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Conference Report - 2004 National Diversity in Libraries Conference: “Diversity in Libraries: Making It Real”

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**Conference Report -
2004 National Diversity in Libraries Conference:
“Diversity in Libraries: Making It Real”**

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“Diversity in Libraries: Making It Real” was the topic and the objective of the 2004 National Diversity in Libraries Conference. Intentionally designed to focus on pragmatic, real-world approaches to fostering diversity, the gathering took place May 4-5 at the brand new Georgia Tech Hotel and Conference Center in Atlanta, Georgia. A record 300 librarians from across the country – and a few from other nations – responded to the call and came together for two days of learning and sharing experiences about this important issue. Sponsors for the fourth national diversity conference included the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL), the Southeastern Library Network (SOLINET), the HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) Library Alliance, and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

Planning, Planning, Planning

Hosting a national diversity in libraries conference in the southeastern United States seemed to be an obvious choice given the rich cultural diversity of our region and our civil rights legacy. The site selection process began in 2002. Stella Bentley (then at Auburn University, now at the University of Kansas) and Barbara Dewey (University of Tennessee) served together on ARL’s Diversity Committee; they proposed that the 2004 conference take place in the Southeast. Bentley and Dewey also served on ASERL’s Board of Directors and secured ASERL’s support. Kate Nevins, Executive Director of SOLINET, agreed to lend SOLINET’s support. The HBCU Library Alliance realized it could further diversify the conference attendance and thereby contribute to, enrich, and benefit from this essential discussion. The match was a “natural” for the

new group, and the membership eagerly agreed to serve as a co-host.

In order to ensure the conference could be self-supporting as well as affordable for potential participants, the organizers needed significant financial support. The host organizations invited their members to consider sponsorships ranging from \$250 to \$1000. Each option included at least one complimentary registration to the conference and publicity opportunities for the sponsoring libraries. Nearly four dozen libraries rallied to the offer, ensuring the conference could take place. Corporate sponsors such as OCLC, Lexis-Nexis, McGraw Hill Publishing, and ProQuest Information & Learning contributed as well.

With sponsorships in place and the Conference Center booked, planning moved forward with Conference Steering Committee members Kate Nevins, SOLINET Executive Director; Sylverna Ford, ASERL Secretary-Treasurer; Loretta Parham, Steering Committee Chair, HBCU Library Alliance; and Jerome Offord, Jr., ARL’s Program Officer for Diversity. To reinforce the theme “Diversity in Libraries: Making It Real,” the Steering Committee agreed on three discussion tracks: diversity in library staffing, diversity in collections, and service to diverse user populations. While previous diversity conferences involved primarily ARL-level university libraries, the 2004 event encouraged the participation of libraries of all sizes and types. Additionally, the organizers scheduled the conference immediately before SOLINET’s Annual Membership Meeting – a big draw in the region. This proved to be a great strategy, providing a natural bridge for integrating diversity issues into operational issues of access,

resources, and library services discussed at the SOLINET meeting.

With the goals and theme in place, ASERL and SOLINET staff worked via contacts regionally and nationally to recruit speakers. After receiving more than 100 proposals, a team of reviewers winnowed the proposals to 24 – some as informal, relatively brief roundtable settings and others as longer, more formal breakout sessions. The selected presenters represented a wide array of libraries – large and small, academic and public – from across the country.

Record Numbers, Rave Reviews

In her opening remarks, Kate Nevins declared that “this attendance – more than double that of previous diversity conferences – demonstrates the importance of what is happening here”. Librarians, library staff, and LIS students from across the country participated in the conference, representing 85 universities and colleges, 3 community colleges or technical schools, 36 public libraries and agencies, and individuals from 12 associations or other institutions. Altogether, they packed the general sessions as well as the two dozen breakout groups and roundtable discussions. They also lingered in lively between-session discussions.

Keynote speaker Raymond Santiago, Director of the Miami-Dade County (FL) Library System, noted that libraries have not fully adapted to the cultural diversity that emerged in the 1970s in the United States. He advocated a holistic approach that acknowledges and addresses all aspects of a community, from demonstrating and reinforcing the very concept of the freedom to read to finding the means to serve those whose schedules or circumstances prevent them from visiting the facility. He challenged the audience with the notion that there should no longer be the need for a diversity conference. In his view, libraries should by now interweave diversity into all that they do.

The conference’s other general session speaker, Francine Henderson, Administrator of the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History in Atlanta, hailed the cultural connections librarians have today that were lacking in the 1970s. “What brings a person to uphold and promote diversity,” she

said, “is not statistics; it is our discovery of other cultures, that there are other people out there, with all their vitality and dynamism. And how do we learn about these other cultures?” she asked. “By hanging out, by being in their midst.”

In between the two general sessions, participants certainly did “hang out,” participating in the many sessions on an enormous array of diversity-related issues and initiatives. Discussions ranged from fellowships and recruiting techniques to the creation of the first library archive of African-American lesbian and gay cultural materials.

Making It Real

Effective recruitment of minorities was a major conference theme. Denice Adkins and Lisa Hussey, University of Missouri, talked about “unintentional” recruitment – defined as those unconscious actions performed by librarians and LIS faculty that can influence individuals to choose librarianship as a career. A roundtable about funding for recruitment and training featured Elaina Norlin, program officer for the IMLS – Recruiting and Training Librarians for the 21st Century federal grant program. Irene Hoffman provided an example of an IMLS-funded grant through the CIRLA Fellows, a model recruitment and education program developed by the Chesapeake Information and Research Libraries Alliance. Michael Havener, University of Rhode Island, and Jametoria Burton, University of Iowa, discussed linkages between minority recruitment efforts at libraries and LIS programs. Hannelore Rader, University of Louisville’s presenter, described recruitment efforts at the national level through the efforts of the ACRL/ARL Task Force on Recruitment. LeRoy LaFleur and Ira Revels, Cornell University, and Jessica Kayongo, University of Notre Dame, explored recruitment at the high school level.

Reflection of diversity in collections was another major theme. Jennifer Ford and Jennifer Aronson, University of Mississippi, described the library-led exhibition commemorating the 40th anniversary of integration at Ole Miss. “Open Doors,” a year-long exhibit, featured photos and text of the African American educational system before integration as well as

oral and visual accounts of the family histories of the African American community surrounding Ole Miss. Dorothy Bell and Betty Jo Gaston, St. Petersburg College, and Julie Arnott, SOLINET, discussed the development of an archival collection reflecting the cultural and educational experiences of two separate-but-unequal colleges in Florida. Another Florida presentation, presented by Lorel Reinstrom and Tomaro Taylor, explored the potential roles of special collections in support of diversity activities within libraries and campuses. Ganga Dakshinamurti, University of Manitoba, noted the virtual component to diversity efforts, citing the Multicultural Resources and Services web portal of Library and Archives in Canada. The portal

(www.collectionscanada.ca/multicultural/index-e.html) supports, coordinates, and delivers multicultural/multilingual collections and services. Steven G. Fullwood added to the discussion about diversity in collections by highlighting the development of the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive Project. Playing a leadership role in fostering academic collections in ethnic studies was the subject of University of San Diego's Amy Besnoy and Alma Ortega's presentation.

Another major theme centered on diversity and working with users, including a presentation about tips and practices to ensure library patrons receive equitable access and services by Justina Osa, Pennsylvania State University. Laura Blessing, Karen LeTarte, and Amy Vanscoy, North Carolina State University, presented information about NCSU Libraries Peer Research Advisors program, a new diversity outreach initiative aimed at users. Indiana University's Deloice Holliday described techniques to create or adapt library programs, services, and collections to make the library more useful and welcoming to patrons of all backgrounds. Serving rapidly expanding Latino populations was the topic of Susan Stewart, Hall County Library System, Georgia; Sister Margarita Martin, Oasis Project; and Kathryn Ames and Gail Firestone, Athens Regional Library System, Georgia. Sandra Phoenix, SOLINET, and Loretta Parham led a session on the role of the HBCU Library Alliance and the potential for HBCU students to enrich the diversity of the library profession.

The centrality of diversity in libraries was, perhaps, the capstone theme of the conference. Rhea Ballard-Thrower, Howard University, and Grace Mills, Florida A & M University, explored integrating diversity into strategic planning. Tracie Hall, American Library Association, presented best practices for placing diversity at the center of libraries. Kansas State University's Regina Beard, Rhondalyn Peairs, and Barbara Steward focused on assessing the totality of efforts related to a comprehensive and multifaceted diversity initiative. Jane Williams, University of Maryland, promoted assessing diversity and organizational climate to determine effectiveness of diversity efforts. Emma Perry of Southern University in Louisiana offered her insights on making "diversity a state of mind and a culture in its own right, which must be grounded in organizational values." She challenged the overflow crowd to examine their own workplaces to assure that diversity makes up an integral part of the strategic plan and that senior management sustains diversity efforts. "Change," she asserted, "must start at the top, but it must be embraced and experienced at all levels."

Derrie Perez, of the University of South Florida and ASERL's Board President at the time, issued a final challenge to the audience as they departed the final session: "Go back to your home library and do one thing to advance diversity in your workplace." Participants agreed that if each librarian did one thing, then collectively truly great things would be accomplished.

Next Steps

In summing up the conference, one librarian said, "The opportunities for networking were incredible; that, coupled with the overall focus on action, made the conference relevant. This was a conference that demanded participation and engagement, either directly in session, between sessions, or at the least with the (sad to say) still timely and still compelling issues at hand."

There was widespread sentiment that the conference had met the goal established by its organizers – that of presenting, debating, and fleshing out concrete, doable programs and projects, the real stuff of making diversity real.

As Raymond Santiago suggested, we all look forward to the day when we will not have to meet to discuss and strategize about diversity in the workplace. Until that time, we must not only keep this topic on the table, but keep it at the center of the table. Until that time, we hope that

you'll save the date for the 5th National Diversity Conference, to take place in 2006 in Washington. The conference website, www.librarydiversity.org, will be updated in early 2006 with information about the next National Diversity in Libraries Conference.

Call for Papers New Reference Research: 12th Reference Research Forum, 2006

The Research and Statistics Committee of the Reference Services Section of RUSA is sponsoring its Twelfth Reference Research Forum, "New Reference Research," at the 2006 American Library Association Annual Conference, location TBA.

This is an opportunity to present and discuss your research project conducted in the broad area of reference services such as user behavior, electronic services, reference effectiveness, and organizational structure and personnel. Both completed research and research in progress will be considered. All researchers, including reference practitioners from all types of libraries, library school faculty and students, and other interested individuals, are encouraged to submit a proposal.

The Committee uses a "blind" review process to select a maximum of three (3) projects for 25 minute presentations, followed by open discussion. The selected researchers are required to present their papers in person at the forum. Criteria for selection are:

- Significance of the study for improving the quality of reference service
- Quality and creativity of the methodology
- Potential for research to fill a gap in reference knowledge or to build on previous studies
- Previously published research or research accepted for publication by December 1, 2005 will not be accepted.

Please submit a one-page proposal by **Friday, December 9, 2005**. Notification of acceptance will be made by Monday, March 13, 2006. The submission must consist of no more than two pages. On the first page, please list your name(s), title(s), institutional affiliation, and address (including your mail address, fax number and email address).

The second page should NOT show your name or any personal information. Instead, it must include:

- The title of your project
- An explicit statement of the research problem
- A description of the research methodology used

Please send submissions to:

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