Examining Effects of LIS Diversity Initiatives for Academic and Public Libraries

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LIS 7996 – Research for the Information Profession

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Fall 2015

Submitted Dec. 14 2015

**Abstract**

Having a diverse workforce has been shown to have a positive effect on an organization. The American Library Association has stressed that diversity is a key value of their organization and is of great importance for libraries. There have been many recent initiatives to increase the diversity of the LIS profession, though little research has been done to examine if these efforts have resulted in successful changes at academic and public libraries. This study will explore whether recent efforts to increase diversity have resulted in changes at academic libraries and public libraries. The methods for collecting data will be focus groups of current LIS professionals at academic and public libraries across the country. Participants of focus groups will be asked questions about their work environment in terms of diversity, initiatives that have been employed, any changes resulting from these initiatives and suggestions for creating a more diverse environment. It is hoped that these results will provide insight into the effects of diversity initiatives and provide suggestions for increasing diversity in the workforce for LIS professionals of academic and public libraries.

**Introduction**

In this study, initiatives aimed at increasing the diversity of LIS professionals at academic and public libraries will be examined to explore what changes, if any, are occurring with regard to increasing diversity. While diversity in the workplace has been looked at extensively, including with respect to the LIS profession, very little research has been done to examine the results of initiatives aimed at creating a more diverse environment at academic and public libraries. Diversity in the workforce has been found to be important, not only in organizations, but particularly for the LIS profession. The American Library Association’s (ALA) has declared diversity to be a “fundamental value of the organization” and offers many resources related to diversity in the workplace (American Library Association (2015a, para. 1). It is the purpose of this study to examine if efforts to increase diversity in academic and public libraries are working to create a more diverse environment.

**Research Questions**

This study is designed to look at academic and public libraries to determine if there have been changes given the many efforts across the country to increase diversity in the profession. This topic will be explored by asking the following three research questions:

1. Have the increased efforts to promote diversity in the LIS profession resulted in any changes at academic and public libraries?
2. If there have been changes that have resulted from these diversity initiatives, have these changes been positive or negative?
3. Are there any efforts that could be made in terms of diversity initiatives to result in more positive changes?

Love (2001) defines diversity as “those attributes that make people different, having properties and characteristics of language, geography, gender, race, age, physical ability, sexual orientation, religion, skills and economics” (p. 75). For the purposes of this study, we will be looking at diversity as it relates solely to race or ethnicity, as most efforts to increase diversity have targeted racial and ethnic populations that have been historically underrepresented in the LIS profession. Diversity initiatives will include efforts that are made to increase the diversity regarding the characteristics that are described above.

**Literature Review**

*Diversity in the LIS profession*

Myriad benefits have been reported in the literature regarding the value of diversity for organizations. Galinsky et al (2015) noted that diversity “increases creativity and innovation, promotes higher quality decisions, and enhances economic growth…” and labeled it “a key ingredient to flourishing societies” (p. 742). It is especially important for libraries to be diverse in terms of its workforce because of the users that they are serving. Lee et al (2015) argued that a lack of diversity in librarians as left many unable to “support the 21st century information needs of our increasingly culturally diverse user populations” (p. S47). If libraries aren’t made up of a diverse group of individuals, then it is believed that it will be more difficult to identify the diverse needs of its user community. Regarding public libraries specifically, Mehra and Davis (2015) discussed how leaders of public libraries have “recognized a need to serve all diverse people in American society, and not just cater to the whims of the white majority that formed it’s traditional constituency” (p. 16).

Recent statistics have shown that librarians are neither reflective, nor representative of their user communities as a whole. Switzer (2008) suggests that “it is essential that our library personnel reflect the growing diversity of the greater community” (p. 296). As of 2009, 89% of all librarians in the United States were white, and as of 2013, over 87% of the ALA’s members were white (Hudson-Ward, 2014). Currently, the statistics show a user population that is growing more diverse in terms of ethnicity and a workforce of librarians that has not changed much with respect to that aspect of diversity.

*Diversity Initiatives*

The ALA has been working to increase the diversity of those entering LIS programs as this is a required credential for most librarian positions. One of the ways that the ALA has done this is through the Spectrum Initiative which began in 1997, which is a commitment to providing scholarships to members of racial/ethnic backgrounds that are underrepresented in libraries. Neely (1999) explained that “diversity efforts aimed at providing financial aid for educational programs to individuals from underrepresented groups are critical to ethnically diverse representation in library education and later in the profession as a whole” (p. 124). Despite that the program has been in effect for many years, as of 2008, African American, Asian American, Hispanic American and Native Americans combined constituted only 11.3 percent of LIS students (Kim & Sin, 2008).

Another diversity initiative was aimed toward increasing the amount of library leaders that were members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups was the ARL Leadership and Career Development Program. This initiative was assessed in 2009, and the results of the assessment were that although the initiative was a step in the right direction. According to Neely (2009), man individuals reported that they were in higher positions in their LIS organizations after completing the program. While this assessment of a diversity initiative is useful for LIS professionals, the results are limited in terms of what can be said for more general LIS diversity initiatives. It is hoped that this research will explore a broader range of LIS diversity related initiatives to provide further information on the current environment for LIS professionals at academic and public libraries.

**Methods**

*Sample*

The sample for this research will consist of current librarians that are working at academic and public libraries across the country. The population of all librarians that are working at academic or public libraries was roughly 73,414 when last calculated in 2012 (American Library Association, 2015b). The sample size will be approximately 50 librarians from public libraries and 50 librarians from academic librarians. Invitations to participate will be sent out via listservs for members of the ALA’s Public Library Association (PLA) and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). The ideal sample will be divided among 10 academic libraries and 10 public libraries that are willing to participate with approximately 4-6 members per each focus group. Participants must be able to commit to a one hour focus group session with their colleagues, and have the necessary technological equipment of a high-quality microphone and web camera to be able to participate, as the focus groups will be observed and moderated virtually The individuals that are taking place in the focus groups will all sign consent forms that permit the researcher to video tape the focus group sessions, after explaining the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and informing individuals that they have the right to opt out of the focus group session at any time. Consent forms will be approved by the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board.

*Data Collection*

As mentioned in the discussion about the sample size, focus groups will be the primary means of collecting data for this study. Groups of 4-6 individuals will be asked a series of questions regarding their experiences in the library, specifically regarding diversity initiatives, changing that they’ve witnessed, and suggestions for future diversity efforts. Sessions will be recorded upon receiving consent from the participants, and the data will be later analyzed. One advantage as discussed by Charbonneau (2015) is that focus groups can result in a faster overall process, as there’s a great deal of information shared in a fairly short amount of time, at least compared to interviewing multiple people individually. Connaway (2010) noted that another advantage of using focus groups is that “people tend to be less inhibited than in individual interviews” (p. 176).

For each focus group, a series of questions will be asked of the groups regarding their perceptions of their work environment, diversity initiatives and suggestions. The following questions are an example of questions that will be used to generate conversation in the focus groups:

1. Have diversity initiatives resulted in changes in your library’s environment?
2. If so, would you say that these changes have been positive?
3. What types of initiatives have had more success than others?
4. What other ideas would you suggest that could result in meaningful change for libraries?

In addition to the focus groups, a follow-up survey will be sent to all participants, which will serve to capture demographic information and any additional comments or ideas that people thought of after the session or were unable to verbalize during the session. Wildemuth (2009) suggested that focus groups that are combined with other methods of data collection are much stronger than when used on their own. For this reason, the surveys will be used to help strengthen the primary method of data collection which is the focus group itself.

*Analysis of Data*

The data that will be gathered will be qualitative in nature. During the focus groups, an individual that is observing the focus group with the moderator, will be taking field notes throughout the session. This ensures that if there is a technological issue, and the recording is lost, then the data is not completely lost as well. After conducting the focus group sessions, the researcher(s) will watch the recordings of the group session, taking notes on what the participants are saying, their tone, body language, and any other characteristics of the conversation. Content analysis will then be used to identify main themes, categories, and ideas that resulted from the focus group session. In addition to content analysis being used on the data from the focus group sessions, content analysis will also be used on the open-ended questions from the follow up survey.

It would be ideal for multiple persons to participate in coding the data into categories and themes. Connaway (2010) stresses that if multiple participants are coding the data, that intercoder reliability is used to make sure that the researchers are describing the data in the same way. “Intercoder reliability is important in content analysis because it measures the consistency of understandings or meaning held by two or more coders” (Connaway, 2010, p. 176). This helps to ensure that people’s comments, actions, tone and body language are interpreted and labeled the same way in terms of overall findings.

The emerging ideas and thoughts from the focus groups will be presented in tables that list common themes and responses for each of the question areas of the session. Evaluations on the current climate, perceived changes as a result of initiatives, and future suggestions will be grouped together based on commonalities and displayed as a bulleted list for each of the question areas.

**Limitations**

The sample represents a very small percentage of viewpoints of LIS professionals. Because the focus groups will be conducted virtually, this will require participating organizations to have an area where the session can take place and the required technology of a high-quality camera and microphone. These requirements could be cost prohibitive for libraries with smaller budgets, and may not be included in the study. Focus groups also have limitations in that some people don’t share responses in a group setting. Even with a skilled moderator, it is possible for some personalities to end up dominating the conversation.

**Future Research**

There are several areas in which this research could be furthered to benefit the LIS profession. Firstly, one could examine research on specific recent initiatives such as the IDOL project to examine the perceptions of change in the LIS landscape of those enrolled in the program. Secondly, one could research specific characteristics of diversity that are less commonly researched like those with physical disabilities or those that identify with the LGBT community. Lastly, one could look at libraries in terms of the paraprofessionals and librarians, and examine whether there are differences in the diversity of these different levels within the organization, and if there are differences in the perceptions of the environment for members of these two groups.

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