

Learning About Diversity: The Roles of LIS Education, LIS Associations, and Lived Experience

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Introduction

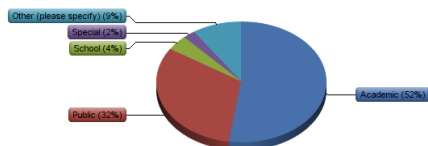
Diversity is a broad and often difficult to grasp concept. Ask several people to define diversity and you may be surprised at the number of different answers you get. We set out to learn how librarians and members of the LIS community conceptualize and learn about diversity, and what role LIS education, LIS professional associations, and life experience play in shaping our concept of diversity. What we found may help spur further exploration that would culminate in a more robust undertaking by LIS institutions and organizations to adequately address this very important subject.

Research Methods

- Literature Review:** Conducted an extensive review of literature on diversity issues and education in librarianship and other fields.
- Discussions with professionals in other fields:** We reached out to professionals in other fields, including law and psychology, to better understand how they approach diversity issues and the frameworks they have in place for educating members of the profession about diversity.
- Survey:** A short survey consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions was distributed to several LIS groups including the five ethnic caucuses of the ALA, NMRT, RUSA, LRRT, MLA, and several LIS student organizations. Questions asked about sources of diversity education, how respondents define diversity, and their experiences in their LIS programs.
- Interviews:** Six in-depth open-ended interviews were conducted with survey participants. These interviews helped us to gain a more thorough understanding of the diversity knowledge of those participants.

Who Responded?

- 397 responses were generated from librarians, library staff, and library science students.
- Participants came from regions throughout the United States and other countries, including Canada, China, and Germany.
- A variety of library types were represented:



* "Other" included tribal libraries, museums, LIS vendors, LIS students, and the unemployed.

How is Diversity Defined and Conceptualized in LIS?

LIS professionals define and think about diversity broadly. Participants were asked to provide a definition of diversity in their own words and these were some of the most frequently mentioned terms and concepts in those definitions.

Most Frequently Mentioned Concepts of Diversity with Code Counts

- Mixture/Variety (33)
- Inclusion/Togetherness (31)
- Difference (30)
- Respect (11)
- Acceptance (8)

Most Frequently Mentioned Descriptions of Diversity with Code Counts

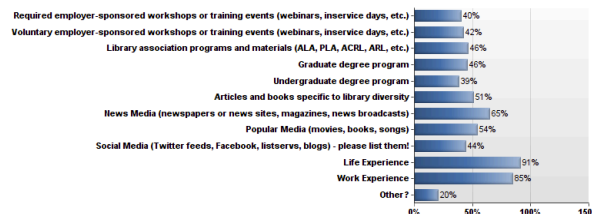
- Race/Ethnicity/Culture (105)
- Sexuality (55)
- Gender/Gender Identity (53)
- Class/Socioeconomic (52)
- Religion/Belief/Faith (47)
- Age (29)
- Mental or Physical Ability (23)
- Politics/Values (18)

Do They See Themselves as Culturally Competent?

- Most participants classified themselves as culturally competent (87%) or as working towards cultural competence.
- Only 1% of participants did not classify themselves as culturally competent.
- Others (12%) indicated confusion about what it meant to be culturally competent and the wording of the question asked.

Where are LIS Professionals Learning About Diversity?

- Primarily through their own life experiences.
"I grew up living in different countries/cultures – that's a great education."
- Work experience appears to play a strong role, but not employer sponsored training events.
"Learning from the students who use library resources and/or spaces"
- LIS associations and graduate programs are not primary methods of learning about diversity.
"ALA Spectrum Institute and Joint Conference of Librarians of Color."
"Mid-America Library Alliance Live Workshops and Webcasts."



Learning About Diversity in LIS Education

A number of participants reported taking a course that focused on or included diversity components, while the majority did not:



And they had some interesting things to say . . .

- "It's embarrassing how little we discuss diversity in our curriculum at the iSchool."
- "There were none offered! I would have taken them if they were offered."
- "Reference and outreach classes touched on it briefly."
- "It was the most engaging, thought-provoking course in my LIS program."
- "If it was there, then it was implicit. Then again, LIS programs are very white places."
- "Would love to!"

Conclusions

It became apparent that there was a sizable demand for diversity courses both by employers and potential employees. It is equally apparent that over the years, there has been a positive trend in diversity education with recent LIS graduates who are more likely than their forbearers to have had access to diversity courses during their training. A lot of this positive development is attributable to LIS associations that have contributed in different ways to mainstream issues of diversity in the profession. For example, ALA is supporting diversity at a practical, as well as policy, level through the creation of the Spectrum Scholarship for underrepresented groups pursuing LIS master's degrees. Other related associations that have made marked contributions in this area include The Association of Research Libraries and some smaller divisions and associations within ALA.

But despite all these efforts, more still needs to be done to adequately ground librarians with sound cultural competency through which they are able to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population that they now serve. The students surveyed in this study indicated that they appreciate coursework dealing with diversity issues when it is available, and that they would like to see more of it. The main challenge now goes to LIS education, which must take its rightful place in ensuring that well-rounded and better adjusted graduates capable of working with, and serving, diverse populations are produced through their systems.