

1-2018

Recruiting a Diverse LIS Workforce

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Recommended Citation

Clarke, Janet H., "Recruiting a Diverse LIS Workforce" (2018). *Library Faculty Publications*. 25.
https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/library_articles/25

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Recruiting a Diverse LIS Workforce

Interview with Cynthia del Rosario

Janet Hyunju Clarke

Editors: Thank you, Cynthia, for taking the time to speak about your experiences and role! Can you please tell us about your current position, what type of work you do, and how you got into this position?

Cynthia: I am the Diversity, Equity, and Access Officer (DEA) for the University of Washington Information School (iSchool). Initially, my job was the recruitment and retention of underrepresented minority (URM) graduate students, and it has grown into the recruitment and retention of URM undergrad and grad students, faculty, and staff, as well as facilitating diversity programming to integrate and support equity and inclusiveness throughout the iSchool. Programming includes Diversity Month activities in November, our annual all iSchool Diversity & Equity Summit in the spring, and student Power Hour diversity lunches in between. Through our Curriculum Transformation Project (CTP), I work with faculty to incorporate diversity and equity components into their curriculum and pedagogy. Our Writing Across Borders project helps our faculty better support non-native English-speaking students with their writing. I organize quarterly diversity professional development lunch seminars for staff, facilitated by nationally recognized diversity advocates/activists.

One relatively new component of my job is particularly exciting for me—faculty diversity. A diverse faculty is essential to authentically diversify the iSchool community. Faculty guide the curriculum. They guide the research. Students come for the faculty. Since 2012, we have required a Diversity Statement, similar to a Research Statement and a Teaching Statement, for every faculty job posting. I meet with our dean, our HR director, and the

chair of each faculty search committee to discuss how to evaluate the Diversity Statement and develop the evaluation matrix. Similarly, each one of our four academic programs has a diversity question on their applications, so diversity is integrated into the admissions matrix as well. This is all very exciting and just the tip of the iceberg. It is impossible to describe the nuances of one-on-one mentoring, of engaging students with community events and organizations, of working with amazing people who are doing great work. It is a very holistic approach to engaging fully and richly in a social and learning environment that fosters excellence through inclusiveness.

I was a late bloomer. I returned to Seattle Central College, formerly Seattle Central Community College, in my thirties as a single mom. As I was finishing up my associates degree, I thought to myself, "I'm way smarter than many people I know who have a BA. I can do a BA, too!" I enrolled at the UW, and as I was finishing up my BA, I took a class in multicultural education and met a fellow student who introduced me to graduate school. Although I knew you could be a doctor or lawyer, I had never heard of graduate school. I entered my master's program in multicultural education the next fall, and many years later, I am working on my PhD in educational leadership and policy. You have to understand that I was one of the "throw-away" kids. Our high school was incredibly diverse. Some of us never went to college; some became doctors or lawyers; some became famous musicians—Kenny G and Phillip Woo; a famous cartoonist—Linda Barry; internationally renowned dancer/choreographer—Mark Morris. So, I was in an incredibly creative educational environment, but not one teacher ever told me I was smart and should go to college. I feel these experiences position me well to help others who might not see themselves as college material or might not know how to access college, and especially at the graduate level.

Editors: What an interesting biography! What about Asian Pacific American communities, can you tell us about your history working with them?

Cynthia: I grew up in Seattle's Mt. Baker neighborhood, which was then, and continues to be, one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Seattle, and I went to school on Beacon Hill with numerous Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese American families. Being mixed-race myself, I identified with this diverse community, which has so many exemplary leaders and role models. Dorothy and Fred Cordova cofounded the Filipino Youth Activities (FYA) in 1957 and the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) in 1987, both in Seattle.¹ With FANHS's national office in Seattle, it now has chapters nationwide. I have been part of the FYA/FANHS community since about 1970. "Uncle" Fred and "Auntie" Dorothy have been very influential in my activism. Most recently, I collaborated with FANHS to write an IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) grant to support Filipino MLIS

students at the University of Washington iSchool. Unfortunately, we were not awarded the grant, but we will submit another FANHS grant with IMLS again.

About fifteen years ago, I attended a weeklong leadership development program for higher education facilitated by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP).² LEAP also has one-day conferences it sponsors around the country, and about a year later, I attended one and bumped into two UW APIA women colleagues. We were so inspired by the LEAP one-day conference that when we returned to campus, we founded the APIA Women Faculty and Staff group at the University of Washington. I am very strong on APIA women in leadership. Fifteen years later, we still meet quarterly with brown-bag lunches. About eight years ago, the UW Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity created ethnic affinity groups, including the UW APIA Faculty and Staff group (men and women), but the APIA Women's group is still alive and well. When Mia Tuan started last year as the dean of the UW College of Education, the APIA Women's group held a welcome lunch for her.

I served on the Board of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle,³ which is dedicated to serving the API communities. The namesake, Wing Luke, was my uncle—my mother's brother. I believe strongly in the mission of this museum and watched its transformation from a modest Asian folk art center to a nationally recognized Asian American museum. It is the first Smithsonian affiliate museum in the Pacific Northwest. Ron Chew was the executive director when the museum transitioned, and he developed the vision of community curation and focus with the inaugural exhibit *Executive Order 9066: Fifty Years Before and Fifty Years After* in 1992. He incorporated the stories of the members of the community into the exhibit, which was very moving. Beth Takekawa, the current executive director, is great and has done much to facilitate the continuing growth of the museum and making it relevant to a wide range of APIA communities and beyond. I don't do as much volunteer work there anymore, but I continue to enthusiastically support the work of the museum.

On occasion, I volunteer at Helping Link, a Vietnamese community service organization. Minh Duc Pham Nguyen is the amazing executive director who leads this community service from a tiny office in Seattle, but her reach is so broad, because there is such need. She and her husband offer essential adjustment assistance, such as conversational ESL, technology use, after-school classes, and elderly services. University of Washington members, like faculty Allyson Carlyle and informatics students, also volunteer their time there.

Another of my heroes is Assunta Ng, founder and publisher of *Northwest Asian Weekly*, the only weekly English-language newspaper serving Washington's Asian community. *Northwest Asian Weekly* sponsors the quarterly

Women of Color Empowered Lunch series, which honors professional women of all races and backgrounds. There is also a summer youth leadership program that Ng sponsors through the NW Asian Weekly Foundation. These are ways in which Ng directly builds, supports, and connects with community.

In an effort to “pay it forward,” I try to maintain connections with my communities, and connect our students with these communities, too.

Editors: How exciting! Your role is to recruit APA and other people of color into LIS programs; can you tell us how you go about doing that?

Cynthia: I feel very strongly that, for me as a recruiter, my biggest barrier to recruiting APIs and any other people of color is the stereotype that librarians are middle-aged white ladies who are running around shushing everybody. I really feel that’s a stereotype that remains. People are like, “I don’t want to be a librarian like that!” People still say that to me. So, you [interviewer] are in the field, so you know that’s not right; but if you’re not in the field, you don’t know that.

My target populations are usually underrepresented minorities, people who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. And for a lot of those communities, their only engagement is primarily with their school librarian. These school libraries are probably really understaffed, and don’t have folks who are peer to them. And the students don’t have librarians who are really engaging them, because these librarians are probably serving multiple schools. I don’t think schools have a dedicated librarian anymore. It’s either a teacher doing librarian work on the side or it’s a librarian working among a whole bunch of different schools. So they don’t have the opportunity to get to know the students, and they probably don’t have the budget to buy the books that should be there, and they have to just take what’s there and try to make the best of it.

Editors: Those are interesting perspectives. I am curious—how do you talk to potential LIS students then?

Cynthia: One thing that I do is to take one of the current badass librarian students and we go talk to an American Ethnic Studies class. They’re the low-hanging fruit. And we’ll invite them to an MLIS event that’s coming up. And most of those students want to go back and work in their communities, so that’s how we frame it. We’ll say, “Who here is in college so you can go back and serve your community?” And almost everyone will raise his or her hand. We ask, “What do you want to do?” And they say, “I want to be a teacher”; “I want to be a doctor”; “I want to be a social worker.” I’ll ask, “Who wants to be a librarian?” Nobody will respond. And I say, “Oh, yes, you do! You just didn’t know that.” And we try to get them thinking about

information. You’re in an information economy, in an information world. Social media: Who do you think runs that? When you need to write a research paper, where do you go? Who helps you? When was the last time you went to the library? When you go to Douglass Truth Library, Beacon Hill Library, Chinatown Library,⁴ and you talk to these librarians, they’re all activists, just like you!

You just don’t know it because you may not have stepped in the library lately. If you don’t want to be a librarian, you may still want to be an information specialist. You still might want to be an information professional so you can help others understand when they need information. It’s harder and harder to understand the information and resources that are available to us. That’s some of the challenges in our communities, because we’re getting further and further behind, so it’s harder to understand the information and resources that are available to us. If it’s not organized in a particular way, it’s just noise. So we need people who understand our communities, so we can figure out what kind of information would be helpful to them.

We need people who can organize it and make it accessible to us. I remind the students, “You were brought up in this community; you know what we need, you know how to talk to us, you know how to display the books, what kind of programming to do to help our communities succeed.”

Editors: How do you go about recruiting students of color, or specifically APA students, to the iSchool, your institution? Why should they be interested in pursuing an LIS degree?

Cynthia: Part of my strategy is working with the students and their communities, but also their families. Because if you’re a first-generation student, your parents probably don’t want you to become librarians; they want you to become doctors. So we have to explain, and be able to talk to families, to let them know how powerful this profession is. Librarians are gatekeepers for information. That means you can either open the floodgates or keep them closed. In one of our new projects, we have a number of undergraduates who are developing information half-pagers targeted toward parents and families, translating our information fliers, not just verbatim, but with cultural and linguistic nuances appropriate to each community.

We are targeting non-native English speakers, so that we have something that parents can read and understand the value of various information degrees. This project is through an iSchool grant for iSchool students to work on.

Editors: What kinds of challenges are there in recruiting APA or students of color to LIS programs?

Cynthia: Although everyone always says it's not about the money, the reality is that if you don't have the money for graduate education, you can't afford to come to the iSchool or any graduate school. And that's really been a challenge. I've had a couple of students whom I know would be so amazing. One young gentleman who was very talented, and met many of the categories of underrepresented students (he's a homeless, gay, Southeast Asian American man), and who received an ARL [Association of Research Libraries] fellowship, still couldn't afford to come to the iSchool. He did volunteer work with LGBTQ homeless youth to connect them with information and resources.

It's not that we're superexpensive, but graduate school *is* expensive. But also just the burden of those loans weighs so differently on communities of color than it does on mainstream communities. He doesn't have any family that could help him; he's on his own. For many first-generation students, not understanding how to navigate the financial piece of graduate school is a challenge if it's not a skill set that you have. One way to describe it is that, for mainstream, middle-class families, thinking toward your future is normal; but for working-class and poor families, thinking toward your future is a luxury. It's a skill set that many of us have and take for granted; but if that hasn't been your path, it's not a skill set that you have, and it's very hard to do it.

That was part of the problem for this student's situation. So this was a situation that was bigger than all of us. We tried to write an IMLS grant to fund this student's graduate education, but they said it was not the right fit for their grant. As I mentioned before, we are working with FANHS to write a grant to hire graduate students who are interested in working on Filipino American history archives through a teaching assistantship. These are some ways we hope to secure better funding for students of color for LIS programs here. We need to do this kind of creative work to open a path to graduate school for underrepresented students and their communities.

Another challenge is that, at the institutional level, they want numbers. And so helping students one by one by one, especially if it doesn't turn into a recruitment, might not show value for the number crunchers even though these connections have a huge value in terms of creating meaningful relationships with students. So I get concerned about that. They want the big numbers. If the institution doesn't understand that recruitment doesn't work the same way for everyone, especially with underrepresented students of color, and especially in this political climate now, with funding being cut for everything, it's a big concern.

And then of course, there is the faculty and curriculum. If you don't have diversity in the faculty and curriculum, students who are interested in diversity will find it somewhere else. This is why faculty diversity is so essential.

Editors: Thanks for speaking with us! One last question: Based on your experiences, what can organizations like ALA do to better integrate diversity into its core actions and strategies?

Cynthia: It's such an advantage that we have these ethnic affiliations at ALA. Why are we not working together to do a recruitment fair or options fair at the conferences? Or maybe we can do a roadshow and go out to local schools to talk to them about the profession. At the ALA Annual Conference, we do a program called "Leaders Wanted," to help recruit students of color for LIS PhD programs across the country. This program emerged out of a grant that Allyson Carlyle, of the iSchool, received and that became a partnership with the ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services (ODLOS). It features a panel of LIS PhD students of color from across the country talk about the ins and outs of being in a PhD program. This would be a great program for the ethnic affiliates to partner in. It would be so fantastic to work together on this! They could cosponsor it, promote it broadly among their respective constituencies, and they would all benefit by working together.

I would love to have an open house or recruitment fair in the host city of the next JCLC [Joint Conference of Librarians of Color] conference in 2018. Then we could incorporate this kind of recruitment fair at the ALA Midwinter Conferences thereafter. Depending on the host city, we could identify which ethnic caucus could be the lead organization to help us with local logistics. As members of our local communities, we need to support diversity efforts like the ones I've discussed. As professionals, we need to push for diversity recruitment through and with the ethnic caucuses, and we need to push for diversity in the LIS curriculum through the ALA so that it has a national effect. These diversity efforts go hand in hand.

NOTES

1. <http://www.fanhs-national.org/>.
2. LEAP is a national leadership organization (<http://www.leap.org/>).
3. <http://wingluke.org/>.
4. These are public libraries in Seattle.