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Embracing a Rich Diversity

Promoting diversity among patrons and staff

By Shamika Dalton



I have been immersed in the issue of diversity since I started working for the University of Florida in 2012. I am currently serving on the University of Florida's Levin College of Law Diversity Task Force and on the greater University of Florida's George A. Smathers Libraries' Committee on Diversity. I have learned a great deal through my service, and I want to share some of that knowledge in the hopes that it will help promote diversity in your respective institutions and in our profession.

The Diversity Task Force

When I began working at UF Law in 2012, it was a crucial time for increasing diversity. There were only 10 African American students out of 287 students in the incoming 2012 class. The dean created the diversity task force to address the issue. When administrators started recruiting volunteers, I applied because I thought I had a unique perspective as one of nine African American faculty members and the first and only African American law librarian. We were charged with identifying strategies that the law school can use to improve the broad diversity of the applicant pool and the 2013 entering class. We undertook two efforts that I would like to share: website development and outreach.

Website Development

Applying for law school can be a scary process for minority students and their families, particularly if they are the first in their family to attend a professional school. The first place that students go when they begin to consider what law school they want to attend is the school's website. Students are looking at the student life and the various extracurricular activities offered to help prepare them for the profession. For a minority student, it is important to see how other minority students are flourishing in the law school. If all of the pictures are of white students, minority students may assume that diversity is not important to the law school or, worse, that minority students do not make "the cut" to be successful at that particular law school. That is definitely not the case at the University of Florida, so one of our goals was to create an environment that was welcoming for our diverse students by enhancing the law school's website.

We updated our website in two ways. First, we selected and uploaded photographs that included minority students participating in student life. Now when applicants visit our website, they can identify with students who look like them and imagine themselves here.

Also, family members are likely to be more supportive, knowing that their loved ones will not be alone. Second, we created a diversity page that reiterates the importance of diversity in the current student body and highlights former minority students who have become leaders in the field.

Outreach

I was the first person in my family to attend college and apply to law school. Entering law school without a mentor was daunting. I did not have anyone to help me navigate the competitive environment or explore my unexpressed expectations of law school. For example, I remember receiving a C on my first midterm and calling my mother, devastated. While my mother was a sympathetic ear, she could not explain that everyone who goes to law school has these setbacks and that these setbacks do not predict failure in the profession. I had nowhere else to go. A mentor could have reassured me, which is why mentors for minority students are important.

Therefore, as a part of our charge, we created an outreach program called "Team UF." Using this outreach model, a majority of the African-American students admitted to the law school were matched with a team consisting of a current student, a faculty member, and

a prominent alumnus. The team works with the student throughout his or her law school experience and ideally beyond graduation as the student embarks on his or her legal career.

I believe that these efforts, in addition to some of our more traditional recruitment efforts (attending law school fairs), helped us yield 34 African Americans and four additional students who each identified as African American and another ethnicity for the 2013 entering class (out of 318 students).

“ As a minority, I walked into my first diversity training thinking that I already knew about cultural sensitivities . . . ”

The Diversity Committee

One day, as I was talking with my tenure and promotion mentor about my interest in the topic of diversity, she strongly recommended that I consider joining the Diversity Committee. The committee is a fairly new committee comprised of 10 faculty and staff members from various university libraries and two student representatives. The Diversity Committee's mission is to promote intercultural understanding and acceptance among library users and library staff by educating, empowering, and creating self-awareness in the context of a global society. There are two primary efforts that we undertake: diversity training workshops and diversity potlucks.

Training Workshops

Cultural awareness is essential for our profession because, on any given day, we serve patrons from all ethnicities. It is important that we are educated about cultural differences so that we can be more sensitive to people's needs. This sensitivity is not limited to those we serve but also applies to the people we work with. So our committee decided to host a series of diversity training workshops each semester for all university library staff. We did not coordinate these trainings alone. The University of Florida's Department of Multicultural and Diversity Affairs, its LGBT Affairs Office, and its President Council on Diversity were great resources for finding speakers to invite to our trainings.

Last year, we hosted four diversity trainings for all library faculty and staff, which focused on how to serve our Islamic and Muslim students; how to increase awareness and understanding of current LGBTQ issues and LGBT history; how to communicate and

manage multigenerational relationships; and the importance of learning how diverse our campus is and what we can do to make it inclusive and affirming for students and faculty.

As a minority, I walked into my first diversity training thinking that I already knew about cultural sensitivities and did not have much more to learn. I assumed that my experiences were identical to the experiences of every other minority. Boy, was I wrong. I learned that the experience of being a minority is

individualized. For example, an African American woman would not automatically know about the customs, way of life, and experience of an African American Muslim woman. Additionally, these trainings benefited me as a professor, reminding me to be sensitive to students from cultures different from my own. In the future, we plan to rotate our topics and add new ones based on need.

Potlucks

Everyone loves food, right? Food plays a central role in cultures around the world. It is often a reason for people to come together and share fellowship with each other, so we thought a potluck would be a great way to get library staff to move toward those goals. We hosted our first diversity potluck in November 2013. We asked everyone to bring a dish that

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represents their cultural heritage to share with their library colleagues. Attendance was very good, and we enjoyed Chinese, Irish, Cuban, and Mexican dishes. Let's just say we were stuffed. Not only was it an opportunity to meet new people and catch up with colleagues, but we also were able to share recipes and childhood memories of making the dishes with our families. In the future, we plan to have at least one potluck per semester.

Recommendations

If you are looking for ways to promote or simply recognize diversity in your

institution, here are a few tips I offer from my own experience:

- Create a diversity statement to accompany your library's mission and vision statements. These statements (especially when posted on your website or included in the introductory paragraph of a job description) communicate the library's commitment to staff, faculty, potential employees, and the community you serve.
- Reach out to your local library school or alma mater and offer to mentor minority students who have an interest in law librarianship. It is a great opportunity to pay it forward and provide support and guidance to those students throughout their schooling and into their new careers.
- Showcase diversity in your library by purposefully taking photographs of students from all ethnicities while they attend library events or use library resources. Post these photographs on your library webpage and social media accounts as a visual reminder that the library welcomes everyone. AALL does a great job of uploading photographs to AALLNET that illustrate the richness of diversity in our profession.
- Collaborate with your university's multicultural affairs office to host diversity trainings for your library faculty and staff. These trainings are a great way to promote diversity and build professional development.
- Host a diversity potluck at your library, and encourage your staff to bring a dish from their childhood/heritage. You may even pick up a recipe or two.

I am grateful for the opportunity to promote diversity within my institution and hopefully take small steps toward increasing diversity in librarianship and legal education. I hope you can incorporate some of these efforts at your library to promote diversity. ■



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