

University Librarian  
position  
presentation

Made speech in 1991  
to University  
of Michigan Library Staff

Upon being asked to come up with a presentation on multiculturalism in research libraries: issues for the 90's, I said to myself, Wow, how the heck am I going to tackle such a broad topic in twenty minutes? After mulling things over in my head for a few days, I finally decided to a) to pick three major areas, collections, services and personnel, and discuss a few general issues related to these topics, and b) to try to tailor my discussion to what I know and have experienced on the job as a public services librarian here at the University of Michigan.

Before I discuss these three issues, however, I'd like to elaborate a bit on why I believe multiculturalism needs to be addressed in the first place. There are a number of reasons: First, like it or not, the demographic picture in this country has changed significantly in recent years. Simply put we now more than ever live in a multicultural society. In California, for example, a recent study entitled Adrift in a Sea of Change, by the Center for Policy Development, states that many California communities are already more than 50% minority and many more will be by the turn of the century. While changing demographics in California is a well known and obvious example of our country's changing makeup, I think it is important because as the report indicates, libraries in California are failing to meet the information needs of minorities and are now being forced to grapple with the many service issues that are sure

settings have about what constitutes legitimate research material. Specifically, somewhere along the line in the history of the Graduate library someone decided that Playboy magazine was appropriate research material, but now, when a student group recommends that the library purchase a lesbian and gay weekly like Outweek Magazine or the Advocate, they are told that these publications are not appropriate, that we don't carry general interest materials at the Grad. But the Grad does carry Newsweek and Jet and countless other "general interest" materials. My question is why such resistance? If we can afford to carry a sexist, misogynist publication like Playboy why can't we afford to put a publication like Outweek in our stacks?

Collection building in multicultural or lesbian and gay studies is often viewed as a difficult task, but in my view it isn't because the materials aren't out there, it's because we, as a profession need to quit burying our noses in the traditional review literature. We need to quit relying on approval plans that as a rule, usually exclude the alternative press and small presses. We need to change the way we think about collection building. We need to find those individuals on campus who are teaching minority studies courses. We need to make ourselves aware of who is doing what in, black, asian american, native american and latino and lesbian and gay studies.

Yes, there is work being done in those areas here at Michigan. We need to do the outreach. We need to open our eyes.

workshops on how to use MRLYN, on how to find those works of lesbian and gay fiction. We need to quit coming up with excuses for not making lesbian and gay periodicals openly accessible. We need to quit marginalizing the already marginalized. I'm sure that what I am pointing at is not uncommon in other libraries across the country. In fact, many libraries across the country are just beginning to deal with these kinds of problems. In preparation for this talk I did lots of reading and was impressed in particular by the efforts made at the University of California at Santa Cruz and elsewhere in the University of California system.

Collections: Again, returning to complaints, the most common ones that seems to arise are that we don't have enough materials on people of color or lesbians and gays and that our materials are never on the shelves. While this may or may not be the case, it seems to me to be all too easy to rely on some of the same, tired counter arguments librarians here use. Here are a few: we do, but you don't know how to use our system. As a research library, it is not within our scope to order "popular" "non-research" materials or materials that have a "narrow" special interest focus. Another counter argument: Our collection strengths have traditionally been in other areas. And yet another: the faculty don't do research in that area on this campus. These counter arguments will get us nowhere if we want to improve our services to minorities and to improve our collections. I find them interesting because they also raise a lot questions about the assumptions librarians in research



should be I be embarrassed when a faculty member tells me that the librarian she talked to didn't know that Latinos were one of this country's largest minority groups. I was embarrassed though. Angry too. The issues that lesbian and gay students have brought up have been similar. Why should a student, frightened that someone will find out if he or she is gay and just coming to terms with his or her sexuality

have to go to special collections and sign forms just to read an article about gay rights? Why doesn't Reader's Guide index anything in the gay press? Why should students in the Undergraduate Library doing papers on AIDS have to be encouraged to go to the Graduate Library to use the Alternative Press Index? Why does MIRLYN not tell the patron what works of lesbian and gay fiction exist in our collections? And why should a patron have to sit in special collections to read a gay novel. What's a gay novel doing in a collection devoted primarily to anarchist and leftist propoganda anyway? Many of you here may be wondering what I'm getting at. Let me explain. Our services here at the University of Michigan Library are not adequate, especially when it comes to the minority members of our community. I would like to advocate that librarians on this staff educate themselves. We need a course in multicultural literacy. We need to be educated on the hazards and dangers of being openly gay or lesbian or on this campus and what that means for the our lesbian and gay library patrons. We need to offer our multicultural patrons and all other patrons

frequently in campus-related educational and social settings. I have spent many hours thinking about these complaints. I thought for a while that maybe they were isolated incidents and that they had no bearing on the overall quality of our library's service efforts. But then I changed my mind. These complaints have not stopped. Latinos and lesbians and gays seem to feel quite marginalized when it comes to services provided by our libraries. Why? I can only speculate. Regarding the Latino students and faculty, it occurs to me that I am the only public services librarian on this campus with a Latino background and with any connections to the campus Latino population. I may very well be the only one able to answer a simple reference question related to Mexican American history or to know that there are a variety of distinct cultural groups that fall fall under the umbrella terms Latino and Hispanic. The other day, in fact, I was called on to help find a definition of the term, Aztlan. Easy enough, I thought. But it wasn't an easy question for two of the staff people on duty at the reference desk at time the question was asked that particular day. Although it would be unfair of me to expect all librarians to know where to find a definition of AZTLAN, it became acutely apparent to me that this term is not one of those one would be likely to find in a source like the Dictionary of Cultural Literacy or even a plain old dictionary. My point is that why should I be the only one to know what Aztlan means? It is only one of the major concepts in Chicano history. And why

will get.

Let me turn to now to the three broad issues I spoke about earlier: services, collections and personnel. I'd like to preface my remarks with a few words. The more I wrote and thought these issues, the angrier I became. I could have cited study after study. I could have gone through all the materials that Carla Stoffle has so conscientiously routed to the Diversity Committee. I could have presented a rosy picture of the University of Michigan's efforts at attaining a diverse environment. I could have quoted the Michigan Mandate, at length. But, alas, my gut feeling was to talk about what I know and have experienced while a librarian here. And what I know is that there is lots that needs to and could be done in the area of services, collections and personnel. And what I know is that many librarians are resistant to making useful changes in these areas.

Services: There are a number of issues that I have seen arise related to library services for minority faculty and students in this library system. First, let me say that I have been amazed to hear so many complaints from Latino and lesbian and gay patrons about our services and collections here at Michigan. OF course, there have been complaints made by African American students and Asian American students, but I would like to focus on the first two groups because they are are the two I deal with most



to spread to other library's across the country as the nation's demographic picture continues to change. And it will continue to change. One more example: Time Magazine, in a 1990 article entitled Beyond the melting pot, has projected, that by the year 2056, the "average" U.S. resident as defined by Census statistics, will trace his or her descent to Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, Arabia, almost anywhere but white Europe. Why else should multiculturalism be addressed? It should be addressed because if it isn't, our college campuses are going to continue to experience problems with racism, sexism and homophobia. I hope I need not elaborate on these problems here on our own campus and in this very community. They are all too evident. But believe me, I could. But why should libraries care? What concern is it of ours? Well, I think that the answer is simple: because college and research libraries are obligated to provide information and services to their constituencies, and as is the case with our society at large, the demographics of our colleges and universities are changing and will continue to do so. One of the first things one learns in library school, at least it was one of the first things that I learned, was that knowing knowing your community, your constituency and what their information needs are is one of the most crucial and important parts of the job. If we don't get a grip on the kinds of issues that libraries in California are dealing with now, it will only be a matter of time before we'll have to. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be, and the worse things

Personnel: There are a number of problems that all libraries, not just research libraries, face in the area of personnel. To start off, there is currently a critical shortage of minority librarians in our profession. The problem has gotten worse since the 1970's, when there was a lot more money available for scholarships. For those of you who are interested, ACRL News, in its December 1990 issue published a lengthy set of recommendations put forth by ACRL's Task Force on Recruitment of Underrepresented Minorities. Among the recommendations the task force made are that there needs to be institutional commitment to change and accountability, that personal and institutional racism has to be addressed, and that barriers to advancement and retention need to be identified and torn down.

Aside from the shortage of minority librarians in our profession, I would like to just point out a couple of issues in this area that I think are worth considering. One is the need for college and research libraries to provide mentoring programs for beginning librarians. I think that minority librarians in particular, would greatly benefit from this, primarily because, and I'm speaking partially out of personal experience, the cultural climate of research institutions such as the University of Michigan is quite different from the cultural backgrounds of many minorities. The "acculturation" process can take quite a long time for someone new to research librarianship. Finally, I think that while the



University of Michigan Library has made great strides in hiring minority staff, that more needs to be done. Middle managers, for example need to continue to be educated about affirmative action and encouraged to closely scrutinize their own prejudices and preferences. Education is key to embracing multiculturalism on the job.

In conclusion, while I may have vented some anger in the process, I have attempted to point out, what I think are key issues. Foremost among them: Librarians will need to change the way they think about collections, services and personnel if they want to continue to provide quality service and keep pace with the needs of their constituencies. They will need to educate themselves, to listen to their constituencies, to get out there and do outreach and be willing to take risks to make the changes that are necessary for survival in the nineties and beyond.