

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING YOURSELF

Why Libraries Need  
a Diverse Staff



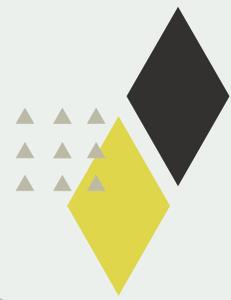
MAKEA KING  
MLIS CANDIDATE

LBSC631: Achieving  
Organizational Excellence



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# Introduction

While employing a staff that is diverse and reflective of its broader community is important for libraries, providing materials and access to services that offer a diversification in gender, ability, social class, and sexuality is also important. This will demonstrate to the community that the library is a place that is open and available for all of its community members.

As a child, I went to a predominantly black and Latino school in northwest D.C. Upon moving to Baltimore County towards the end of 5th grade, I became a student at a predominantly white school. I quickly became aware of the differences in classroom materials, schoolyard social norms, and school library offerings. Understandably, some of these differences were largely due to the change in the socio-economic status of the school's surrounding neighborhoods, however, the school library's collection left a lot to be desired for a young girl of color. People need to see people like themselves being represented in the world. Being visually represented makes you feel that you not only have a voice, but that it is being heard and acknowledged. When a young child goes to their school library or community library and struggles to find books that reflect their reality, it makes them feel diminished and unseen. Combine that with not seeing people in positions of authority that look like you, and you start to wonder where you fit in the world. Your paths seem limited and your ability to reach out and ask for help from someone who you feel comfortable is also restrained.

Having a library staff that varies in race, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds allows for more room to be made to accommodate other's differences. Minorities in America are often tasked with knowing as much or more about the majority's culture than their own. So, it would make sense that the inverse would be true: the majority knows their own culture, but little about minority cultures. So it is not surprising when choosing items for a library's collection that a predominantly white staff may lack the awareness of different books, movies, or music that is created by those not within the mainstream.

This paper will delve into some of the reasons why the librarianship profession is having difficulty shedding its predominantly white image, while also attempting to pinpoint ways in which universities can restructure their Master's in Library Science (MLS) and Master's in Library and Information Science (MLIS) programs to become more open and welcoming to minorities.



# Statistical Make-up of the Librarianship Profession and Its Impact

Despite the fact that more minorities are enrolled in college, the American Library Association (ALA) has found that librarianship remains predominantly white. Morales, Knowles, and Bourg (2014) report that “2012 data show that only 4% of students in ALA accredited MLS/MLIS programs are African American, 4% are Latino or Latina, 4% are Asian, 5% are international, 9% are unknown, and 71% are white” (pg 442). Without a formal intervention, the field will remain majority white despite the fact that the communities being served by libraries will drastically differ. Upon reflection of this data, the authors raise a great question; “We must ask ourselves what message such a stark lack of diversity communicates to patrons, to current and potential members of the profession, and to society at large” (pg 443).

The importance of libraries reflecting the changing demographics of the country as a whole is noted on page 441, “To reflect the diversity of our communities and provide a full spectrum of diverse services and resources to those communities, library professionals need to be aware of the changing ethnic and racial makeup of the current and future college student populations” (Morales, Knowles, and Bourg, 2014). They go on to add, “A more racially and ethnically diverse workforce in academic libraries is important not only as a measure of how well it reflects our communities but also because a more diverse staff provides academic libraries with a fuller range of perspectives, talents, knowledge, and experiences to draw on” (Morales, Knowles, and Bourg, 2014). This is the crux of the importance of diversity. Different people think differently and can draw on their varied experiences to help solve problems or offer help in ways that may not be conventional or commonplace to others.



When a library employs a diverse staff, the different perspectives, experiences, and lifestyles that come along with them influence the way they conduct their tasks and responsibilities within the library. The categorization and organization of library materials and collections is one of those responsibilities that are directly impacted by library administration. On page 445, Morales remarks upon “the power librarians and their standards and practices have over how knowledge is described and organized, and therefore how and who might discover, find, and use the resources in library collections” (2014).

How a book is categorized directly impacts whether or not a patron will find it and be able to use it. If a patron is seeking information about LGBTQ artists and wants to learn more about Frida Kahlo, who was openly bisexual, but the library administration has books about Kahlo categorized only by geographic region or not tagged as LGBTQ, it's likely that the patron will not find it. In another example, if that same patron seeking information regarding Frida Kahlo and her sexuality is at a library where administration has opted not to include materials that acknowledge or explore LGBTQ themes, the patron will again be left without the information they need, albeit for a different type of collection organization reason. As Morales states on page 446, “The decisions made about whose archives to collect and preserve and what books and journals to buy are inevitably biased, based as they are on some combination of the judgments and interests of individual libraries and librarians and on those same librarians’ sense of tastes and needs of patrons” (2014).

Librarians must actively pursue materials created by and about people from underrepresented groups in order to ensure that their collections are diverse. It can't simply be left up to their perceived demand of the library's patrons. This is especially true for academic libraries that are often viewed as the repository of intellectual excellence at universities. Neglecting to incorporate a variety of resources from a diverse pool of authors, artists, and creatives, in general, will profoundly hamper the development of student's minds and perspectives due to the resource limitations of their library.

# Importance of Recruitment and Retention



Librarians are often some of the first people school age children form relationships with and seek out for help with understanding their studies and the wider world. The potential impact that can be had by increasing the number of African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American librarians within academia cannot be overstated enough. That young student of color can potentially go on to become a library administrator or educator due to that initial interaction with an academic librarian of color.

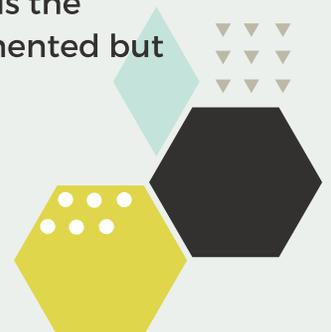
Employing more minorities within academic and public library systems will also offer a visual representation to students and outside community members that librarianship is a viable career-path for them as well. Researchers have noted that there is a higher proliferation of librarians of color working within public libraries, as opposed to academic libraries. Winston (2006) remarks that “the minority librarian who wants to make a contribution to his or her community has more opportunities to do so in the public library and more aggressive minority recruitment efforts in public libraries presumably reflect an appreciation for diversity, as well as opportunities for advancement in a more ‘fair’ system.” In order to change the perception that academic libraries are only suited for certain types, the myth of “the ivory tower of academia” (Winston, 2006, pg. 5) not being open or embracing minorities not only has to be dispelled, it must be directly and vocally challenged by the institution and the library administration in their external and internal recruitment efforts and community outreach.

An increase in the number of minority librarians within academic libraries will support the diversification of thought within library administration. “By increasing the number of minority academic librarians, we will be able to broaden the number of perspectives represented in academic library decision making, administration, and library services” (Winston, 2006, pg. 1). A diverse staff will ensure that the students, faculty, and researchers at the university will be better served and have their differentiated needs met adequately.

So, the question now becomes, if we know that the number of librarians from underrepresented groups is alarmingly low, while also recognizing the importance of the community being served by the library being able to see the staff reflect the diversity of their community, what can be done to recruit and retain more librarians of color? People tend to imagine themselves in positions when they see others like themselves in those same positions. How can the underrepresented population see themselves as MLS/MLIS graduate students or faculty members when no one in the academic library looks like them? Jaeger and Franklin (2007) state, "In order to produce inclusive library services for all populations, LIS needs to work at creating a virtuous circle of inclusiveness." The two researchers are basically saying that if universities continue to employ a majority white faculty in their MLS/MLIS programs they cannot fully prepare their students for the diverse needs of the population that they will end up serving. "Due to the current preponderance of white faculty in LIS programs, the range of perspectives that LIS Master's students are exposed to can be quite limited, particularly in terms of providing inclusive library services to diverse populations" (Jaeger and Franklin, 2007, pg. 20).

By increasing the number of minority LIS faculty members, incoming MLS/MLIS students will be more apt to visualize themselves as MLS/MLIS faculty members. This in turn increases the awareness of library information science master's and doctoral programs to underrepresented populations. Thus ensuring the virtuous circle can begin to change the demographics of library and information science faculties.

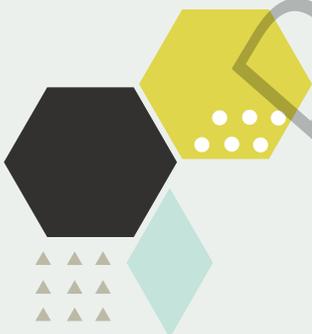
In a study mentioned by Jaeger and Franklin (2007) on academic library utilization, the results found that "students of color reported more academic library use, indicating the success of outreach programs to diverse populations by academic libraries" (pg 23). If students of color are using the academic library more often than white students, having librarians of color working in the library would be a direct line of contact for those students to see librarianship as a possible profession upon graduation. And, when more libraries employ more librarians of color, those librarians will be bringing with them their background and experiences that will help to formulate the programs and types of services that the libraries can offer to their patrons. Without their specific input, how can libraries truly meet the needs of the diverse population? What is the percentage of services and programs that could have been implemented but weren't due to the lack of a different perspective?



Employing librarians from different parts of the community will help to shape how libraries serve their patrons. Without diverse librarians, we don't get diverse perspectives and thought patterns. Without diverse librarians we miss out on the chance to meet people where they are and help them get to where they need and want to be in life or their career.

As more students of color graduate from MLS/MLIS programs, it would behoove university administration to actively recruit them to return to academia and pursue advanced degrees in order to become LIS faculty members. This would in turn increase minority recruitment to LIS programs, which will, likely, increase the number of minority LIS graduates becoming library directors and administrators at academic and public libraries. Librarians of color noted the importance of this, "57% of librarians of color responding to the survey made it clear that having more faculty of color in the LIS school/program and having faculty/staff/alumni of color involved in the recruitment process would attract more students of color" (Jaeger and Franklin, 2007, pg 22). Without this diversification of LIS faculty and staff, the needs of the future population cannot be properly addressed.

If we, as a society and as academics and researchers within the field, are aware of the detrimental impact a lack of inclusiveness and diversification of the librarianship profession can and does have on communities, what are we doing to remedy this situation? Simply acknowledging a problem won't fix it. After discussing the effects of a predominantly white librarianship profession can have on a growing diverse society, there must be concrete and strategic procedures put into place in order to impart any significant and long lasting change.





# Retention Strategies

On their website, the American Library Association (ALA) states, "We value our nation's diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve." How does this mission statement apply to actual programs the ALA has put into place to strengthen the diversity of the field? Since 1997, the ALA has awarded Spectrum Scholarships to MLS/MLIS students from underrepresented groups. Morales, Knowles, and Bourg (2014) note, "more than 800 students from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups (African American, Latino American, Asian American, and American Indian, Hawaiian, and Alaskan) have been awarded Spectrum Scholarships to offset the costs of enrolling in graduate programs in library and information science" (pg. 443). In addition to this program sponsored by the ALA, there is also a doctoral fellowship under the Spectrum Scholarship program that has "supported approximately 25 students" with the hopes of them in turn going on to "support and mentor future Spectrum Scholars and other students of color" (pg 443).

This effort by the ALA is commendable, yet limited in its scope due to the fact that there is only so much scholarship money to be awarded. Despite the interest, only a few applicants will be awarded the scholarship money and there just aren't that many comparable programs for them to turn to. Morales, Knowles, and Bourg (2014), note that the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have a "comprehensive set of diversity programs designed to recruit people from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups into librarianship" (pg. 443). However, those programs are dependent on grant funding, which has yet to become available for new cohorts past 2020 (ARL Fellowship for Digital and Inclusive Excellence) or 2021 (the ARL/Society of American Archivists (SAA) Mosaic Program).

So, with the temporary halt or, possibly unfortunate, ending of these programs, how do we continue our efforts to rectify this situation? Without avenues for students of color to make their way into the profession, how do we increase recruitment efforts so that academic libraries have more librarians and library staff of color?

One way suggested by Morales, Knowles, and Bourg (2014) is to reach out to the growing diverse student body to be student employees within the library (pg 444). This provides a way for other students to see students of color working within the library while also exposing the actual student workers to the field, which may increase their desire to explore librarianship employment options. As a former student worker in an academic library myself, I was often praised for my work and efforts, but was never asked directly about my interest in librarianship or explained the path towards becoming a librarian. Had there been a librarian of color there to mentor me, I might have made my way to the profession nearly thirteen years sooner.

Having librarians of color working within academic and public libraries, in positions of authority, helps to affirm that patrons of color belong in these spaces and offers a level of comfort that may not be present otherwise (Kim, Sin, 2008, pg. 4). “The knowledge of language, cultural values and information needs of their minority communities, which librarians of color possess, is invaluable for providing reference services and literacy services, for developing and managing collections, and for reaching out to diverse users” (Kim, Sin, 2008, pg 4). Not only is it beneficial to students when libraries employ a diverse staff, but studies have shown that it also goes a long way towards “improving the quality of learning”, “fosters intellectual development, reduces students’ level of racial prejudice”, and “can facilitate students’ explorations of diverse perspectives” (Kim, Sin, 2008, pg 4).

The combination of a strong effort to recruit a larger pool of minority MLS/MLIS students and the offering of ongoing career development training that focuses on the interpersonal issues that inhibit the retention of minority librarians will go a long way to improving the number of librarians from underrepresented groups staying committed to working within academic and public libraries. In an effort to address the potential interpersonal issues that minority librarians may have to deal with once on the job, the Association for Research Libraries (ARL) created the Leadership and Career Development Program (LDCP). According to the ARL website, the LDCP is a yearlong in length and aims to help mid-career librarians from underrepresented groups advance into leadership roles within their current organizations, or the field at large. The goal of the program is to work towards “building a broader community of career coaches and mentors, supervisors, directors, and other champions of the program with greater cultural proficiency and deeper understanding of the systemic barriers to creating authentically inclusive environments.”





In reviewing the study results regarding suggested recruitment and retention strategies for librarians of color, Kim and Sin (2008) noted, “Being in the minority, students of color can easily feel isolated, and often suffer ‘cultural loneliness’. The LIS schools/programs might consider training all the members of the program to better understand and appreciate other cultures” (pg 20). Having faculty members and advisors that understand what it’s like to be in a profession as a member from an underrepresented group could go far in keeping students within the program and fostering a sense of belonging for them.

Other suggestions offered by Kim and Sin include creating “support groups and systems for students of color” and getting “ethnic associations/communities involved in teaching and other student activities” (pg. 20). Partnering student groups and associations with the university’s MLS/MLIS program can go far towards “increasing exposure to diversity issues, a closer relation with diverse communities, and also increasing opportunities of mentoring” (pg 20). Actions such as these will demonstrate to the MLS/MLIS students just how committed their institution is to not only encouraging more students from underrepresented groups to study library science, but also the value that university administration places on diversity within the program and its curriculum.

Radical LIS



# Conclusion



Currently, only one HBCU has an ALA accredited program, North Carolina Central University. Overall, there are only 38 universities with ALA accredited programs in the United States, Puerto Rico included. While increasing the percentage of academic and public librarians from underrepresented groups is a major goal, the lack of accredited LIS programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) has a direct impact on this. With an already limited pool of interested degree candidates, it is imperative that we reach as many students as possible in order to change the demographics of the field.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median salary for a librarian in 2018 was \$59,050 per year. Librarians are required to have a master's degree from an ALA accredited program. The average price for a MLS or MLIS program is around \$7,056 for in state tuition and \$37,500 for out of state tuition. These programs are typically two-year master's degree programs, but there are a few one-year programs and many universities offer online degree programs as well. The flexibility of online programs opens up the field to more students, however, the potential high costs and relatively lower salary projections - in comparison to other professions that require graduate school degrees, such as lawyers or doctors - can lead many students to refrain from entering the field. When pursuing an advanced degree, it is easy to see why students may choose a profession that has a higher earning potential to justify the costs of a graduate degree. Specifically, those students belonging to underrepresented groups who make up higher percentages in other, those previously mentioned higher paying professions.

So, what does any of this mean? It means that despite knowing that the demographics of librarianship in the United States don't reflect the changing US society, we are still nowhere near close to finding a way to amend the situation. The ALA's diversity programs are underfunded and limited in the scope of correction they can achieve, so current librarianship numbers may not get any better in the near future.

It seems that the best place for making a marked difference would need to occur on an institution level for ALA accredited universities and colleges. Increasing the number of ALA accredited programs at universities in the United States, specifically at HBCUs, would go a long way towards closing the representation gap. In addition to diversity programs and scholarships, the ALA should consider reaching out to universities to lobby for more programs. Students can only enroll in majors that are present at their universities. In addition to creating more programs, the recruitment of faculty and staff who work in the administration of those programs needs to be inclusive and representative of the student body at that institution. By working to make the academic program more open and accessible to students of underrepresented groups, the field will naturally diversify.

When students can major in library science at their in-state school, they won't have to worry about a higher out-of-state tuition cost. This will make the librarian average salary seem more comparable. In addition to salary, an emphasis on the fact that librarianship contains a multitude of specializations can also lead to more students becoming interested in studying library and information science. While the majority of librarians work in the public or academic settings, many state, federal, and private businesses employ librarians as well. The problem will not be solved overnight and addressing one problem at a time will not solve it. Only a comprehensive solution that embraces the many issues plaguing the field will work and ensure long-term success.



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