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Into the breach with AALL's Diversity Committee: Law libraries' struggle to achieve diversity goals

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Into the Breach with AALL's Diversity Committee

Law libraries' struggle to achieve diversity goals

By Michele A. Lucero and Beau Steenken

In an article in the summer 2012 issue of *Law Library Journal*, "Addressing the 'Emerging Majority': Racial and Ethnic Diversity in law Librarianship in the Twenty-First Century," Alyssa Thurston describes in detail the challenges that law libraries face in increasing their internal diversity to mirror the diversity of American society as a whole. In doing so, she points out that law librarians widely acknowledge the need for reaping the benefits (many of which she enumerates in her thorough treatment of the topic) of increasing diversity in the profession and attempts to answer the question of "why, after years of discussion and action, law librarianship is still not more racially and ethnically diverse."

Thurston discusses half a dozen possible causes for law libraries' continued struggle with achieving diversity, many of which (i.e., a small pool of qualified candidates and lingering racism within the legal profession) are at least partially out of law librarians' control as they will also require action from the broader legal and law school/information school communities. However, one underlying cause identified by Thurston demands the attention of our profession if we are serious about increasing diversity: time and budget constraints within AALL.

This is not to say, of course, that AALL has been inattentive to devoting resources to diversity issues. After all, our Association features as one of its finite number of national committees an eight-member Diversity Committee, which, according to its official purpose, "serves

to ensure the diversity of AALL membership." Given, then, the Association's formalized support for increasing and guaranteeing diversity within the field, the question becomes whether the actions taken are having positive effects or whether the problems faced are too large for a nonprofit organization of limited means to dent without securing further, substantial resources.

To help answer this question, the current members of the Diversity Committee thought AALL members might benefit from a description of the committee's recent efforts and future plans along with a self-evaluation of our successes, our failures, and the future challenges we face.

The Diversity Symposium at AALL's Annual Meeting

Along with its broader mandate to act to increase diversity in law libraries, the Diversity Committee assumes responsibility for two specific annual duties, the first of which is to plan and stage a Diversity Symposium at the Annual Meeting. The Diversity Symposium has been held each year since 1996 but has undergone an evolution of sorts in recent years. While it was originally held on days and at times apart from those of other educational programs in an attempt to encourage maximum participation, more recently the symposium has been integrated in the schedule with the other educational programs.

Our primary rationale for wanting the symposium held and marketed in the

same manner as other educational programs lies in the fact that we want to share that diversity as a goal actively benefits law libraries. Rather than treating diversity as a lofty, abstract ideal set aside from the "useful" programming, we strive to emphasize that learning objectives involving techniques to increase diversity are just as valuable to law librarians as learning objectives involving other aspects of our profession.

The topics of the Diversity Symposium over the years have reflected the useful nature of topics related to diversity. The Diversity Committee has put on a variety of programs focusing on a range of topics, from legal issues, such as affirmative action, to practical librarian issues, such as the intersection of technology and diversity in a law library context. Perhaps no recent program better illustrates the value of the symposium's learning objectives to law librarians than last year's symposium, Cultural Intelligence: Are You Culturally Competent?

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The symposium began with an open question to the audience to consider in framing the concept of cultural intelligence: "What's the difference between individuals and

businesses that succeed in a multicultural, globalized economy and those that fail? The answer: cultural intelligence.” Michele A. Lucero, Diversity Committee member and certified cultural intelligence quotient (CQ) facilitator, then elaborated on what was meant by cultural intelligence by noting that, according to Soon Ang and Lin Van Dyne, two authors who have written extensively on the subject, cultural intelligence is the “capability to function effectively across various cultural contexts (domestic, international, ethnic, organizational, generational, etc.)” Everyone has a CQ, which is a capability anyone can further develop.

To help attendees begin the process of developing their individual CQs, they were asked to take a basic CQ self-assessment to determine where they currently lie in each capability and overall. After focusing on and discussing each of these capabilities, the room was broken into four groups to tackle several questions:

- Is your organization currently looking at CQ? If so, how? If not, why not?
- How does CQ impact your organization and its staff?
- Why is CQ important to know and apply?
- As an informational professional, how would you improve your CQ drive, CQ knowledge, CQ strategy, CQ action, and/or CQ as a whole?

Following reports back from the breakout groups, the Diversity Symposium closed with discussion on how to apply cultural intelligence at work with several aspects that can easily be incorporated into your organizations to help increase cultural intelligence use and awareness:

- Personal CQ development—developing your own plan to include assessment, self-awareness, and immersion
- Culturally diverse teams—being involved with teams of diverse nature when working on projects
- Firm-wide assessment—assessing all employees and leveraging those with high cultural intelligence
- Training and consulting—working with a certified CQ expert to train and consult with your organization
- Hiring and promotion—identifying and using cultural intelligence as a tool in the hiring process and promotion status
- CQ as an integrative model—adding cultural intelligence to other training sessions.

Readers who missed last year’s symposium and are interested in learning more about cultural intelligence should

visit the Cultural Intelligence Center at www.culturalq.com.

Overall, the Diversity Committee feels that the program exemplifies what we envision as the role of the Diversity Symposium. It highlights an issue related to diversity but also provides concrete learning objectives of use to law librarians from multiple professional paths.



AALL past president Darcy Kirk presents Eugenia J. Charles-Newton with the 2012 Minority Leadership Development Award during the 2012 Annual Meeting in Boston.

Our future plans for the symposium are to continue offering programs of value, as this July we will revisit the law of affirmative action in the wake of *Fisher v. University of Texas* and its ramifications for law libraries. We also tentatively plan in upcoming years to broaden views of diversity by including programming on how law libraries interact with differently abled individuals, as well as programming on issues surrounding religious diversity.

While moving the symposium in line with other educational programs has largely been a success, the move has encountered hiccups along the way. For instance, in Philadelphia in 2011, Diversity Symposium attendance did not match the committee’s hopes, due in part perhaps to its description not appearing alongside those of its contemporaneous educational programs in the Annual Meeting Conference Program. The Diversity Committee last year took steps to avoid that situation going forward but acknowledges that contemporaneous programs will siphon off potential attendees. One action we take to ameliorate this physical limitation is to continue to host a reception immediately following the symposium. The reception extends the time of the symposium past that of other educational programs. The

Diversity Committee feels that this gives members interested in diversity but with scheduling conflicts a second opportunity to discuss diversity with friends and colleagues.

With regard to the symposium, the Diversity Committee views further integration with educational programming as the most immediate challenge going forward. By working more closely with the Annual Meeting Program Committee (AMPC), we hope to achieve two primary goals: to prevent topical overlap between the Diversity Symposium and other programming, rendering it easier for the AMPC to plan properly, and to alert the Diversity Committee to potential topics of interest touching on diversity but proposed through the general application process.

The Minority Leadership Development Award

The second regularly occurring duty of the Diversity Committee is selecting the recipient of the annual Minority Leadership Development Award (MLDA). The Association created the MLDA in 1991 to address the dearth of individuals from groups defined by the U.S. government as minorities in positions of leadership in law libraries and in AALL. The award includes travel, lodging, and registration expenses for attendance at the Annual Meeting, as well as pairing the winner with an experienced AALL leader to serve as a mentor and a guaranteed appointment to a national committee. Originally, the Awards Committee selected the recipient of the award; however, about five years ago, AALL’s Executive Board transferred that responsibility to the Diversity Committee.

Ron Wheeler, current Executive Board liaison to the Diversity Committee, served as Diversity Committee chair at the time of the transfer. According to Wheeler, “Many of the people who won the award got their first appointment to a committee to the Diversity Committee itself. They as a group self-selected as being concerned with diversity and were aware of the effects of the award on the careers of minority librarians. In contrast, people serving on the Awards Committee may or may not be interested in diversity goals as a primary focus, so it just made sense that the Diversity Committee should select the recipient.” Indeed, the Diversity Committee is uniquely situated not only to gauge the merits of applicants but to assess the diversity needs of the Association at the same time.

In recent years, the Diversity Committee, in addition to selecting a

winner, has undertaken a number of actions aimed at increasing application submissions for the award. In the two years prior to the writing of this article, the Diversity Committee chose from pools consisting of only handfuls of applications, and in 2009 the MLDA was not awarded. Last year, the committee streamlined the application form, dropped a requirement for official transcripts (which can be both annoying and expensive to obtain), and rephrased some of the requirements that combined to create the appearance of a dauntingly high bar for winning the award. We felt that, since the purpose of the award is to further leadership and involvement, seeming to require previous leadership and involvement might have been counterproductive.

While applications for the award increased incrementally last year, the committee still hopes for greater gain. Ideally, every young minority law librarian should apply for this award when he or she qualifies (the award does require two years of AALL membership OR two years of professional experience in a law library), as it constitutes an excellent means to further individual careers as well as diversity within the profession. In furtherance of that goal,



A past Diversity Symposium

the MLDA's application deadline is being moved up to March 1, in line with AALL's other awards, so that we will benefit from "awards season" buzz. The Diversity Committee has also identified conducting a more far-reaching publicity campaign for the MLDA as a pressing need and will endeavor to act accordingly.

As a program, the MLDA can be viewed largely as a success on a micro level and as somewhat of a success on a macro level. On the micro level, 11 individuals have received the award and

so directly benefited from it. Of those recipients, five continued to be involved at the national level in positions of leadership within AALL beyond their initial appointment. (And, of course, it is too early to say for the most recent recipients.) Therefore, AALL has benefited from their perspectives at the macro level, as well. However, members of the Diversity Committee feel that some talented individuals of diverse backgrounds may be slipping through the cracks; thus, there is room for improvement. The challenge remains, therefore, to increase the number of applicants for the award. Assuming application rates rise, another challenge will be finding ways to keep talented individuals who may not win the award, as well as the award recipients, involved at the national level.

Freestyle Activities of the Diversity Committee

In addition to the annually occurring actions described, the Diversity Committee periodically undertakes other activities with the goal of increasing both diversity itself and awareness of diversity issues within AALL. For instance, in the past,

actions to increase diversity have met with any success.

Potential future actions that have been raised in the Diversity Committee's internal discussions include coordinating with the Recruitment to Law Librarianship Committee to target undergraduate colleges with traditionally high rates of minority students, as much of the difficulty with recruitment derives from the fact that graduate programs in library and information science remain largely Anglo (as they say in Texas to refer to native English-speaking Caucasians). We have also talked about ways in which we can expand the concept of diversity beyond racial and ethnic diversity, though traditionally that is the area with which our profession has struggled the most.

Successes, Failures, and Challenges

Increasing diversity within the law librarian profession with limited resources remains a daunting challenge, yet we, as librarians, should be accustomed to succeeding in underfunded endeavors. Indeed, the successes of the Diversity Committee rely primarily on either spreading information via relatively low-cost means, such as through the annual Diversity Symposium (the cost of the symposium is usually offset by the generosity and sponsorship of commercial vendors), or on our natural librarian tendencies toward inclusiveness and aiding others, such as through the MLDA program. While these two programs are necessarily limited in scope, the challenge for our profession should be to expand the use of these same librarian skills to be better able to ameliorate some of the underlying causes of the relative lack of diversity within law libraries, despite the lack of financial resources at AALL's disposal. Though such actions promise to be lengthy campaigns, the Diversity Committee remains committed to achieving the worthy goal of ensuring that we happy few, we law librarians, include in our band of brothers and sisters the diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints that will allow us to thrive. ■

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