

## A Study in Library Diversity

Diversity within the library is a necessity in order to create an environment that is both welcoming and relevant to people from all ethnic background and ages. However, this diversity is currently not ubiquitous and work must be done to shift the current state of libraries into the ideal. In the journal article titled “The Library Internship and Expo as a Pathway to Diversity: A Case Study,” the problem of a lack of diversity in libraries is discussed. As libraries seek to be all-encompassing and complex centers of welcome and information to the community, a lack of representation through diversity leaves minorities feeling left out of the library environment. As the article claims, this lack of diversity is a well-known fact that must be changed in order to create new interest in the field of Library and Information Sciences as well as to invite people belonging to minorities to feel welcome at libraries. To explore methods of bringing in a diverse, new wave of future librarians into the field, Curt Asher and Johanna Olson Alexander elaborated upon a case study conducted at California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB) that aimed to create diversity through internships and expos for librarians and students to access.

The primary problem that was addressed within this case study is the extreme lack of diversity found within libraries and library school programs. To add scope to this claim, Asher and Alexander explain that, “while an estimated 12.5 percent of the U.S population is Hispanic or Latino, only 3.7 percent of the graduates from accredited library science programs are... African American students, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians are also vastly underrepresented” (Asher, 2006). This lack of diversity is problematic because underrepresentation often results in certain minorities

not feeling welcome and, as a result, not getting the aid they seek. The severity of this situation is clear, as it is essential for people of all backgrounds to be able to access the community resources they seek. In their paper, Asher and Alexander cite another study, conducted by Adkins and Espinal, claiming “when people of color do not see themselves represented in libraries, they do not approach librarians. They may not even approach libraries” (Asher, 2006). To combat this, Asher and Alexander encourage internships and expos to be created as the main solution to the lack of diversity in the library system.

One of the secondary problems uncovered and explored by this case study is how a lack of interest in the field causes a twofold problem: underrepresentation of minorities *and* a workforce that mostly consists of adults in older age groups. Statistics on this problem do not offer a bright future for the field due to the fact that “libraries in the United States face a well-documented workforce aging problem... with 75% of librarians are over 45 years and about 45 percent of the nation’s librarians are expected to reach retirement age before 2010” (Asher, 2006). The large gap in age between the people who work at libraries and the patrons that visit libraries may create an even more uncomfortable environment for members of a minority who are attempting to access the resources that a library has to offer. Venturing into an environment that offers no representation of neither their race nor age group is isolating, creating a situation where coming to the library may be something they start to avoid.

The situations concerning diversifying the field of library and information science through inviting minorities and individuals of a younger age are derived from inter-group and environmental factors that have been inserted into these issues. Intergroup tensions

arise from the lack of minority representation that is prevalent in libraries as well as librarians. Groups that are not represented often feel left out and unwelcome, which, in conjunction with other disadvantages associated with belonging to a minority group, creates an environment of tension between groups due to the lack of easy access to information and help. Environmental factors also influence problems within the library system, as it is difficult for minority students to access the education and information they would need to learn that becoming a librarian is a valid career.

To combat the problems that arise when a certain community center is predominately employing a single race, usually the most populous one, CSUB has experimented with creating internships and other opportunities to aid members of minorities that are interested in becoming a librarian. These internships, as outlined by Asher and Alexander's case study, would allow for "career development and professional exploration (through) trips to libraries and information centers, conferences and training sessions" in addition to giving the interns projects that allow them to work directly with seasoned librarians (Asher, 2006). These internships would provide "training and study, professional development and mentoring, assigned professional projects, and evaluation" so that the interns would be well prepared for the field they wish to enter (Asher, 2006). With these opportunities, students will be able to decide if pursuing a career as a librarian is correct for them and will also aid them with gathering experience before looking for a more permanent position, which is an opportunity that is not often available for minority students. The chance to gather this kind of experience will, as a result, lend to the quest of diversifying the ethnicities of librarians in the workforce.

Similarly, creating expos to draw attention to the field of library and information science is also important. Though most public institutions struggle with the limitations of small budgets, Asher notes that it's very important to draw attention to library programs through any means possible. To cope with a small budget, it is possible to create an expo for students and field-professionals to meet and gather information in addition to network. New students will be allowed to learn about a field that they may not have considered, and librarians will be able to interact with the newcomers as well as network with each other. These expos would draw immediate attention to the programs with a minimal cost. For the California State University, Bakersfield, an expo drew "120 interested attendees the first year and 240 the second year, all for a base budget of less than \$500" (Asher, 2006). The publicity that comes from such a small event in a University-setting gave librarians a setting to offer students an "exposure to the realities of the profession (to) shatter myths and stereotypes and awaken individuals to the research, technical, and service careers in library science that they may have been unaware of" (Asher, 2006). Additionally, it is noted that, if diversity in gender, age and race is to occur, most library programs and schools must create internships, expos and other opportunities for students to participate in.

The library values and ethics that are the most relevant to the issues discussed in this paper is the importance placed on being a good community hub. As the library is meant to serve the community, it is important that all groups of that community feel welcomed. This sort of inclusion allows members of minority races who may not have the same educational opportunities as those from a more prevalent ethnicity to access information without worrying about payment. Libraries value being able to service all

patrons equally and with excellent quality, so working hard towards diversifying the field is just one step that needs to be taken in order to include all minorities and allow them equal opportunities. In the case of this analysis, it is made clear that these values are important to the California State University, Bakersfield library. The steps that are being taken to become inclusive of minorities, such as internships and expos to draw attention to the field will all, in turn, help diversify the ages and ethnicities that can be seen when walking into a library.

The solution to the lack of diversity in age, gender and ethnicity that I would forward is to create *multiple* activities, such as internships and expos, for students to participate in. This diverges only slightly from the solution promoted by the case study because I find that they have created the most viable solution. I propose the addition of scholarships as well. Allowing minority students to access scholarships or other beneficial programs would significantly raise the percentage of students who would consider a career in library and information science once they realize that they would have support throughout the process. Though I completely agree with the methods promoted by the case study created by Asher and Alexander, I would propose that these opportunities be made available on a frequent, semester-by-semester basis so that students will have multiple chances to stop by and gather information and experience. Since the expos and internships at CSUB seem limited, the outcome to this solution would be quite limited as well.

The better solution would build off of the ideas of Asher and Alexander to involve the creation *and* expansion of opportunities to allow students from various backgrounds

to find something that fits their needs and schedule. Having a choice of multiple opportunities would allow a young mother of two, who is also working, to participate in an internship that have hours that work with her responsibilities rather than struggling to fit into an internship that is designed for a young person with no extra responsibilities. Additionally, I believe that scholarships should also be awarded to those who demonstrate a great interest in the field but do not have the financial capacities to become involved. Diversity in opportunities would allow an equally diverse range of students to be welcomed into the field of library and information sciences, and therefore offer a solution to the problem of age and ethnic diversity within libraries.

### References:

- Asher, C., & Johanna Olson Alexander. (2006). The library internship and expo as a pathway to diversity: A case study. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 47(1), 17-26.

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