure to library science as a professional career goal should begin in

high school or even earlier. Robles suggests that providing accurate information about librarianship, mentoring, and participating in career days are all good strategies that should be encouraged and expanded.

Reese and Hawkins (1999) suggest target-marketing the profession, electronic mentoring, and early recruitment as keys to minority recruitment. Their guide to minority recruitment contains practical information, including sample brochures and tips on how to produce recruitment videos.

Patterson (2000, p. 186) writes that it is her personal belief that the most successful technique to recruit Native Americans to librarianship is done on a one-to-one basis. No amount of press releases, announcements, career fairs, or recruitment trips work with any degree of success with this segment of the population. Native Americans, especially those from a reservation environment, respond best to personal recruitment. Even then, it may take two to three years before the potential student is ready to leave his/her job, family, or environment to come to library school.

This approach, however, has an inherent problem: the low number of Native American librarians available to do one-to-one mentoring. The career paths model described by Glendenning and Gordon (1997), has four stages of professional growth: apprentice, colleague, mentor, and sponsor. Certainly one individual can successfully mentor more than one potential librarian at once, but it requires a strong commitment, dedication, resolve, and as Patterson (2000) emphasizes, several years.

But Who is Native American?

Assuming our goal is to achieve racial parity in librarianship, it is imperative that we first agree on some basic definitions. Who is Native American? Is it only those who carry

tribal identification cards or is it anyone who self-identifies as a Native American? If we include both we must find ways to differentiate between the two when we examine the data.

The Diversity Counts (2006) report is a 36–page report prepared by the ALA Office for Research and Statistics, and Office for Diversity, along with Decision Demographics in October, 2006. It analyzed the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses for the industry of "library," including both credentialed and non-credentialed employees. The purpose was "to provide reliable estimates of employment in the profession and age, gender, and ethnicity figures for five types of libraries" (p. 4).

The report (ALA, 2006, p. 8) provides charts showing the number of librarians identifying themselves as Native Americans/Alaskan in 1990 (284) and in 2000 (310)—an increase of 26 librarians in 10 years. Intriguingly, the chart showing the percent change of credentialed librarians by race/ethnicity from 1990 to 2000 claims that librarians identifying themselves as Native American increased by 140 percent. It is unclear how this percentage was reached—an increase of 284 to 310 is less than 10 percent. The explanation may lie in changes in the U.S. Census forms. In 1990 the instructions required one to fill one circle for the race that the person considers himself/herself to be; in the 2000 the census, it added 15 combinations of two races, 15 combinations of four races, 6 combinations of five races, and 1 combination of 6 races for a total of 57 combinations. A chart shows that in the year 2000, 923 librarians identified themselves as being of two or more races, although there is no data showing how many of these included Native American as one of the two races.

Clearly, it is difficult, if not impossible, to compare the 1990 and 2000 census statistics when it comes to race. We will have to wait for the 2010 data to become

available to compare groups identifying themselves as belonging to more than one race. The number of people identifying themselves as part Native American will likely increase in the 2010 census because people are now more comfortable identifying themselves as belonging to more than one racial category and they have the opportunity to do so.

Who should we concentrate on recruiting and why? Which recruitment strategies work best with different populations? One recent research study by Kyung-Sun Kim (2006) examined the latter question. Using a web-based survey questionnaire, she looked at what were the most effective strategies for recruitment and retention of minority students, examining for differences among different ethnic groups. She found that "the American Indian group indicated that offering distance learning options in LIS program is crucial" (p. 4). This intriguing conclusion deserves more research to determine why that is so. Her study also indicated that offering distance education is an effective retention strategy for Native American LIS students (p. 5). The importance of offering distance learning options was not listed in the top ten strategies for any other minority group for either recruitment or retention and these findings remain the same in a recent update (Kim and Sin, 2006).

Conclusion

Recruiting and retaining Native American students in LIS schools and programs needs to continue. But in order to do this effectively we need more precise research into what techniques and strategies are most useful for each target group. The first step must be to more clearly define exactly what population we are discussing, recognizing that there are some profound differences between those who live on tribal homelands and those who do not, and between those who identify themselves as tribal members and those who view

themselves as being of more than one race. Research such as that by Kyung-Sun Kim (2006) will point us towards effective solutions. When we know what works best for each subset we can focus our time, money, and energy more productively as we seek to increase diversity in the library community.

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