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Shaundra Walker  
shaundra.walker@gcsu.edu

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## Chapter Nine

# Developing Cultural Competency and Sensitivity

Shaundra Walker

You got tuh go there tuh know there.

—Zora Neale Hurston

This chapter provides an introduction to cultural competence within the library profession and describes my experience developing and teaching a four-week asynchronous online course on cultural competence for academic librarians. While diversity is a popular topic of conversation within the larger society and the library profession, discussions about the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of library professionals to function and to thrive within diverse environments are not as common. Slowly but surely, the profession is coming to the realization that, if librarians and libraries are to thrive in the future, possessing cultural competence will be critical to their success.

### CULTURAL COMPETENCE DEFINED

Patricia Overall (2009) was one of the first scholars to offer a definition of *cultural competence* within the library and information science (LIS) profession, referring to it as “a highly developed ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently” (p. 176). Several years later, in “Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries” (2012), the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) borrowed liberally from the social work profession, using the following language to define *cultural competence* as

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. (para. 6)

### WHY CULTURAL COMPETENCE IS IMPORTANT

As our nation becomes more culturally diverse, developing and maintaining cultural competence will be an essential skill for librarians, and providing culturally relevant services and resources will be important for libraries of all types. Just examining the changing demographics of the United States in comparison to the lack of progress in diversifying the library profession helps one to understand the increasing importance of cultural competence.

In 2007, the American Library Association (ALA) released *Diversity Counts*, “a comprehensive study of gender, race and age in the library profession” (para. 1). Updated in 2012, the most recent version of the study indicates that, while minimal progress was observed between the first and second versions of the study, there is much room for improvement. The percentage of credentialed librarians of color working in academic, public, school, and other libraries increased by only 1% between 2006 and 2011. Maureen Sullivan, ALA president at the time, remarked, “Although the findings show some improvement in the diversity of the library workforce, we clearly have a long way to go” (para. 6).

While diversity among credentialed librarians remains stagnant, the demographics of the United States are changing rapidly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), babies of color now outnumber non-Hispanic White babies (50.4%). During the 2014–2015 school year, minority student enrollment in public schools surpassed White enrollment for the first time (Maxwell, 2014). These data suggest that, in the future, academic libraries will serve a demographic that looks much different from its workforce, making cultural competence critical for the successful provision of services and resources.

These demographic shifts are taking place at a time when the United States is increasingly polarized. Regrettably, the academic library is a place where these tensions play out. A recent article in *Library Journal* highlighted a rash of incidents that took place within academic libraries shortly after the 2016 election, including hate speech, graffiti, and even racially motivated violence (Peet, 2017). These incidents are not limited to library practitioners; there is a growing body of research on the racialized, gendered experiences of librarians working in the field, suggesting that there is much work to be

done on that front, as well (Alabi, 2015; Damasco & Hodges, 2012; Daniel, 2013; Hathcock, 2015; Swanson, Gonzales-Smith, & Tanaka, 2014).

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE WITHIN LIS CURRICULA

The ALA-accredited master's degree is still considered the terminal degree for library professionals. Standard 2 (curriculum) of the "ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies" maintains that the LIS curriculum "responds to the needs of a diverse and global society, including the needs of underserved groups" (American Library Association, 2015, p. 5). Research by LIS scholars provides perspective on how well library education programs are meeting this requirement.

Mestre (2010) documented the challenges faced by librarians who had not received cultural competency training during their LIS programs. One of the major findings of the study was that neither library school curricula nor professional development in the job setting helped participants to become culturally competent. The study also called for cultural competency training to be included as a core component of LIS curricula. Similarly, Kumasi and Hill's (2011) pilot study of LIS students revealed that students felt there was a need to "infuse cultural competence learning objectives into the LIS curriculum" (p. 260). More recent scholarship has identified "diversity levers," existing places in the LIS curriculum that are ripe for the infusion of diversity and social justice concepts (Kumasi & Manlove, 2015, p. 415).

While there is increasing promise that LIS curricula of the future will be infused with cultural competence as a key learning outcome, librarians who are already working in the field, many of whom have not been the beneficiaries of such training during their LIS graduate experiences, still need this essential skill.

## DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS

In spring 2015, the Library Juice Academy, a company providing a host of professional development courses to librarians, sought proposals for the development of a cultural competence course for academic librarians. In response to the call, I developed a proposal for the design of a four-week asynchronous online course, anchored by the ACRL "Diversity Standards."

In addition to using the "Diversity Standards" for academic librarians, the course also relies heavily on Overall's (2009) "Building Blocks to Cultural Competence" conceptual model, which presents the development of cultural competence as a continuum. The process of becoming culturally competent begins at cultural incapacity on the lower end and progresses to cultural

competency on the higher end. Cultural incapacity is evidenced by an inability to recognize one's own biases, while cultural proficiency is demonstrated by "changes in policies, standards and practices to increase opportunities for culturally diverse groups" (pp. 185–186). Self-reflection, education, travel, and other forms of professional development provide an avenue to progress from the lower end of the continuum to the ideal of cultural competence (Overall, 2009).

### Professional Standards and Learning Outcomes

Because the course was to be delivered asynchronously and in consideration of Overall's (2009) cultural competence continuum, I decided to focus on professional standards and learning outcomes that would be relevant to an individual. As mentioned previously, the course uses the ACRL "Diversity Standards." Specifically, it focuses on the following standards:

- Standard 1: Cultural awareness of self and others. Librarians and library staff should develop an understanding of their own personal cultural values and beliefs as a first step in appreciating the importance of multicultural identities in the lives of people they work with and serve.
- Standard 2: Cross-cultural knowledge and skills. Librarians and library staff shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, and artistic expressions of colleagues, coworkers, and major constituencies served.
- Standard 4: Development of collections, programs, and services. Libraries and library staff shall develop collections and provide programs and services that are inclusive of the needs of all persons in the community the library serves.
- Standard 5: Service delivery. Librarians and library staff shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use and provision of information services available in the community and broader society and shall be able to make appropriate referrals for their diverse constituencies.

The course endeavors to introduce academic librarians to the concept of cultural competence in the library and information science profession. Specifically, it was designed to assist participants with

- defining *cultural competence* as it applies within the academic library in order to explain its benefits for organizational performance and success;
- examining personal cultural values and beliefs in order to better appreciate the cultural values and beliefs of others;
- investigating strategies for applying cultural competence; and

- identifying opportunities for new or enhanced library programs, services, and resources.

Recognizing that individuals enrolled in the course come from different backgrounds and with different experiences, I made the deliberate decision to weave self-reflective activities throughout the course. In the introductory module, students are provided with theoretical information, primarily through readings and presentations, that forms the foundation of the course. The students are then asked to reflect on their reasons for enrolling in the course and what they hope to gain. Not only does this exercise help the students to consider their motivations, but also it assists the instructor in clarifying the students' intent, which helps in making appropriate adjustments to the course content as necessary.

In the second module, students examine their personal beliefs as they relate to culture and identity and have an opportunity to consider the cultural beliefs and identities of their classmates. This is achieved by completing an adapted version of an activity called "The 'I Am Me' Poem," where students reflect on and list the different aspects of their identity. The activity is designed to help students gain an understanding of the complexities of identity and how individuals may see themselves very differently from how they are perceived by others. To frame the assignment, students engage in a variety of readings from the psychology literature, as well as the LIS context. Through a combination of self-reflection and comparison and contrast, this assignment serves the dual purpose of helping students to understand the role of identity and how it is influenced by culture, varies among different people, and potentially affects service delivery.

In the next module, students are tasked with contacting their institutional research offices to learn more about the demographics of their campuses. In conjunction with this task, students identify and briefly describe campus resources that are available for diverse groups. The third module also requires students to locate resourceful individuals and community groups that are already working with diverse groups on campus. Collectively, the gathered data provides students with the foundational information they need to understand the demographics of their campuses and identify potential collaborative partners.

The course's final module requires students to engage with the library literature to identify scholars and practitioners who are involved in diversity work and find replicable examples that could be implemented in their day-to-day work. Students are charged with evaluating the program or service to determine its consistency with the ACRL "Diversity Standards." Regardless of where students are positioned within their library organizations, they leave the course with a rich resource list that can be taken back to their home institutions. This resource list will be especially beneficial for students who

are already engaged in diversity work within their libraries or on their campuses.

### Lessons Learned and Course Revisions

One of the most evident lessons learned through developing and teaching this course was that academic librarians bring a wide range of prior knowledge and ability into the cultural competence classroom. Some participants in the course were already engaged in some level of diversity and inclusion work and were eager to build upon their prior knowledge. Others were self-motivated and enrolled in the course of their own choosing. On occasion, students enrolled because their parent institution (college or university where employed) was engaged in a campus-wide diversity program. In a few rare instances, students enrolled because cultural competence training was a job requirement due to a mandate from either the library administration or the university, perhaps as a part of the promotion, tenure, or evaluation process. In my experience, those various motivations influenced students' engagement in the course.

I observed that teaching and learning cultural competence in an asynchronous online environment can be challenging. The first time I taught the course, students were required to publish their "I Am Me" poems within a message board where they could be read by others in the class. Several students contacted me to indicate that such public posts, even in an online environment, made them feel somewhat uncomfortable, so in other iterations of the course, students have been allowed to share their poems only with me. While the most personal aspect of the assignment was modified, students are still required to post a reflection of what they learned about themselves and a consideration of how their identity characteristics might affect their work, relative to the demographics of their institutions.

On several occasions, groups of students from the same institution enrolled in the same section of the course. Oftentimes these individuals would be members of library diversity committees or represent different departments within the same institution. Although these groups obviously anticipated finding value in going through the course together, because the course was designed for individual consumption, working with several students from the same institution proved to be challenging to me for several reasons. First and foremost, because the course relies heavily on self-reflection, students from the same institution would often be reluctant to be as transparent as they might have been if they were taking the course on an individual level. To a certain degree, the asynchronous online environment benefited the students and the course by offering a degree of anonymity, perhaps making it easier for some students to share their experiences. This effect was null and void when students from the same institution attended in one setting. Similar-

ly, because one of the information-gathering assignments required students to work with their campus institutional research office, the posts from students from the same institution became redundant and took away from the value gained by having students from different institutions share about their respective campuses. This effect was particularly strong in smaller sections of the course and at times appeared to isolate those who were truly taking the course on an individual basis.

### **Recommendation**

Based on my experience, it might prove useful for students to participate in a series of professional development experiences designed for cultural competence. Four weeks of asynchronous learning simply does not provide an adequate amount of time to work with students. Either a two-part course or courses for individuals and for groups would be beneficial. Additional courses could delve into standards, such as those that deal with workforce diversity, organizational dynamics, and cross-cultural leadership. Librarians who have participated in the course thus far have been primarily in nonsupervisory positions. While librarians who do not supervise others certainly need to be culturally competent to deliver the best services and resources to their constituents, academic library leaders also require competence to effectively lead changes that will be necessary in the future. As Overall (2009) acknowledges, cultural competence is exhibited by changes in policies and practices at its highest level. In order for structural processes within academic libraries to change, library leaders will need to embrace diversity and develop and maintain cultural competence.

### **CONCLUSION**

Cultural competence is an essential skill for academic librarians. Changing demographics coupled with a lack of progress in diversifying the library profession will increase the need for this skill, as academic libraries will find themselves serving constituencies with cultural backgrounds that are vastly different from those providing services and resources. Although there are promising developments within the LIS curriculum to infuse cultural competence as a key learning outcome for future librarians, there remain a large number of practicing librarians who also need cultural competence. The four-week asynchronous cultural competence course for librarians, as described in this chapter, represents one option for building cultural competence for academic librarians.



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