

Advancing Cultural Competency in Library and Information Science

Rae-Anne Montague

Graduate School of Library and Information Science
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Champaign, Illinois, U.S.A.
E-mail: rae@illinois.edu



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Abstract:

Libraries, Schools of Library and Information Science (LIS), and LIS Professional Associations are committed to incorporating multicultural perspectives and promoting cultural competency. These efforts are guided by the creation of mission statements, strategic plans, and diversity standards--and evaluated by metrics such as learning outcomes and retention.

*This paper explores three aspects of this larger process within LIS education: program- and course-based components and guiding models. Identification of methods employed to infuse cultural competency into LIS programs is based on an examination of approaches used at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which offers both campus and online programs. This is complemented by discussion of how cultural competency may be emphasized within graduate LIS courses based on a review of syllabi such as *Local, Regional and Global Intersections in Library and Information Science*. An analysis of varied strategies and circumstances needed to evoke cultural competency in LIS education including consideration of limitations, dealing with unexpected tensions, and challenges that arise as a result of shifting paradigms is also shared.*

Keywords: Cultural Competency, Diversity, LIS Education, Professional Education

This paper explores current approaches to promoting cultural competency in library and information science (LIS) education. First, a review of methods employed to infuse cultural competency into LIS programs based on an examination of practices at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which offers both campus and online programs, is introduced. Second, a focused discussion of how cultural competency may be emphasized within graduate LIS courses is presented. This is followed by a brief summary of efforts and impending issues.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Developing cultural competency is an essential component of professional education. The following, from the National Association of Social Workers (2001) via the Association of College and Research Libraries, offers a useful definition of what is meant by cultural competency:

A congruent set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a person or group to work effectively in cross-cultural situations; the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

One should expect those starting graduate education to possess some general cultural competency, which may be focused and expanded in LIS. That said, there may also be a need to increase general knowledge as well as unlearn concepts. Additionally, issues of teaching and learning autonomy also influence the process.

In considering what guides LIS schools in developing mission statements, strategic plans, and other documents to advance cultural competency, a review of materials from several LIS professional associations is useful.

GSLIS, like many other LIS schools in America, where this discussion is situated, seeks accreditation for our master of science program through the American Library Association (ALA). GSLIS has been accredited by ALA since 1924. ALA's policy B.3.6, *Library and Information Studies Education to Meet the Needs of a Diverse Society*, encourages LIS programs to ensure that their students, faculties, and curricula reflect the diverse histories and information needs of all people. Accreditation standards should be interpreted in the spirit of this policy. The nature of a demonstrably diverse society is referenced throughout the Standards because of the desire to recognize diversity, defined in the broadest terms, when framing goals and objectives, designing curricula, and selecting and retaining faculty and students.

In 2012, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released *Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries* as a framework to support local efforts. Standards in eleven areas are expanded and interpreted in the document including skills to develop.

1. Cultural awareness of self and others
2. Cross-cultural knowledge and skills
3. Organizations and professional values
4. Development of collections, programs, and services
5. Service delivery
6. Language diversity
7. Workforce diversity
8. Organizational dynamics
9. Cross-cultural leadership
10. Professional education and continuous learning
11. Research

As an example of skills that are included, within development of collections, programs, and services, librarians are charged to create and advocate for programs and services that are

reflective of the cultural heritage, cultural backgrounds and social identities of constituent populations.

The Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) Board approved the *ALISE Diversity Statement* in 2012 including principles (what), benefits (why) and competencies (how). The Statement calls for full representation of all kinds of LIS educators and students and a commitment to challenging all forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, etc.). The Statement is grounded in diversity as a compelling interest, which, in LIS, will lead to benefits including enhanced access, equity, engagement, personal growth, and organizational relevance.

Archival educators are also working toward approaches that enable better, more culturally inclusive, scholarship. This starts with recognizing the ways in which dominant cultural paradigms narrow practice and developing frameworks that encourage critique of societal and professional norms. As part of this process, they call for broader consideration and engagement by academics, students, professionals, and other stakeholders (Archival Education and Research Institute, 2011).

CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

GSLIS is embedded in a University system, which also has a commitment to diversity as described by this values statement

As the state's premier public university, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's core mission is to serve the interests of the diverse people of the state of Illinois and beyond. The institution thus values inclusion and a pluralistic learning and research environment, one which we respect the varied perspectives and lived experiences of a diverse community and global workforce. We support diversity of worldviews, histories, and cultural knowledge across a range of social groups including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, abilities, economic class, religion, and their intersections...

<http://www.diversity.illinois.edu/SupportingDocs/Diversity Values Statement.pdf>

In this vein, GSLIS faculty, staff, and students have the opportunity to interact with a number of units, such as the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Access (<http://www.diversity.illinois.edu>), which focuses on issues including affirmative action; the Graduate College (<http://www.grad.illinois.edu>), which offers fellowships and programming to recruit and retain underrepresented students; Disability Resources & Educational Services (DRES; <http://dres.illinois.edu>), the oldest post-secondary disability support program in existence; and the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs (<http://www.library.illinois.edu/mortenson>), charged to strengthen international ties among libraries and librarians worldwide for the promotion of international education, understanding, and peace. University representatives from various offices are dedicated to demonstrating clear, consistent internal policies and practices designed to facilitate ongoing dialogue and cultural understanding. These and many other units provide important resources to advance cultural competency.

These efforts may be juxtaposed with a range of negative issues that need to be confronted in actuality. For example, for many decades, Illinois grappled with the use of Chief Illiniwek, the former official mascot and symbol of the University's intercollegiate athletic programs. In 2000, GSLIS faculty issued a statement describing how use of this symbol constituted cultural misappropriation and perpetuated stereotypes that hindered teaching, research, and

service. For example, they asked, “How can we provide leadership to library and information professionals on strategies for serving diverse populations or looking beyond stereotypes of library user groups when our own campus promotes stereotypes of a minority population?” The Chief was retired in 2007. On campus and beyond, vocal Chief supporters still call for reinstatement. This struggle demonstrates the persistence of problematic norms and need for ongoing dialogue.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY VIA COLLABORATION

In addition to responding to challenges, GSLIS engages in a number of proactive and collaborative efforts to increase representation and cultural competency. Since 1997, GSLIS has partnered with ALA for the Spectrum Scholarship Program to support diverse scholars at Illinois (<http://www.ala.org/offices/diversity/spectrum>). Spectrum is designed to address the critical issue of under-representation of students of color and serve as a model to bring attention to larger diversity issues in LIS. Spectrum Scholars who elect to study at GSLIS receive full scholarships for the duration of their programs.

More recently, ALA launched the Spectrum Doctoral Fellowship initiative, which seeks to reinforce and expand efforts to recruit racially and ethnically diverse individuals into the LIS professorate. In discussing her recent research, Dr. Nicole Cooke describes how she asked Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library leaders of color, “What advice would you give to aspiring leaders of color?” The response: Every one of them stated that librarians of color should get a PhD—a PhD is what will help you stand out and get the job you want, because a PhD is not something the academy and higher education can discount (2013). GSLIS welcomes our first Spectrum Doctoral Fellow in 2013.

In collaboration with regional LIS schools and academic libraries and with the support of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (<http://www.imls.gov>), GSLIS, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Services initiated LIS Access Midwest Program (LAMP; <http://www.lis.illinois.edu/admissions/lamp>) in 2006. The LAMP network encourages promising undergraduates to participate in activities designed to increase their awareness of graduate studies in LIS. To date, over 60 students from statistically and historically underrepresented populations have joined LAMP, including participating in the annual institute that brings together scholars and mentors to engage in dialogue about studies and professional opportunities. LAMP is one of several IMLS-supported initiatives that emphasize cultural competency. One component of the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant application, through which LAMP received funding, requires a diversity plan—to explain how the project will engage diverse communities and their shared experiences, world views, and ways of learning. As Smith notes, both foundation and government funding have been important in working to improve representation (157).

ADVANCING SCHOOL-BASED CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Since 1969, GSLIS has awarded the Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award, named after a former director of the School (<http://www.lis.illinois.edu/about-gslis/awards/downs-award>). The Award recognizes individuals or groups who have furthered the cause of intellectual freedom. The hard work of the recipients tends to be inspiring and often aligns with areas in which we strive to build cultural competency. For example, in 2009, West Bend Community Memorial Library received the award for its steadfast advocacy in response to a

challenge to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) content in the young adult section of the library. The 2012 recipient was *Librotraficante* (<http://www.librotraficante.com>) based on efforts to oppose the censorship of ethnic and cultural studies materials in Arizona. In addition to the Downs Award, the School sponsors a number of student awards at graduation, which include recognition for caring for others with courage, creativity, art, laughter, and friendship (Edith Harris Camp Award), demonstrating the spirit of volunteerism, and a concern for others and for the welfare of the School (Peggy Harris Award), special interest in providing or enhancing library and information services to groups whose needs fall outside the parameters of traditional service (Social Justice Award), and excellence in scholarship, passion for life, being inspirational, and making a positive impact on the GSLIS-Chinese community (Yingbo Zhou Memorial Award).

A variety of other initiatives span the breath of the School. In April 2011, GSLIS hosted a Town Hall meeting to engage the community in dialogue about the life of the School. This meeting spawned a number of working groups to further explore areas such as cultural competency, critical theory, faculty roles, and student experience. These groups discussed several areas for improvement that were documented in forums in the course management system. Topics included:

- Considering options to replicate the cohort-building experience of online (LEEP) students, who complete an intensive weeklong introduction to LIS.
- Involving more faculty, staff, students, and alumni in extending best practices in mentoring like those developed in LAMP.
- Making more efforts to recruit faculty of color.
- Building a better framework for communication among students, staff, and faculty.
- Incorporating alumni reflections on their experience at GSLIS both inside and outside the classroom.

As the School is a white-centered environment, there is an ongoing need to develop space for the ideas, scholarship, and lived experiences of students of color. The following year, a Task Force on Inclusion (TFI) was formed to provide continued follow-up. The TFI, consisting of faculty, students, staff, and alumni, began meeting regularly to research, review, and propose policies and actions to enhance understanding and acceptance of all forms of diversity. An early aspect of this effort was identifying and sharing details of activities and events in one place—on the School’s website. These activities include:

- those of the GSLIS Center for Digital Inclusion (<http://cdi.lis.illinois.edu>) that fosters inclusive and sustainable societies through research, teaching, and public engagement about information and communication technologies (ICT) and their impacts on communities, organizations, and governments.
- bi-monthly Inclusions and Exclusions reading group open to all to foster constructive discussions about diversity. Readings span many topics. Sample texts from the 2012-13 list include:
 - “Towards understanding international graduate student isolation in traditional and online environments.” Elizabeth. A. Erichsen, and Doris U. Bolliger, 2010.
 - *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda F. Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris (Eds.), 2012.
 - “Towards a critical theory of whiteness.” David. S. Owen, 2007.
 - “Trippin’ over the color line: The invisibility of race in library and information studies.” Todd S. Honma, 2005.

- *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege*. Robert Jensen, 2005.
- a syllabus template, which includes a sample statement of inclusion: "We support diversity of world views, histories, and cultural knowledge across a range of social groups including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, abilities, economic class, religion, and their intersections."
- open lectures based on critical and timely topics such as *Critical Cultural Informatics: Twitter and Black Discourse* (Brock, 2013) and *Can Technology Serve Social Justice?* (Eubanks, 2012) – many of which are part of a series and/or in collaboration with other groups. <http://www.lis.illinois.edu/newsroom/lectures>

In spring 2013, a proposal to faculty to convert the TFI to a formal Inclusion Committee was generated. The proposed charge of this group is to oversee the climate and practices contributing to the emotional and intellectual wellbeing, and professional success, of all members of the GSLIS community. A committee would enable greater accountability and be better aligned with the promotion and tenure review process. It is currently under consideration. Additionally, in spring 2013, GSLIS, in conjunction with the University Library, applied for and received a Provost's Initiative on Teaching Advancement (PITA; <http://provost.illinois.edu/committees/tab/pita.html>) grant to provide training to increase cultural competency.

In addition to these School-directed efforts, students create opportunities for themselves and others to engage in advancing cultural competency through the formation of groups, such as:

- GSLIS Students of Color (SOC), which aims to create and support a community of library students of color at Illinois and beyond. Activities emphasize development of professional skills and personal growth of members to add to the quality of the library community. <http://publish.illinois.edu/studentsofcolor>
- GSLIS Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) chapter promotes open exchange of radical views on library issues. PLG members often team up with other GSLIS groups to support progressive and democratic library activities locally, nationally and internationally. <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org>
- Queer Library Alliance (QLA) participants explore what librarians and archivists can do to provide better service for LGBTQ patrons, sponsor a monthly book club, and lead presentations at conferences, such as the Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC). <http://queerliballiance.wikispot.org>

Students involved in these groups also often participate in other community-based projects, such as the CU-Wiki (<http://cuwiki.net>) and Mix IT Up! (<http://mixituplis.wordpress.com>). While it is positive that students have a number of opportunities to engage in a range of important initiatives, in considering the reach of efforts that promote cultural competency, concerns of "preaching to the choir" arise.

CURRICULUM-BASED CULTURAL COMPETENCY

The master's degree program requires 40 hours of graduate study, including two core courses, *LIS 501: Information Organization and Access* and *LIS 502: Libraries, Information, and Society*. Additionally, students pursue electives from a broad range of LIS course offerings to constitute the remaining 34 credit hours. MS students may also opt to earn up to 12 hours in graduate electives through other academic units at Illinois—including cultural studies options. Students may pursue specializations in areas such as Community Informatics (CI), which involves understanding how communities access, create, organize, and share

information. CI work emphasizes work with marginalized communities to create solutions to the most serious issues threatening society as a whole: poverty, health, violence, etc.

The GSLIS curriculum is comprehensive. For example, in fall 2013, over 60 courses are listed in the timetable (<http://www.lis.illinois.edu/academics/courses>). Additionally, students may pursue focused studies through practicum, independent study, and/or thesis work. Students have opportunities to engage with many facets of cultural competency via elective coursework, including:

- **LIS 418 Community Engagement**
Community engagement refers to the multiple ways that information professionals in libraries and other settings learn about, collaborate with, and provide service and outreach to community members. This course provides an introduction to, and overview of, community engagement theory and practice. A significant portion of coursework will take the form of service learning or community-based research via approved projects that match students' interests.
- **LIS 490DD Digital Divide**
This course combines an intensive reading of texts with hands on fieldwork in building bridges across the digital divide. Students will work in teams by partnering with an assigned community organization to develop and implement a plan to informatize that organization. Part of this course will involve a lecture series by leading professionals regarding community uses of information technology.
- **LIS 5901 Dialogues in Feminism and Technology**
Part of a massively distributed collaborative learning experiment, this seminar investigates the intersection of gender and technoculture. Built around a shared set of recorded dialogues with preeminent thinkers and artists concerning feminisms and technologies, the course utilizes collaborative resources, texts, and even objects to examine policy, accessibility, innovation, and citizenship.
- **LIS 590AF African American Bibliography**
Approaches the study of African American bibliography from several perspectives: the bibliography as a genre, bibliography as technology, the librarian as bibliographer, and the bibliography (aka finding aid) of special collections and archives. Will focus on Black intellectual history and the memory of its collective intelligence.
- **LIS 590CA Community Archives**
Community Archives are a collection of material that documents one or many aspects of a community's heritage, collected and preserved by that community and its members. These materials tell the story of groups of people who have often been excluded from mainstream archives, which have tended to focus on official documents and the lives of elites. We will investigate the role community archives play in supporting a sense of heritage and identity amongst members of a community and how they serve to raise awareness of these neglected stories in the wider public.
- **LIS 590DU Information Services for Diverse Users**
Given the increasing diversity of information users in society, information professionals need to learn more about specific groups in order to provide appropriate services. This course is designed to prepare future information professionals to develop and provide inclusive services to underrepresented populations, and to analyze and evaluate services to ensure equality of access to information in a range of institutional settings.
- **LIS 590GL Local, Regional and Global Intersections in LIS**
This course explores traditions and trends in library and information science (LIS) from a global perspective incorporating local and regional intersections. Participants

consider diverse information contexts emphasizing LIS subfields including archives, community informatics, data curation, information policy, LIS education, and youth services.

- LIS 590MY Global Contexts and Social Justice in Youth Literature
Examines books, media, and other resources for young people (ages 0-18) in a multicultural, globalized, and increasingly digital media-saturated world. Explores the history of multicultural writing for the young, and major issues and debates of youth literature concerning diversity, racism, power, ideology, etc. Guides students to better select, interpret, evaluate, and promote such literature, media, and resources according to young people's various needs (intellectual, emotional, social and physical).
- LIS 590RGS Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Information Professions
This course examines how issues of race, gender and sexuality are represented in the information professions and will study how race, gender and sexuality affect, and are affected by, information technologies. Socially constructed misrepresentations (or lack of representations) of race, gender and sexual identity will be critically examined in different settings as they intersect, overlap, and impact the information use, technology practices, and the design of information resources and services in the processes of creation, organization, and dissemination of information in LIS and related fields.
- LIS 590SJ Social Justice in the Information Professions
This course is intended to provide a historic and contemporary overview of social justice and advocacy work in librarianship during the 20th and 21st centuries. The course will be primarily focused on activities in the United States, though international movements and perspectives will be addressed. Topics include: library work during the Progressive Era; desegregation of libraries and professional associations; alternative media in libraries; recruitment and retention of library workers from traditionally underrepresented populations; library outreach; intellectual freedom; and emerging critical issues in the field.

These courses, as well as others that do not emphasize facets of cultural competency as directly, draw on writings that ask challenging questions and spawn deep thought linked to frameworks grounded in critical, feminist, and queer theories such as:

- *A Belief in Humanity is a Belief in Colored Men: Using culture to span the digital divide*, André Brock, 2005.
- *Dewey Deracialized: A critical race-theoretic perspective*, Jonathan Furner, 2007.
- *The Power to Name: Representation in library catalogs*, Hope Olson, 2001.
- *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick, 2001.

GSLIS courses offer many opportunities for students to explore and advance cultural competency as part of their LIS education. As Dr. Martin Wolske, recipient of the 2011 Library Journal Teaching Award, notes to encourage ample critical analysis in our courses is essential: “We need to help our students develop new models and skills for engagement... to seek out innovative approaches that challenge not only how we do things but also how we define and measure success. How do we truly become more inclusive?”

In addition to master’s level courses that emphasize professional engagement, doctoral students may pursue in-depth research related to cultural competency. This is reflected in the titles of some recent dissertations:

- *The Lens of Postcolonial Theory in LIS Research and Practice*, Navadeep Khanal, 2013.

- *Searching for Black Girls: Old Traditions in New Media*, Safiya Umoja Noble, 2013.
- *Piecing a Quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History*, Christa Valencia Hardy, 2010.
- *Invisible Scarlet O'Neil and the Whitman Authorized Editions for Girls: Homefront Representations of the American Feminine and the Feminine Heroic during World War II*, Anna L. Nielsen, 2010.

Dissertations completed by GSLIS students are available in the Ideals Digital Repository (<http://ideals.illinois.edu>).

ADVANCING LIS EDUCATION

As discussed above, there are many approaches to advancing cultural competency in LIS education—both at program- and course-levels. They emphasize teaching, service and/or research. They involve proactively developing new pathways and responding to issues of concern. They are student, staff, faculty, and collaboratively led. They may be one-time events or ongoing endeavours. All our efforts to recognize, affirm, and value each other are important. However, as many LIS scholars have observed, there is much unfinished business in LIS education (Wheeler, 2005). Even with ample good intentions and myriad efforts, inequity remains entrenched in both intellectual and professional arenas. As scholars committed to inquiry, we must continue to ask critical questions to evoke deeper awareness and more comprehensive and effective actions in order to elevate students' academic and professional achievements.

In advancing cultural competency in LIS education, we move between awareness, policy and action. Building awareness, also known as conscientization, requires recognizing and breaking through prevailing and often seemingly invisible, mythologies to reach new levels of awareness—in particular, awareness of oppression. The process involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and committing to enable change (Goldbard, 2006). Our understanding and commitments are codified as policy, which can be shared and further developed. However, as Ahmed (2012) warns, policy is not a substitute for action. Our awareness and our policies must align with and inform our actions.

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