

# Case Study: Where Is the Diversity?

## Focus Groups on How Students View the Face of Librarianship

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**T**he need for diversity in librarianship has been reported variously within the profession. The potential effects of efforts to diversify have not met most objectives. For example, in a 2003 survey conducted by the American Library Association (ALA), out of 842 graduates placed in a permanent library position, only seventy-five (9 percent) were African Americans or Hispanics.<sup>1</sup> This means that libraries nationwide are competing for the same seventy-five students. Several researchers in the area of minority recruitment feel that there should be the same proportion of librarians of color within the profession as is found in the general population, and this has been a concern within the profession for some time.<sup>2</sup> In a 1992 study done by Brown, the percentages of minorities in schools of library and information science (LIS) had a sizeable decline from 1978 to 1988, and the figures continue to decline.<sup>3</sup> She suggests that library schools target geographic areas with larger concentrations of minorities in order to increase the student pool.

The closing of the School of Library and Information Studies at Clark Atlanta University, a historically black university, has increased the difficulty of recruiting minorities into the profession.<sup>4</sup> When students or library users do not see themselves represented in library staff, they may find it difficult to approach librarians for assistance. Another complaint heard from both current library school students and minority librarians in the field is that the programs also are lacking in representation of minorities among their faculty. Not only do librarians have to consider recruitment into the field, they must likewise look at how to increase the number of minority faculty within library school programs.

Further, recruiting librarians is one of the crucial issues facing the profession now, due to the rapid graying of the workforce. Many current librarians will be retiring within the next ten years. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has recently rated recruitment as one of the top seven concerns facing the profession.<sup>5</sup> A study conducted in 2005 found awareness of opportunities in the field to be one of the biggest problems in library recruitment.<sup>6</sup> In a study conducted in the East Cleveland area of Ohio, results indicated that teenagers had little knowledge of the variety of library career opportunities in librarianship and could only identify two types of libraries—school and public.<sup>7</sup> Combine that lack of knowledge with the underrepresentation of ethnic minority professionals employed in colleges and universities, and they have a double dilemma facing the profession.

Two initiatives, the ALA Spectrum Scholarships and the Knowledge River Initiative, are attempts to attract minority students into the library profession.<sup>8</sup> Spectrum began in 1997 with an initial funding of \$1.5 million to support scholarships and programs from the four “protected minority” categories recognized by the U.S. Equal Opportunity Act: African Americans, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, and Native Americans. Spectrum provides a \$5,000 scholarship to selected individuals; between 1998 and 2003, 226 scholarships were awarded. The Knowledge River Initiative attempts to increase minority representation in the library profession by recruiting Latino and Native American students into the library program at the University of Arizona. This initiative is funded by a 2001 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. In January 2003, there were thirty-nine Latino and Native American students enrolled in that graduate program.

In recognizing these national priorities, the Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) campus has set a goal to double diversity numbers in its faculty, staff, and students. In particular, a major reason for wanting to diversify its library staff is the growing number of minorities at the IUPUI campus. In 1995, the number of minority students was 3,184 out of a total student population of 26,868 (or 12 percent). By fall semester 2004, the number of minority students had risen to 4,404 (or 15 percent) out of a total student population of 29,953.<sup>9</sup>

According to the 2004–05 IUPUI Affirmative Action Plan, out of fifty-two librarians on campus, only five are minorities, which is equivalent to .09 percent. This is far beneath recommendations of researchers in the professional demographic of librarianship.

However, increasing the number of librarians of color will be extremely difficult with the lower number of minorities coming into the library profession. It is clear that recruitment is the key to long-term success. The intent of this exploration was to learn from current minority students at the undergraduate level what they know about opportunities in the profession of librarianship and what factors would motivate them to consider library science as a career. Data were gathered via three focus groups with minority undergraduate students, and interviews were conducted with minority staff and library faculty members.

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The results of this exploration can suggest avenues into further research and guide marketing and recruitment into the library profession.

## Focus Groups

After reviewing the literature on various methodologies of research, focus groups were selected for research into student attitudes toward careers in librarianship among the student population at the IUPUI campus. It has been established that “focus groups are commonly conducted among a small, non-representative sample of participants who share one or more characteristics of interest to the researchers.”<sup>10</sup> In academic settings, the focus group method has been useful in identifying the needs, attitudes, and perceptions regarding educational programs and services.<sup>11</sup> In one particular case study, focus groups proved to be a useful qualitative method by allowing collective discussion, especially with minority groups.<sup>12</sup> In a survey conducted by the Digital Library Federation, more than half of the respondents reported preferring focus groups to targeted surveys for gathering data for usability analysis, because the use of focus groups allowed for more in-depth discussion and clarification.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of the Digital Library Federation survey was to examine the kinds of assessments Federation members were using, what they did with the results, and what worked well or not so well. Since this study aims to gather details on attitudes that might attract minorities to the library profession, that capability was deemed valuable.

An application to do focus group research was submitted to and approved by the Research Compliance Administration at IUPUI with the understanding that each student participating in the focus groups would sign an informed consent statement. At the same time, the researchers also submitted an internal grant request with the Office of Professional Development at IUPUI that was approved and funded for the period of January through December 2005 for incidental costs, such as to provide lunches at the focus group sessions, office supplies, and for a graduate student who transcribed the focus group session tapes.

During each focus group session, a series of questions was asked. The questions for the staff and librarians were slightly different than the ones for the undergraduate students and will be discussed in full detail as the results of the study are summarized. Upon advice from the director of Research Services at the School of Social Work, who argued that it would be beneficial to have the discussion leader be representative of the students being interviewed, an Hispanic librarian agreed to serve as the discussion leader. This individual had great experience in a facilitator role in his previous library experience at another institu-

tion. Since IUPUI campus diversity initiatives have focused on the Hispanic and African American population, representatives of these groups were solicited for participation in the focus groups.

One of the most difficult exercises was the recruitment of participants for the focus groups. (Indeed, another reason for choosing the focus group method in preference to surveys was the identifying factor of student ethnicity.) The researchers partnered with the Campus and Community Life Office, which was instrumental in connecting with student group organizations. Letters of invitation to participate (including lunch) were sent to members of the Latino Student Association as well as the Black Student Union. Working through the student organizations kept participation on a totally voluntary basis. Individuals were encouraged to contact the principal investigator of the study and designate which focus group they would like to attend. Ten students contacted the investigator; three dates were initially set up for the focus group sessions.

Attendance at the sessions was a problem. For example, only three individuals attended the first focus group session and none appeared for the second or third sessions. However, at the time of the third, six students who were using the library agreed to participate and the session went forward. After that, because of the lower-than-expected attendance and in order to acquire more data, it was decided to conduct another focus group session, at which time six more students participated in the study. The researchers also conducted a non-student focus group session with all of the black and Hispanic members of the library staff and a session with several of the minority graduate students enrolled in the IU Graduate School of Library and Information Science (SLIS). Finally, the researchers conducted telephone interviews with minority librarians within the IU library system. In the end, though sampling and recruiting participants proved difficult, the consistency and frequency of certain themes in their responses argued in favor of the representativeness of their views and experiences.

Following the completion of the focus group sessions, all the responses were entered into a database and coded for content analysis assessment. The focus group sessions were recorded and transcriptions were prepared by a graduate student from the social work department. An outside analyst prepared an index of the texts of the transcript that is included in the appendix. The researchers then read the texts grouped by the topical codes and drew conclusions about the presence and prevalence of certain themes (see appendix). The coded excerpts were checked against the original full transcripts to ensure that comments were not taken out of context and maintained a fidelity to the original circumstances. The following is a general summation of these results, as well as recommendations for next steps in this recruitment process.

## Findings

### Focus Group Sessions with Undergraduate Students

In the introduction, students were asked to give their names, grade levels, majors, and intended career goals. Many of these students were beginning their academic studies, and most of the careers chosen were general in nature (for example, accounting, medicine, law, business). None indicated library science as their intended careers. Participants were then asked to relate their experiences with libraries prior to attending any college or university. Most shared positive experiences with public libraries as young children. Few indicated that they used the library in high school; one worked as an assistant in the library while in high school. At the same time, a small number of students stated that they did not use the library at all prior to college.

When asked to express what they thought of when they heard the word, “librarian,” the following adjectives were given: shy, organized, helpful, quiet, reserved, versatile, knowledgeable, eager to help, a public servant, and a variety of functional descriptions: someone who “reads a lot,” a person who helps you find the things, an “older person” with glasses who helps you find books, someone who checks books in and out. Several students observed that most librarians were women. Taking this discussion further, students were questioned to determine what they knew about the field of library science or library careers. The query seemed difficult for them to answer and responses were tentative, as many of them were unsure about educational requirements or what avenues the career might take. Students were then asked whether this career possibility was ever mentioned as an alternative by school or career counselors. Almost all declared that a library career was never mentioned. One student noted that librarians were not listed in a career directory he had consulted. Another student noted, however, that she had in fact received a booklet about the library science program from the graduate office via the Latino Student Organization.

The students were questioned about the career paths that they were currently pursuing and how long they had been interested in those particular careers. Several students mentioned that their career paths had been influenced by their early experiences and that they were in college in pursuit of their childhood “dreams.” For many others, the career decision had been made in the past three to four years; some were still being formed. For the most part, students stressed their desires to make important contributions to society and to feel that their chosen careers would allow them that opportunity. Most of the respondents commented that their families were a great influence and support system, encouraging them to continue their educational pursuits.

When asked what they thought could be done to make the field of library science more appealing to their peers or

high school students, one of the most common responses was “make individuals more aware of the profession.” The students also suggested many ways by which to do this, such as greater marketing, more visibility at career fairs, and classroom assignments that required use of the library. Many felt that if more people were aware of the various opportunities in the field, they might be drawn to the profession. Some expressed surprise when learning about the many opportunities that the field of library science has to offer. A final question revolved around the incentives that could be offered to make them consider this profession as a potential career. Money was a paramount factor here. The students wanted to be assured that they could make as good a salary in this vocation as in technology or other emerging fields. Scholarships were mentioned several times as a possible incentive.

### Focus Group Session with Minority University Library Staff

In the focus group session with minority staff within the university library, the questions were slightly revised to recognize their status as library workers and therefore persons more familiar with the field. The first question asked was: “What influenced your choice to work in the library?” The responses indicated the fact that these were library positions per se—as opposed to office, institutional, or public services positions—was of no influence. Happenstance or serendipity seemed a determining factor. Among the responses were: the position offered benefits and was full time; the location was close; it just happened by accident; and it was suggested by someone else.

Next, the group was questioned about whether they had ever thought of the library field as a possible career choice, a move that the majority of participants had not considered. One individual did request an information packet from SLIS and was seriously considering library school as a next step. Another indicated a lack of interest in the tenure track process, a requirement for the librarians at this institution. A third had worked in a bookstore and felt the two professions were similar, and was not interested in either as a permanent career. Several expressed concern that the profession was dying out because of technology. Still, when asked to describe their prior experiences with libraries, all but one participant had positive comments about their previous library experiences (and that individual could not remember *any* library experiences). Again, the mention of going to the library with family was represented as a common and favorable experience.

Other questions covered topics related to career paths. Responses to a question about career counselors or advisors and their experience with them were varied. Some had very good experiences with their counselors, while one person could not even remember meeting with a counselor. One indicated that a test for career aptitude

had suggested library science as a potential career. When questioned about other incentives in considering this as a potential career, provisions for mentoring and support came to the top of the list. Many of the respondents felt that if they were encouraged to learn more about the profession, they might consider it as a possibility. When asked about potential obstacles that would keep them from considering library science as a career, the majority responded that funding and time were the biggest factors. Several of them were still paying off former student loans and were not ready to take on another financial burden.

### Focus Group Session with Minority SLIS Students

Four minority IU SLIS students were interviewed for this part of the study. (Ten individuals were contacted but only four were able to participate in the study.) One student had been considering librarianship as a career for at least eight years. The other three indicated they had been considering it for at least two years. When asked what had influenced them in their career choices, most responded that other librarians had recommended it. One person indicated a desire to give back to the community. All indicated that they had never had this career suggested by a counselor or advisor.

The main obstacle mentioned was the cost. Another added that childcare and the driving distance were difficulties. Regarding financial assistance, most of the students were currently using student loans, and several individuals had also received some small scholarships. One student was receiving job reimbursement for tuition and books.

One of the final questions asked of this group in particular was “Do you have any ideas regarding incentives or promotional activities that could be offered to influence minorities to consider library science as a career?” Three topics were mentioned several times: better marketing to minorities, informing students about the career at an earlier age, and highlighting the different aspects and opportunities of the field. Some felt that recruiting males into the field would be difficult, because it might be viewed by them as “nerdy.” One individual suggested taking younger children to different potential career settings. Mentorship was suggested by another student. All of the students responded that one of the most positive aspects of their experience as library students had been the interaction with other students and also learning the various aspects of a library career. In some regards, they indicated that they felt the profession can sell itself.

### Telephone Interviews with Minority Library Faculty

The final group, interviewed by telephone, was made up of Hispanic and African American library faculty members already in the IU system. The first question asked when they made the decision to become a librarian. The

responses ranged from “during high school” to “it just happened.” None of the respondents remembered any high school or career counselor suggesting librarianship as a career path. One librarian had taken a vocational aptitude battery that identified library science as a potential career but did not discuss it with any counselor as a possibility. All but two worked previously in a library and felt it had been a positive and enriching experience. One who had not worked in a library did have experience as a teaching/graduate assistant, and the other had spent a lot of time in libraries and archival settings.

Obstacles to their career paths varied. One indicated that her family was concerned that there are few African American librarians, and that it has been perceived as an unfriendly profession for black women. Several mentioned being the only minority person in the program at the time they were taking classes and felt that this was a disadvantage in the grading system. Most of the librarians had received some form of financial assistance in order to obtain their library degree, either in the form of student loans, small scholarships, or a fully paid postdoctoral training fellowship. Without the financial assistance, some may not have decided to enter library science as a career.

When asked about the best aspects of their experience as a librarian, many responded by saying, “working with the students and making a difference in their lives.” Among the suggested incentives or promotional activities that could be offered to encourage more minorities to pursue a career in librarianship were: being informed of the various opportunities in librarianship; mentoring; and scholarships or other avenues of funding. As one participant aptly put it, “Funding from the top is necessary: they have to put their money where their mouth is.”

## Discussion

The feedback from the various focus groups reveals several issues that appear consistently. First, the field of librarianship appears not to be commonly advocated by career counselors or advisors at either the high school or college level. More generally, creating broader awareness of opportunities in librarianship is a priority, for librarians are not doing a very good job of marketing their profession. There is evidence that such efforts can be effective. For example, in 2002, Cornell University Library implemented a program aimed at introducing high school students of color to academic libraries and librarianship.<sup>14</sup> This program generated significant qualitative data regarding diversity and recruitment in the academic research library.

Mentoring was mentioned by several of the student groups as something that might aid in the recruitment of minorities to the profession, reinforcing the point made by Holt in *Library Journal*: “Mentorship through the graduate program and into the first job is rare.”<sup>15</sup> Although graduate library programs are not expected or required to

assist students beyond graduation, many of the new graduates wished that the programs would have helped them with placement and career building. One good example of this kind of cooperation is a program between Southern University, a historically black institution without a library program, and Louisiana State University (LSU), which has a library program.<sup>16</sup> Southern recruits students who receive their master's degrees at LSU. The students receive professional support from the library at Southern, as well as financial incentives from the library school in order to facilitate successful completion of the program. Work schedules are adjusted to accommodate class schedules, tuition is often waived, and some students receive fellowships. Since 1990, more than 100 African American students have earned their MLIS degree from LSU's library school. Still, even with these two recruitment initiatives, minority graduation rates have remained at about 10 percent of total library school graduates.

The results of this study were shared with the dean of the IUPUI university library and the associate dean of the Graduate SLIS, Indianapolis Campus. These two individuals are currently collaborating to develop a joint position for a minority faculty member that will hopefully come to fruition within the next year. They are also working on a plan to identify one or two graduate assistant positions that will be designated for minority applicants only. These will include tuition reimbursement and employment for the students. Another result of the study was the appointment of a diversity committee within university library to review other possibilities for minority recruitment and diversification of the library staff.

In consideration of the key issues raised by focus group participants, the author makes the following recommendations to increase minority recruitment into the library profession:

- Make a personal commitment to minority recruitment and diversity and encourage your colleagues to do the same.
- Begin marketing much earlier, at the junior and senior levels in high school, using high school advisors, career days, and high school librarians.
- Revamp the marketing strategies to enhance the look of the profession, stressing technology and other exciting elements, as well as the values of the traditional roles.
- Advocate for higher salaries through ALA.
- Use the "grow your own" philosophy. Develop one-on-one relationships with non-degree minority library staffers and encourage them to consider librarianship as a career. Provide as much flexibility as possible to accommodate minority subordinates pursuing the MLS.
- Develop and implement a mentoring program that provides professional and emotional support and assistance to minority library school students.

The need for a more diverse face of librarianship has been well documented and will only become more urgent as time passes. It is vital that librarians be proactive in cultivating a professional identity as diverse as the users that they serve.

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## Public Librarians—What's Next? Certification!

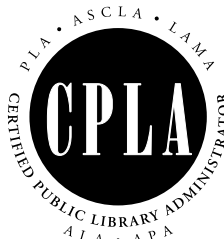
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## Appendix. Diversity Coding System

To index and code the text of the transcription, the analyst read through the entire material, identifying and devising codes for themes and topics to reflect the issues posed explicitly by the researchers and those that became apparent in the transcripts themselves. Most categories had been anticipated by the researchers and were reflected in the focus group questions and answers; one additional category that appeared important when examining the text was the role of high school or college counselors.

The following coding scheme was developed:

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UL-xxx	<b>Use</b> of library (prior to college: any public or school use)
UL-R	Recreational
UL-S	School (for such things as assignments)
UL-G	Generic (unable to determine whether for school or personal use)
UL-H	As a place (to be, to hang out)
UL-X	Not used or "only when forced"
xxL	<b>Impressions</b> of librarians/librarianship
NL	Negative impressions
PL	Positive impressions
L	Any impression/idea of librarianship
C-Wn	When they chose or changed their career goals
D	Career <b>decisions</b> (actual decisions)
I	<b>Influencers</b> of career decisions
I-A	Influencers of <b>actual</b> decisions
I-P	Influencers of <b>potential</b> decisions (for example, "What would make you interested?")
LI	Influence for a library career
LI-P, A	
I-x-P	Person is the influence
I-x-K	Knowledge (that they knew about the career) is the influence
I-x-M	Monetary influences (includes career prospects or security, salary)
I-x-C	Contribution influences (ability to make a contribution, influence people's lives, make a difference)
I-x-O	Other—something else is the influence Includes intrinsic interest, or to be able to work with people
CHS-N/P	<b>Counselor</b> in high school—negative or positive comments
CC-N/P	Counselor in college—negative or positive comments

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This coding scheme was circulated to the researchers for review. The analyst applied the codes to statements by the focus group participants. Sentences or statements relevant to particular subject areas were tagged with the appropriate codes; the tagging was relatively loose, in that an extract could have more than one code, and codes were applied when there was any relevance of the extract to the topic.

An assistant then reorganized the text according to the codes, so as to provide for the researchers all text relevant to each subject area. Because the text was manageable in size, Microsoft Word was used to manipulate and rearrange the text, rather than a qualitative/textual analysis software program. Each coded sentence included identifiers likening it back to the original context (focus group, particular participant, and prompting question).

The use of the outside analyst provided a double check for the indexing step, as researchers reviewing the raw and coded transcripts were able to scan for additional themes.