

# Keynote Address

## **Diversity in Libraries November 22, 2004 Long Branch, NJ**

Frank G. Bowe, Ph.D., LL.D.

Good morning. It is a pleasure for me to join you.

This is, by acclamation, the “Information Age” – and librarians are, by definition, information professionals.

Why, then, do so many of you feel as if people in your communities are bypassing you? Does it sometimes seem as if everyone is “Googling” – and not visiting local libraries?

It may seem like that. Let me assure you that *I* would be the last person to bypass libraries. Many years ago, when I was struggling in school as the only deaf student among 1,000 hearing students, you guys literally saved my life. I took out three or four books every week from three libraries in my hometown. By reading, and reading, and reading, I eventually learned the English language. I also discovered – to my amazement! – what people say to each other. Novels did that for me. The librarians at the Himmelreich Library, the Bucknell University library, and the Lewisburg Joint High School library were my guides. I thank them, and you.

One reason – perhaps – why you may sometimes feel as if people are not making as much use of your library as you would wish has to do with diversity. That’s what we’re discussing here today. I will talk briefly first about the *why* of diversity – the changes to which you as librarians need to respond. I will then turn to the *how* of diversity – specific steps you can take to make your programs more welcoming for an increasingly diverse society. In what follows, I have benefited from reading a recent paper by Dr. Mark Winston, associate professor of library and information science at Rutgers. I thank Dr. Winston.

### **THE ‘WHY’ OF DIVERSITY IN LIBRARIES**

America – and the tri-state area in particular – are experiencing some remarkable changes.

Although immigration slowed immediately after 9/11, it is still transforming this nation. Looking just at the

10-year period 1990-2000, we see that the number of Americans who are identified as “foreign-born” (first-generation Americans) increased by a remarkable 42%, according to the US Census Bureau’s 2000 March supplement to the Current Population Survey (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-206.pdf>). These people are native speakers of a daunting variety of languages.

Did you know that the largest ethnic minority group in the United States no longer is African Americans? As of 2003, the #1 group is, instead, Hispanic Americans. Latinos increased in number by an astonishing 58% in just 10 years (1990 – 2000), according to the Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/p20-535/p20-535.pdf>). Hispanic Americans now number 37 million. Two out of every three are Mexican Americans, with large numbers of others coming from Central/South America and from Puerto Rico, according to the National Council of La Raza (<http://www.nclr.org/>). Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans are expected to increase by one-third by 2010, about five years from now.

Meanwhile, the “age wave” is cresting. Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) number 76 million. The oldest turned 58 this year. Over the next several years, this “pig in a python” will reach “retirement age” – which I place into quotation marks because for many, retirement will occur not at 62 nor at 65 but rather at 67 – or even later. Many of these people, contrary to popular belief, are active searchers for information. They have become lifelong learners. Seniornet, for example, has 240 learning centers around the country; its Web page (<http://www.seniornet.org/>) averages two million hits per month. According to a survey of its 75,000 members, conducted in July 2004, more than half use e-mail regularly and most browse on the Web, especially for information related to health.

And Americans with disabilities are also increasing in number. They, too, tend to be hungry for information. This population is frustrated by its chronic inability to break through: just one in every three works; about three in every ten live in poverty; and just 22% have a college degree. People with disabilities very much need access to information – about continuing and adult education, job training, assistive technology, health care and other benefit programs – yet, because so many are poor, may not have the PCs and Internet access required to gain entry to the vast realms of information “out there” that could help them. This is where public libraries come in.

## **THE ‘HOW’ OF DIVERSITY IN LIBRARIES**

The first step to take, I believe, is to assess the diversity of your community. You should take note of the number of members of ethnic and racial minority groups, of people for whom a language other than English is the native tongue, of individuals with disabilities, of senior citizens, etc. One starting place is the US Bureau of the Census. Its American Community Survey (ACS) offers 2003 county- and state-wide demographic information at: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/Single/2003/ACS/index.htm>. You can learn, for example, how many people speak languages other than English, how many with disabilities, how many persons are aged 65 and over in your county.

The second step is to compare those figures to the profile of users of your library. Of necessity, this will be largely anecdotal (e.g., the opinions of library staff based upon their day-to-day interactions with library patrons). You might, however, assign a volunteer to record apparent demographic characteristics of patrons visiting the library during sample time periods. You might also send out, via e-mail or snail mail, or place on check-out counters, a short anonymous survey form.

If the two sets of numbers are similar, you likely have no serious issues with respect to diversity. If, however, they diverge sharply, you know that you do have issues.

The third step, it seems to me, is for the library's leadership to get firmly behind diversity as a core organizational goal. Not much will happen unless the library's leaders support it. Logical next steps include establishing diversity objectives, adding those objectives prominently onto the library's Web site, and commissioning diversity-related reports. These measures may be facilitated by the creation of a diversity advisory committee, ideally drawn from the community you serve. It should go without saying that this committee should be asked to recommend books, periodicals and other acquisitions likely to interest people from diverse backgrounds. The library's annual reports should document yearly progress in all of these areas. Ocean County Public Library, by most measures the state's largest public library, has taken all of these steps. Mark Winston, of Rutgers, recently has written about this library ("Leadership Diversity Theory" A Public Library Case Study", in press at the journal *Public Library Quarterly*; for a copy, contact Dr. Winston at [mwinston@scils.rutgers.edu](mailto:mwinston@scils.rutgers.edu)).

It is common sense that people will feel most welcome in an environment that "feels like me" – an environment, that is, that features staff members who share the community's demographic characteristics. This means taking steps to recruit as staff members and as volunteers persons who have the characteristics currently in short supply in the library. An added advantage is that research in corporations shows that staff diversity is positively correlated to organizational effectiveness. This makes sense – a more diverse team will be more sensitive to marketing needs and will consider a broader array of strategies and tactics than is the case with a less diverse team.

Similarly, people will feel "at home" in an environment that celebrates the "months" (e.g., Hispanic Heritage Month) that are important to the community. This means asking persons of diverse backgrounds to assist library leaders in identifying important dates and highly visible ways of celebrating them. The environment can also help in other ways. For example, I am continually encountering grandmothers who are taking care of young children. These women typically are in their 50s and 60s. They would welcome the kinds of environments that they find in some of the more progressive bookstores out there – you know what I mean: plenty of open space and toys/objects such as Colorform pieces matching shapes on a rug for children to play with, sitting areas with cushy seats and a fireplace, and the like.

I would also recommend that you fully implement broadband – high-speed, always-on, voice/video/data – capabilities in your library. The “Digital Divide” – the divergence between the “haves” and the “have nots” with respect to PC ownership, Internet connections, and broadband use – remains, notwithstanding the recent efforts in Washington to downplay its seriousness. Many families, and the children of those families, need to use the computers and connections that you have thanks to e-rate. So do many seniors. A 2002 paper by Richard Adler -- <http://www.seniornet.org/php/default.php?PageID=6694> -- sponsored by SeniorNet and Verizon Communications, outlines how broadband is already transforming the lives of millions of senior citizens. I have reported on the use by persons with disabilities of information technologies at: [http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/frank\\_g\\_bowe/bb/](http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/frank_g_bowe/bb/). (The paper is also available, in an earlier form, from the New Millennium Research Council at: <http://www.newmillenniumresearch.org/archive/disability.pdf>).

The more information you have that is in digital format, the better. Digitized information can be listened to, rather than or in addition to being read. This helps many older persons and people with disabilities. Digital text, too, may be enlarged as needed. It can be translated to languages other than English much more rapidly than can analog information. While machine language translation is not yet sufficiently mature so as to render high-quality translations, it can handle some text. Today, for example, you can translate Web pages “on the fly” at Google – [http://www.google.com/language\\_tools](http://www.google.com/language_tools) can translate English Web content into 60+ languages. Human translators can work faster, and at lower cost to you, from machine-translated drafts. This can include material on your library’s Web site. If you have on staff persons who are bilingual, they can, of course, perform these translations.

You can partner with community groups in “getting the word out” about the progress you are making in diversity. Let radio stations, magazines, newspapers, etc., that reach diverse audiences tell your story. There are more than 700 Spanish-language papers, and 600 Asian-language papers, in the U.S. Helping will be a “champion” who serves as your “voice” in each community, so that newspaper stories may open with a personal story.

You may also consult with experts on diversity. A good resource is *The Source Book of Multicultural Experts* (Lisa Skriloff, Multicultural Marketing Resources, Inc., 1998). My colleague at Hofstra, Dr. Daniel T. Sciarra, is one of those experts (e-mail: [cprdts@hofstra.edu](mailto:cprdts@hofstra.edu)). You may also benefit from reading *Diversity Inc.* magazine; they offer an online resource guide at: <http://www.diversityinc.com/public/2028.cfm>. The Public Relations Society of America has a new “Diversity Tool Kit” (see: <http://www.prsa.org/>). And I have found the American Studies Web at Georgetown University to be particularly valuable: <http://cfdev.georgetown.edu/cndls/asw/>.

If all of this interests you, let me conclude by noting that I have written about these issues in *Making Inclusion Work* (Prentice Hall, 2005) and in *Birth to Eight: Early Childhood Special Education* (International Thomson Publishers, 2004).