

Unintentional Recruiting for Diversity

Introduction

Library and information science literature presents several types of intentional recruitment strategies, such as scholarships and mentoring programs. In this presentation, we will introduce the topic of unintentional recruitment: unconscious strategies used by librarians and library science faculty which affect patrons' likelihood to choose librarianship as a career choice. Unintentional recruitment strategies can be positive, inducing the patron to think of librarianship as a good career choice, or negative, inducing the patron to disregard librarianship as a career choice.

Strategies of negative recruitment, as found in our research investigation, are not the traditional "in your face" negative strategies that one might expect. We found more subtle negative strategies, including lack of communication with potential recruits, lack of visibility in the community, and lack of visible respect for the patron. Examples drawn from the research will illustrate how each of these strategies affects potential recruits to the profession.

To help librarians realize their everyday ability to draw in new recruits, we'll also emphasize positive strategies which encourage potential recruits. Included among these positive strategies are personal attention from library staff, providing a supportive environment, demonstrating respect for the patron, and recognizing diverse research needs. As with the negative results, our research will illustrate positive examples of unintentional recruitment.

The Research Projects

These findings rose out of three separate research projects, each of which used in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This qualitative method was chosen to capture respondents' own words and stories to explain their situations. We felt that this method would be more appropriate for working with underrepresented populations, because they have a story to tell about their choices which may not be the same as that of the dominant population, and which may not have been revealed in survey responses.

The first project took place in Fall 2001. Latino librarians were asked about their experiences in library science education. In the summer of 2002, the second project took place. Latino undergraduate students were interviewed, and asked about their contact with libraries, their career aspirations, and whether they had considered librarianship as a career option. The third project took place in Fall 2002. In this last project, two Latina and two Native American library school students were interviewed. Questions focused on their decision to enroll in library school and what drew them to the profession. Results from these projects led us to question whether recruiting for diversity was different from recruiting students from the dominant culture.

How Are Librarians Made? What the Research Says and What We Found

Entering this profession is a choice. Very few people can say that they "accidentally" enrolled in library school, or that they didn't realize that their master's degree in library science would lead

them to future library employment. Every librarian had a point at which he or she decided to become a librarian, and only after that decided which school to enroll in and what financial aid opportunities to pursue. We looked at recruitment as something that happens relatively early on in a student's career. Scholarship money, flexible course schedules, and distance education opportunities are tools to make LIS **education** possible. By the time these considerations come into play, though, the student has already decided upon librarianship as a career path (Van Fleet & Wallace, 2002).

LIS literature says that librarians choose their careers based on certain factors. These factors include knowing a librarian, being comfortable in the library environment, and knowing what librarians do and what librarianship involves.

- **Knowing a librarian**

In her study of why students select librarianship as a career in the early 1980s, Barbara Dewey found that most LIS students chose the profession after being influenced by other librarians. Moen and Heim's 1988 *Library and Information Science Student Attitudes, Demographics, and Aspirations* (LISSADA) Survey found that a third of LIS students were inspired to become librarians by other librarians. By contrast, less than 15 percent decided to enroll in library school based on a brochure or advertisement. A qualitative study of school librarians in the 1990s reinforced this: the librarians interviewed had all had some form of encouragement and reinforcement from relatives or friends who were librarians. And in a personal "case study," Latino librarian Ronald Rodriguez traced his career path back to an inspirational junior high school librarian.

Our research echoed this. When we asked Latino librarians what influenced them into the field, several indicated that they had role models, mentors, and friends who advised them to pursue the degree. Many had gone to school in the 1970s, and were encouraged to participate in programs like GLISSA by their friends and career counselors. (GLISSA stands for Graduate Library Institute for Spanish-Speaking Americans, and was a larger version of what Knowledge River is today.)

All of the graduate students mentioned how working with librarians during their academic career helped shaped their decision to pursue a LIS degree. The librarians added to the library experience through encouragement and praise. The students were encouraged by LIS professionals to apply to LIS programs. As children, the librarians knew each of the students by name and established a rapport that encouraged them to spend as much time in the library as possible. One student in particular discussed how her high school librarians not only assisted her with questions, she enjoyed helping. Years later, this memory was part of the drive to earn her MLS.

Of the Latino undergraduates interviewed, only one had a relationship with a librarian. Inez was part of a Latino book group led by this librarian. She had also had informal contact with a library school student, whom she had met through the book group, and who shared her interest in juvenile legal defense. Other than Inez, the undergraduates had no positive relationships with librarians which could have been used for recruitment purposes.

- **Being comfortable in libraries and familiar with the conditions of librarianship**

In general, people tend to go into professions that they know something about, and in which the setting is familiar. Children decide they want to be doctors or lawyers based on the impressions of the doctor's office, hospital, and courtroom that they've developed from television programming (Signorielli 318). Libraries don't get the same kind of popular media coverage, so recruiting new librarians generally has to rely upon people's previous experience as patrons or library employees in order to draw them into the field. In their study of public librarian recruitment, the Public Library Association said that one barrier to recruitment was "Inadequate Understanding of the Library Profession" (PLA 2000). People who work or volunteer in libraries manage to overcome this barrier.

The LISSADA study found that over half of all library school students had previous library experience. Esser's school librarians underwent a "cognitive apprenticeship" during their elementary years, by being allowed to work as student assistants in the school library. A 2001 article by Carolyn Caywood cites two librarians whose career decisions were based on library volunteer experience obtained during their teenage years. Children who volunteer in their school libraries are more likely to become librarians. Teenagers who obtain part-time jobs shelving materials are more likely to become librarians.

Our research again demonstrated this. One of the Latino librarians I interviewed told me, "I was a library aide, a page ... you just sort of realize that it's a very interesting type of work and move in that direction and before you know it, you're immersed in getting a formal education."

One of the graduate students was a student volunteer in the library and two others worked in libraries throughout their undergraduate studies. When Teresa and Ana graduated, they both ended up working full time in libraries. After a short time, they both realized that librarianship was the career they wanted. Teresa commented on how her co-workers and supervisors nagged her until she finally applied to an LIS program.

Of the undergraduate population, however, only Inez had library work-related experience. In eighth grade, she volunteered at her school library, shelving books. The other seven undergraduates had no work-related contact with libraries and, one must conclude, no ideas about the nature of library work.

Work experience is, of course, not the only type of experience that might draw people into a career in librarianship. When library service is visible in the community through outreach, programming, and bibliographic instruction, these services might lead one progressively to a career in librarianship. While none of the librarians interviewed mentioned this as something that had attracted them to the profession, several said it was something the profession should be doing to attract more young people.

None of the graduate students discussed attending library programs such as storytime; they all spoke of the joys of simply spending time in the library as a child. Two of the graduate students have expanded their own experiences by bringing their own children to libraries for reading

materials and for programs. Ana helps sponsor reading programs in her daughter's school in connection with the library. Wendy made a point of bringing her kids to the library on a regular basis. "As an adult, I took my children to the library every two weeks for them to check out books while I browsed in the stacks looking for the next novel to read." It quickly became a favorite family outing.

Of the undergraduates, Inez and one other woman had attended library storytimes as children. Said Inez, "When you're poor, [going to the library] is the cheapest thing to do." Four of the Latino undergraduates had taken a library orientation program or attended a library orientation lecture. Two had actually taken formal library skills coursework, and another two said that librarians came to their classes at the request of their teachers to discuss appropriate sources and search techniques for their subject areas. In general, students were not oriented to the library, and were not comfortable approaching staff for help. This doesn't say much for the likelihood of recruiting these students into the profession.

Two New Ideas about Making Librarians

Our studies reinforced the ideas of personal relationships and familiarity, but also found two additional factors that attract students of color: they saw librarianship as a profession in which they could be of service to others, and they saw librarianship as a profession in which people were treated with respect.

- *Being of service to others*

In her paper entitled "The Accidental Profession," Susan K. Martin says that librarianship is ripe for recruitment **despite** being characterized as a service profession. However, we found that Latinos and Native Americans were looking for career paths in which they could transform people's lives and affect them for the better. For these individuals, recruitment needs to emphasize that librarianship is the right choice for them **because** librarianship is a service profession.

As one Latina librarian said, "I didn't want to go into corporate America when I graduated. I wanted to do something to help others." She saw librarianship as a helping career, because she had been helped by librarians. Another librarian said that though he had considered a career in library education, he felt he could serve the greatest need by remaining in public libraries, providing help to his patrons, and partnering with library school faculty when the need arose.

All of the graduate students discussed their intent to work in either their home community or a very similar one. Teresa specifically stated that she wanted to return to her childhood library to help influence positive change on the community. Ana is already working within her neighborhood, acting as both a literacy advocate and an example of what is possible for the members of the community. "...they realize that I went to school up the street...they start to realize that coming from that areas...[they] can get a graduate degree in something...it's possible." The graduate students realized that they can be, and want to be, positive role models within their communities

To a person, every Latino undergraduate we interviewed was interested in taking up a service-oriented profession when they left college. Several wanted to be doctors, and cited influences like being able to help their communities. One wanted to be a health care administrator. Two wanted to be lawyers. And one wanted to be a schoolteacher. When asked why they settled on their specific career paths, all of the respondents echoed Mireya: “More than anything, I just want to help people. I feel that [my community], they’re the reason I am where, *why* I’m still here today, so I want to give back.”

- *Demonstrating respect for others*

Respect is an underlying characteristic in many career and educational decisions. Individuals want to receive respect for their work, as well as feel a sense of pride and accomplishment for what they do. One might not think of librarianship as a respected profession in the same way that doctors and lawyers are respected, but learning and knowledge are respected, and librarians are seen as having both.

The graduate students spoke of LIS and librarianship as a respectful profession. They each commented on librarians they respected and the respect they received in libraries. As users, they were encouraged by librarians to ask questions and to find information. They were given the idea that what they wanted to do and what they were trying to learn was important. There was recognition of the validity of their information needs and it gave them a sense of importance and worth. Although it was never plainly stated, they all alluded to feeling respected in the library and how that respect has impacted their decision. When they described interactions with librarians, they did so with respect for the individuals and what they did in their work.

Latino librarians didn’t focus on librarianship as a profession which demonstrated respect for others, but their discussions did allude to the role that respectful treatment played in their career decisions. Some indicated that they felt they were treated with a lack of respect in their graduate education, which they contrasted to the respect they felt from their coworkers in the library field.

Latino undergraduate students’ career choices suggest that they expect to be respected as professionals, and they anticipate treating other people with respect. Sara said, “Having good coworkers and supervisors is important to me ... I respect authority a lot, so I want to be able to [work with] someone that I respect, someone that, when I’m doing a good job, I know they actually appreciate it.” If they see respect between patrons and staff, undergraduates might be more inclined to see librarianship as a respectful profession.

Recruitment Strategies

- **#1: Developing Personal Relationships**

One of the easiest ways to get children and undergraduate students to think positively about libraries as a profession is to demonstrate caring for those children and undergraduates. In her studies of school librarians, Linda Esser cites a librarian who was motivated to become a librarian based on her memories of her local librarian always picking out books that might interest her. One of the graduate students, Wendy, was still influenced by her interactions with

the school librarians. “In the sixth grade, I volunteered at the school library after class. At the end of the year, I received an award from the school librarian.” The support and praise she received as a child has helped her to focus on the library as a way to help and encourage others. It won’t kill any of us to go back home tomorrow and smile at a little kid, recommend books for someone special, or call a friend who works as a teacher and ask to speak to the class about librarianship or library research. In fact, some of us might be doing these things already and providing an avenue for future recruits. We talk to patrons every day; we can direct some of that talk toward the goal of recruitment.

- *De-cruitment Strategy #1: Keeping to Yourself.*

Where most librarians fail in this regard is in not creating relationships with people who could become librarians. This is demonstrated when we look at the results of Latino undergraduate interviews – only one had a relationship with a librarian; the rest did not. In some sense, not creating relationships is natural – you can’t provide individualized service to every single person who comes into the library, and it feels unfair to treat one person better than another.

However, it won’t hurt to spend more time talking to people who are going to be in a position to choose a career: high school and college students looking at their future. If you perceive a staffing need in your library right now, you may not be able to address it right now. But that doesn’t mean you can’t start encouraging young girls and boys of color to think about library work. Eventually, they may become librarians. They’re far more likely to do so than they would be if you said nothing.

- **#2: Making Libraries and Librarianship Familiar**

People look for jobs in familiar fields. Unfortunately, libraries are rarely as familiar to people as we would like to believe. In our interviews with Latino undergraduates, one lady said that she “hated” the university library because it was so big and because she didn’t know where anything was. By contrast, she found the smaller public library “clean, attractive, and well-organized.” This suggests that librarians need to be taking a much more active role in familiarizing students with their college and university libraries. BI is something we do every day – some of us are even paid to do it, just as some of us are paid to do outreach. We can take some of that effort and target it toward people of color. Librarians could be doing intensive bibliographic instruction for student associations and fraternal organizations for students of color. Public librarians can visit high schools to make students aware of public library resources. And when job openings are available, prospective applicants can be directly approached. Librarians working with the community can target people who would do well in the library setting, and help those young people find employment in the library system. Maybe you are already doing some of these things – and maybe some of these young people will remember the nice librarian who helped them understand how books were filed.

One thing that did help make libraries “familiar” and comfortable environments for our Latino undergraduates was the addition of computers into the library. Many students noted the university library’s remodeling to include a computer lab as making them more likely to use the library. However, one is compelled to wonder whether the addition of computers increases their

inclination to use the library's print resources, or if it just provides convenient access for their use of electronic and web resources.

- *De-cruitment Strategy #2: Waiting for "Them" to Take the Lead.*

I worked at the public library, and I remember how easy it was to sit at the desk, smiling hopefully at patrons as they walked by. I also remember working at the academic library, and wondering why teachers never invited us into their classrooms to talk about the library resources that their students subsequently used. In waiting for "them" to take the lead, I realize that I squandered several opportunities for publicity and eventual recruitment. This was reinforced by a comment that one of the Latino undergraduates made about roving reference: "They started having people go up to you and ask if you needed help. I like that, because sometimes you don't like to go to the desk and ask." Students are frequently intimidated by the library and by librarians; they aren't going to take the lead unless we show them our library world and demonstrate why we love it here.

- **#3: Demonstrating Service**

The undergraduates we interviewed almost universally wanted jobs in which they could help other people. Money was a secondary, though important, concern. Librarians need to be active in the community, working with and for the people, if they want to recruit applicants of color. One of the obvious ways to demonstrate that librarianship is a service profession is to get out into the community and serve. Plan programs which bring diverse groups together. Go into schools, visit classes, and show them how libraries can help them with their research questions. Partner with community service agencies and make your library a career training site. And tell people, in no uncertain terms, that librarians are there to help them.

- *De-cruitment Strategy #3: Not Caring.*

A survey of African American undergraduates in 2002 suggested that they did not see librarianship as a service profession – less than 30% associated community service with librarians' skills and activities (Solomon, 2002). One Latino undergraduate shared a negative opinion of her high school librarian: "She just didn't care about helping us. I went to the city library, where at least they acted like they cared." In the rush to become an "information profession," sometimes we forget that we're also a people profession and a helping profession. We need to emphasize that if we want our library jobs to look interesting to diverse applicants. We don't write grants and plan programs for the sake of killing time – but unless we are seen helping in the community, potential recruits aren't going to know that.

- **#4: Demonstrating Respect**

Everyone who comes into the library deserves to be treated with the same level of respect. For some, simply receiving good service is enough. Responding to questions with interest takes the reference interview to a different level. By treating each question as a 'legitimate' inquiry, the librarian helps provide a level of validity to an individual's information needs. One of the graduate students commented on her experience with the high school librarians. "I usually went

straight to her and just sit there and she'd be like 'Oooh, what to we get to find today?'" The encouragement Kathy received only increased her desire to learn and her respect for the library. Even when a question is left unanswered, individuals remember the experience well and are more likely to return. It doesn't take a lot to encourage questions, but the results can have a strong impact.

- *De-cruitment Strategy #4: Demonstrating Disrespect.*

Part of respect is the recognition of different ideas and diverse needs. One of the worst things a librarian can do is to marginalize a question. Just because an individual can't understand why certain information is important, it doesn't mean that it isn't. Acting as if the inquiry is silly or irrelevant not only disrespects the patron's needs, it also alienated the individual from the library. We need to provide an open and welcoming environment, which includes encouraging patrons to ask questions, regardless of the staff's own concepts of 'good' information. The library serves diverse populations. LIS professionals need to recognize these differences and respect this vast array of information needs.

Summary

Recruitment is more than just offering money for someone to go to library school. Money is nice – but what would your reaction be if tomorrow, someone offered you free tuition at the Sheep Herding School? It would probably be something along the lines of, "Why on earth would I want to be a shepherd?" You might also think, "Who's going to support my family while I'm off at Sheep Herding School?" or "Have I ever even **met** a shepherd?" However, if your local shepherd had always been kind to you, and let you watch the sheep after school, you might consider that shepherding scholarship. If you knew that your job herding sheep would benefit your community and enable them to reach their dreams, you might find the concept of Sheep Herding School attractive enough to overcome the obstacles.

Recruitment is an ongoing process. The day is very far away when we will be able to say, "We've done our share; the need is filled." The combined ALA-accredited library schools graduate about 5,000 students each year. For one class to achieve proportional representation, about 1,500 of those graduates would need to be people of color (Adkins & Espinal, 2004). Currently, only about 500 are. Granted, we're closer to the target now than we were in the 1980s, when people of color made up only 5 percent of new librarian graduates, but a lot of work remains to be done.

Small steps are as important as big ones. The Spectrum Scholarship, for instance, is a wonderful big step: in addition to a large scholarship, Spectrum Scholars get training for leadership, networking with peers, and the support of the library community. When you go home tomorrow, I'm guessing that none of you will be dipping into your petty cash and setting up a Spectrum-like program. However, every single one of you probably works with or knows a young person of color who sees you in your library. We need to speculate on what messages we're sending to those young people, and make certain our messages are the kind that will promote librarianship as a career option.

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