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

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ABSTRACT

How do librarians learn about diversity? What role do library and information science (LIS) education and LIS associations play in developing that knowledge? How do librarians talk about diversity? We surveyed librarians across the United States, Canada, and a few other countries and found that life experience and media play a greater role in diversity knowledge than do LIS education, LIS associations, or LIS workplaces. Although diversity is still discussed largely in terms of race and ethnicity, our respondents also considered factors such as personality, cognitive style, political viewpoint, and socioeconomic status in their discussions of diversity.

When we talk about diversity, are we both talking about the same thing? The dictionary definition of the word *diversity* is merely "the condition of being different" (Merriam-Webster 1997). In the twenty-first-century United States, however, this word is packed with meanings that have arisen out of our history and our need to move forward. As we use the word, we remember our country's past history of discrimination against certain types and classes of people, and we recognize the need to make sure that we are adequately representing the groups that we excluded in the past. This historical context grounds our perceptions of the meaning of diversity. In the contemporary workplace, the word is used to describe staffing patterns and trends among employees or clientele, primarily from the perspective of race, ethnicity, ability, or gender. But *diversity* is a safe word—as many human resources documents tell us, diversity is about more than race or gender; it includes everyone. Thus, the word *diversity* gives us an out, allowing us to personalize the issue and perhaps letting us continue to ignore the needs of those we have marginalized in the past.

In section B.3 of its *Policy Manual*, the American Library Association (2013) provides the profession of library and information science (LIS) with an extensive definition of "who counts" as diverse: "all people, especially those who may experience language or literacy-related barriers; economic distress; cultural or social isolation; physical or attitudinal barriers; racism;

Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy, vol. 85, no. 2, pp. 139–149.
0024-2519/2015/8502-0003$10.00

discrimination on the basis of appearance, ethnicity, immigrant status, religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression; or barriers to equal education, employment, and housing." Nonetheless, practicing librarians do not always consult the *ALA Policy Manual* before applying the word *diversity* and may have entirely different viewpoints. In starting this research project, our question was, How do librarians think and talk about diversity?

In the research literature, it is not uncommon to find articles asking what LIS education is doing about a particular topic, from specific areas of librarianship such as academic librarianship to preparing students for change to diversity itself (Bailey 2010; Mullins 2012; Jaeger, Bertot, and Subramaniam 2013). It is less common to find articles asking what LIS associations or workplaces are doing about particular topics. Practically speaking, though, LIS education occupies only 2–3 years of a professional's life. LIS education is one aspect of their background that most librarians have in common, but, realistically, librarians' prior life experiences, their workplaces, and their involvement in professional associations will occupy much more time than their LIS education. Given this caveat, we wanted to look beyond what LIS education taught them about diversity and include other potential sources of knowledge about diversity, including life experience, the workplace, and LIS associations.

When looking at questions of diversity, we acknowledged that many researchers have been here before us, including Lori Mestre, Patricia Montiel Overall, Renee Franklin Hill, Kafi Kumasi, Paul Jaeger, and Mega Subramaniam. We will present a brief review of our research process and more extensive coverage of our results and the LIS literature.

Our Research Process

The question about what diversity means to us was the starting point for us (Adkins and her two masters students, Virden and Yier) to explore larger questions of diversity in librarianship. We began with some basic research questions:

- How do librarians learn about diversity?
- What roles do LIS education, LIS associations, and life experience play in developing librarians' diversity knowledge?

We addressed these questions in several ways. First, we conducted an extensive review of the LIS literature. We spoke with professionals in other fields (psychology, education, and law) about how they develop diversity awareness in their fields. Our research team also reflected on our own identities and backgrounds and how those influenced our views of diversity.

We designed, pretested, adapted, and conducted a short online survey with open- and closed-ended questions asking LIS practitioners about their sources of diversity knowledge. The survey went to each of the five ethnic caucuses of ALA, so we drew from groups that had a vested interest in diversity issues. We also surveyed general LIS practitioners from groups such

as the Reference and User Services Association, the New Members Round Table, the Library Research Round Table, and several ALA student chapters. After the survey, we conducted interviews with six LIS practitioners around the country for a more in-depth look at their diversity knowledge.

By March 2014, we had 397 completed surveys from librarians and library workers throughout the United States and other countries. The two largest groups of respondents worked in academic libraries (204, or 52%) and public libraries (124, or 32%). School library respondents made up 4% and special library respondents another 2%. The remainder (37, or 9%) indicated that they worked in "other" environments, such as tribal libraries and museums, or were vendors, LIS students, or LIS faculty. Several respondents indicated that they were not employed or not yet employed, and some indicated that they worked in multiple library types.

After collecting survey responses and interviews, we read, reflected, and qualitatively coded our interviews and survey responses. Our initial coding scheme was developed based on what we found in our literature review and represented practitioners' discussions of diversity in the LIS literature. We jointly coded several survey responses to assess our own understanding of our coding scheme and its applicability to the surveys and interviews. As we discussed our common coding experiences, however, we added and refined our coding scheme to better reflect our team's joint understanding of the concept of diversity and also the codes that emerged from the actual words and concepts we found in our respondents' and interviewees' comments.[1] From our final codes, we developed categories that helped us understand some of the theoretical and conceptual issues that might be underlying our profession and its diversity focus. We used our interviews to deepen our understanding of some questions, but most of the results presented here come from our survey.

Survey Responses

How Do Librarians Learn about Diversity?

In our survey, we asked a closed-ended question about how librarians learned about diversity. We presented several broad categories for respondents to select as well as an "other" category with a text box for comments. As shown in table 1, our survey respondents attributed more of their diversity knowledge to life experience and work experience than to LIS education or professional development. News and popular media also played a major role in providing diversity information to our respondents, and many also indicated that they did their own reading (and research) on library-related diversity issues. About 4 in 10 respondents indicated that their employers provided mandatory or voluntary training opportunities on diversity.

We coded the responses in the "other" text box just as we coded our open-ended questions. In interviews, we asked how librarians learned about or encountered diversity in their

1. Our final coding scheme is available at www.deniceadkins.com/diversity/, along with our survey and interview questions.

Table 1. Survey Responses on How Respondents Learned about Diversity

Method	Number of Respondents (Percentage)
Life experience	354 (91)
Work experience	329 (85)
News media (newspapers or news sites, magazines, news broadcasts)	252 (65)
Popular media (movies, books, songs)	211 (54)
Articles and books specific to library diversity	198 (51)
Library association programs and materials (ALA, PLA, ACRL, ARL, etc.)	179 (46)
Graduate degree program	177 (46)
Social media (Twitter, Facebook, listservs, blogs)	171 (44)
Voluntary employer-sponsored workshops or training events (webinars, in-service days, etc.)	165 (42)
Required employer-sponsored workshops or training events (webinars, in-service days, etc.)	156 (40)
Undergraduate degree program	150 (39)
Other	79 (20)

daily experiences. The responses indicated a variety of sources of learning. Respondents talked about living and working in diverse societies and how they developed awareness of difference through that experience or through specific efforts they had engaged in, such as travel, study, or volunteerism. Many respondents spoke of their patron base as being a key motivator to learn more about diversity in order to better serve people in their communities.

Our survey, including its open-ended questions, and our interviews suggested that librarians have a variety of ways that they use to learn about diversity. LIS education and LIS associations are important, but they are not primary sources for acquiring knowledge of diversity.

How Does LIS Education Contribute to Librarians' Diversity Knowledge?

In her book *Librarians Serving Diverse Populations: Challenges and Opportunities,* Lori Mestre (2010) surveyed academic librarians involved in serving multiple cultures. She found that only 21% of her respondents felt that their LIS education had prepared them for working with multiple cultures, and another 28% said that their LIS education did not prepare them for such work. Most respondents said LIS education prepared them "somewhat." She also noted that 22% of librarians said their LIS program offered a course related to multicultural librarianship, though 75% of the library school administrators she surveyed said their program did in fact offer a course relating to multicultural librarianship. Meanwhile, Charlene L. al-Qallaf and Joseph J. Mika (2013) found that 81% of North American LIS programs offered a diversity-related course. Subramaniam and Jaeger (2010) found that 9 out of 14 iSchools (members of the iSchool

Consortium) provided diversity-related classes, but only 10% of those courses were required and another 5% were doctoral-level courses.

Mestre's findings may explain an experience of the first author of this article (Adkins). She asked some students from a program known for its diversity coverage what they were learning about diversity. There was a long pause before someone hesitantly mentioned globalization. Students may not realize that they are learning about diversity, even when LIS faculty think they are teaching about diversity. As LIS faculty, we may need to emphasize, repeatedly, that we are teaching about diversity and the importance of diversity in our profession.

In our survey, we asked respondents whether they had taken courses in their LIS program that focused on diversity or included diversity coverage. A total of 150 said they had, while 228 said they had not. Responses to open-ended questions in the survey suggested that students want such a course but do not always see it offered in their programs. Here are some of the comments we received.

- "A class on diversity should be a requirement for everyone, regardless of field or track."
- "I wish my MLIS program included more diversity topics and multiculturalism services in libraries."
- "Unfortunately, there were [no diversity courses] offered, nor did we focus very much on diversity in our courses."
- "It's embarrassing how little we discuss diversity in our curriculum at the iSchool."

However, other comments suggested that students appreciate taking diversity courses when they can get them. Respondents identified courses and faculty by name, indicating that these courses were memorable and important to them.

- "Dr. Naidoo's Outreach to Diverse Populations class at UA SLIS—great course."
- "UCLA Ethics and Diversity Course."
- "The University of Washington included some great classes about indigenous knowledge systems."
- "FSU Grad School offers a class, 'Information for Diverse Users,' that was very informative on this subject."
- "It was the most engaging, thought-provoking course in my LIS program."

Al-Qallaf and Mika's results indicate that library employers want their employees to be able to work with diverse and multicultural populations. They state that "the identified qualifications

and skills from the content analysis suggest that employers for the most part are searching for information professionals with some form of experience in multicultural settings; that have the ability to work with faculty, students, and staff from diverse backgrounds; and/or who have demonstrated skills related to various cultural attributes" (17). Clearly, then, there is a demand by both employers and potential employees for courses that cover diversity in the frame of user services and users' information needs. LIS educators may think they have met the need, judging by the data collected by Mestre, Al-Qallaf and Mika, and Subramaniam and Jaeger. However, librarians in Mestre's survey and many in our survey think otherwise.

The good news is that diversity coverage in LIS education seems to be increasing over time. In the survey comments, there was a definite time-based trend in that those whose LIS education was more recent were more likely to have had access to information on diversity. Table 2 includes some of the comments we found that listed dates of LIS program attendance. In the 1970s and 1980s, respondents were clear in indicating that there was no diversity education. Our respondents started to indicate that a change was happening by the 1990s, and a respondent who had graduated in the 2000s clearly indicated the beginning of some diversity education. In addition, the commenter above who referred to Jamie Naidoo's class was a student in the 2000s or 2010s who clearly had exposure to diversity.

In summary, the answer to the question "How does LIS education contribute to librarians' diversity knowledge?" is that until the 1990s, it did not, and for many respondents it still may not. Respondents who graduated after the 1990s suggested that it was a very valuable part of their learning.

How Do LIS Associations Contribute to Librarians' Diversity Knowledge?

Our LIS associations have been very active in their support of diversity, primarily through the work of some active members and committees. We see evidence of this support in several

Table 2. Survey Comments about Diversity in LIS Education, by Referenced Date

Time Period	Respondent Comment
1970s	"My library degree was earned in 1970. There were no diversity programs then."
	"I went to library school in 1973. I don't think they had diversity as a topic then."
1980s	"I went to library school in the mid-1980s and there was not much discussion of diversity then."
	"It should have been a part of LIS education, but was not in any real sense when I got my degree (1980s)."
1990s	"I graduated in fall 1991—this was not really emphasized back then."
	"It was the early 1990s and some discussion of looking at texts other than by 'old white guys' was just beginning."
2000s	"It's been over 10 years, but, yes, I did take courses related to learning about Native American and Hispanic library users and reaching out to nontraditional library users."

ways. As mentioned earlier, section B.3 of the *ALA Policy Manual* (American Library Association 2013) includes a section specifically addressing diversity of information users when it discusses "the critical need for access . . . by all peoples." Section B.3 further acknowledges the need for increased diversity among library personnel, suggesting that this need should be filled through "concrete programs of recruitment, training, development, advancement, and promotion." As listed in section A.1.5 of the *Policy Manual*, diversity and equitable access are two of ALA's key action areas intended to help the association prioritize its investments and decision making. The ALA is supporting diversity at a practical level as well as a policy level through the creation of and support for the Spectrum Scholarship for underrepresented groups pursuing LIS master's degrees. The Association of Research Libraries, which is affiliated with but not subordinate to ALA, provides the Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce, another program of recruitment and professional development for LIS master's students from traditionally underrepresented groups. Both programs provide scholarship support, professional mentoring, and career development training.

In addition to diversity support in ALA, various divisions and associations within ALA are emphasizing the importance of diversity. For example, the Association of College and Research Libraries (2012) recently developed a set of cultural competencies for academic librarians. The Association for Library Service to Children (2014) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (2014) work extensively with ALA ethnic caucuses to promote diversity in materials.

When our survey respondents talked about LIS associations and how those associations helped keep them aware of diversity, they mentioned other sources too:

- ALA Spectrum Institute and Joint Conference of Librarians of Color
- BCALA [Black Caucus of the ALA] listserv
- Mid-America Library Alliance Live workshops and webcasts
- Social media . . . APALA [Asian Pacific American Librarians Association]
- The recent brouhaha with the ALA Code of Conduct

In terms of contributing to librarians' knowledge about diversity, section B.3 of the *ALA Policy Manual* describes the need to include diversity in "programs, activities, services, professional literature, products, and continuing education." However, our respondents tended to focus on the bigger items (e.g., Spectrum Initiative) and ethnic affiliates (e.g., Black Caucus of the ALA) and did not tend to cite general ALA conference programming. Continuing education was indicated as a source of diversity knowledge, but provided by a regional consortium rather than ALA or its divisions. This might suggest that diversity awareness needs to be local and more regionally defined. In one interview, a respondent shared that her biggest diversity challenge was providing appropriate services for refugees from a specific country. She said she had trouble finding diversity support resources geared toward that particular need at a national-level conference.

LIS associations have kept diversity awareness front and center, but this has not meant that the body of LIS practitioners has become much more reflective of our community. While our nation rapidly diversifies, our profession is diversifying far less rapidly. From some of the comments given to us by survey respondents, we could perceive some "diversity fatigue": weariness or cynicism in the face of messages about the importance of diversity in contrast to the relative stability of the profession's white, straight, female demographic. Even so, the majority of respondents seemed eager to talk about diversity and their libraries' progress toward it.

How Do Librarians Talk about Diversity?

Now we get back to our original question: Are we talking about the same thing when we talk about diversity? We explored this question through the written answers to an open-ended survey question: "How do you define diversity?" We got 339 written responses to this question. Some were off-the-cuff and humorous, and some merely paraphrased boilerplate language, but many people took the time to reflect deeply and respond to the question.

Based on our literature review, we suspected we knew how *diversity* would be defined, and we created our original coding scheme based on those suppositions. As we were reading and coding answers, however, our list of terms expanded. Our original list included *race*, *ethnicity*, *gender*, *ability*, *sexual preference*, and *sexual identity*. Our respondents went further, including geographic, political, and other identity status indicators. We created codes and categories using the words that our respondents used to answer the question on diversity and assigned each code once per response. For instance, one response was "Diversity is inclusive but not limited to the consideration of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, age, religion/faith, socioeconomic background, physical abilities/qualities, sexual orientation, and linguistic ability." That response was given eight different codes: *race/ethnicity/culture*, *sexuality*, *gender/gender identity*, *religion/belief/faith*, *physical and mental ability*, *class/socioeconomic*, *language/accent*, and *inclusion/togetherness*.

Table 3 shows our codes and the frequency with which we assigned them to responses. We divided our codes into two broad categories. One addressed descriptions of diversity, or what makes a person "diverse." The other category was oriented more toward the concept of diversity itself and how people think about it.

Definitions of who counts as diverse, or what makes a person diverse, followed the expected patterns of being heavily influenced by US history and the civil rights movement. When our respondents defined what diversity meant to them, they most frequently used words such as *race*, *ethnicity*, and *culture*. Other concepts that potentially came from national struggles for equality were *sexuality*, *gender/gender identity*, *age*, and *veteran status*. Our respondents' answers also brought up some different ideas about diversity: class, socioeconomic status, religious and political views, nationality, and personality type.

Table 3. Codes Classifying Respondents' Answers to the Question "How Do You Define Diversity?"

Descriptions of Diversity	Code Counts	Diversity as a Concept	Code Counts
Race/ethnicity/culture	105	Mixture/variety	33
Sexuality	55	Inclusion/togetherness	31
Gender/gender identity	53	Difference	30
Class/socioeconomic	52	Respect	11
Religion/belief/faith	47	Acceptance	8
Age	29	Awareness	5
Mental or physical ability	23	Institution/workplace	5
Politics/values	18	Techniques and methods	4
Uniqueness	10	Recognition	4
Status (general)	7	Nonbiased	3
International/nationality	6	Support	3
Viewpoint	4	Representation	3
Language/accent	4	Comfort/safety	2
Minorities/underprivileged	3	Equality/proportionality	2
Personality types	2	White privilege	1
Veteran status	1	Celebrating diversity	1
Cognitive style	1	Richness	1
Personal identity	1	Education	1
Protected groups	1		
Geography	1		
Body type	1		
Legal definition	1		

The focus on race as a key indicator of diversity is not new. Mega Subramaniam, Howard Rodriguez-Mori, Renee Franklin Hill, and Paul Jaeger studied LIS dissertations from 2000 to 2009 and found that "racial diversity has traditionally received the most focus in LIS literature" (2012, 363). The same held true for LIS literature (Jaeger et al. 2010). The variety of concepts identified by our survey respondents exceeded the number of concepts we found in the LIS literature. This may indicate changing mind-sets and changing ideas of diversity and who "counts" as diverse. Librarians, in writing about their own beliefs, are able to explore ideas that PhD candidates, needing to review the existing LIS literature, cannot broach and that writers of the current LIS literature have not yet broached.

Our respondents also provided information about their concepts of diversity and how diversity was to be practiced. The codes we most frequently applied to responses were *mixture/variety* and *inclusion/togetherness*. Several respondents spoke of diversity as requiring different groups to interact together and mentioned the need for active efforts to create an inclusive environment. Codes such as *respect*, *acceptance*, and *awareness* seemed to indicate differing views on the depth to which diversity should be incorporated. A few brave respondents indicated

that building their diversity awareness also involved challenging their ideas of comfort and safety, going from the known to the unknown.

Language, the words we use when we talk about people and their needs, has the potential to influence our thoughts and our actions. Moyra Lang notes this when she points out the need to ensure that the needs of transgender people are taken as seriously as the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people when implementing position statements advocating for equal service to LGBT groups. She writes, "Librarians need to understand how the dominant terms and language restrict boundaries of sex, gender, and sexual orientation to a sticky matrix of conflated terms. We can begin to untangle the language and learn new ways to include patrons who are often excluded and provide access to much needed information" (Lang 2009, 39). This statement applies equally to other diverse groups. Our notions of diversity develop from our history and our culture, and as a result, we may have preconceived notions about who belongs in a certain category. We should note that many in our profession—including the first author of this article—also typically look at diversity from a racial perspective. At a previous conference, when our hosts talked about the University of Maryland's iDiversity program as being open to all students, there was concern that this would disenfranchise the students whom some felt represented "true" diversity, that is, racial and ethnic diversity. However, Paul Jaeger and Mega Subramaniam pointed out that their program, by highlighting inclusion, actually attracted more students of color to LIS education. Looking at our profession and our professional responsibilities through the lens of inclusion reminds us that our obligation is to go beyond accepting and appreciating difference. It extends to changing ourselves and our practices to help others in their information-seeking quests.

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