Using Educational Entrepreneurship to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in Library and Information Science Education

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Shorter Abstract
Through curriculum development, community partnerships and internships, Library and Information Science programs can use educational entrepreneurship to reach historically underrepresented populations and promote a more diverse and inclusive field. This paper explores relevant lessons and best practices from a Master’s in Library Science program at the University of Maryland.

Longer Abstract
Educational entrepreneurship presents opportunities for Library and Information Science (LIS) institutions to be inclusive by designing program and courses that teach designing inclusive services and programs that can be offered to diverse populations, develop community partnerships with information institutions in the nearby area that serve such populations, and provide internship opportunities in these information institutions. A key benefit of such educational entrepreneurship is that it allows schools and their student bodies to work with populations that are underserved, underrepresented, and disadvantaged. This paper explores how a Master’s in Library Science (MLS) program at the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland implemented such programming and the lessons learned. Other LIS institutions with existing MLS programs can adopt this model and offer such experiences to their students and communities.

Issues of diversity are central concerns for a field dedicated to promoting widespread and equitable access to information and information literacy, both in the composition of the profession and in need for practice infused with cultural competence (Jaeger, Bertot, & Subramaniam, 2013). In addition to historical issues, technological, social, and demographic
changes give greater importance to information and information technologies, expanding the range of diverse populations affected by information issues. Information diversity encompasses race, gender, ethnicity, language, literacy, disability, age, socio-economic status, technology access and skills, and other important considerations (Jaeger, Subramaniam, Jones, & Bertot, 2011).

The composition of our profession does not reflect the society that we serve, with race being a particularly long-running challenge. Despite offering of scholarship awards to minority students (such as through Laura Bush 21st Century Grants offered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services), LIS continues to struggle to recruit, train and sustain professionals from diverse racial backgrounds. The focus on the issue of racial underrepresentation, however, masks the issues of the underrepresentation of other populations among LIS students and professionals. As the nation grows ever-more diverse in terms of race, language, literacy, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, education level, socio-economic status, and other factors, reflecting the diversity of society becomes ever-more important for libraries to remain relevant to the communities they exist to serve.

A number of LIS schools have promoted diversity through individual courses, recruiting plans, mentoring initiatives, and academic programs (Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2010, 2011). Notable efforts like the University of Arizona’s Knowledge River Project (http://sirls.arizona.edu/kr/) and the University of Illinois’ LIS Access Midwest Program (http://www.lis.illinois.edu/admissions/lamp) remain uncommon. Several professional organizations in the field, such as the American Library Association, the Association of College and Research Libraries, and the Association of Research Libraries also have scholarship and fellowship programs to recruit and support these students. These initiatives obviously help to increase the diversity of the profession in terms of race and ethnicity, but focus on a specific population (such as Hispanic or Native American) or focus on recruiting underserved populations into LIS. As successful as these programs are, they do not make large-scale changes in the profession. They also are only a first step, as they do not address the issue of comprehensively incorporating diversity and inclusion into the broad and specific aspects of LIS curriculum.

To meet the information needs of this increasingly diverse society, all of our graduates need to be culturally competent from the moment they graduate. This means being ready to work with patrons of all the different populations noted above and perhaps others that are unique to the local community being served. The curriculum of LIS education has to adapt and evolve much faster that it has so far to ensure that our graduates are ready to serve every member of their communities. And, of course, these challenges must be met in times of unprecedented levels of usage of libraries and often catastrophic budget cuts (Taylor et al, 2012; IMLS, 2013).

The vast majority of students graduating from LIS programs – nearly 80% – do not feel that they had the chance to take even one class related to diversity (Mestre, 2010). Of the courses offered by LIS programs that are related to diversity, the vast majority are electives that may be offered infrequently, if at all (Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2011). Among iSchools, which include many of LIS programs with the largest enrollments and largest emphases on research, the availability of courses related to diversity is even more limited as among LIS programs as a whole (Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2010). LIS schools must simultaneously confront the need to draw a pool of students that better represents the general population and the need to provide a curriculum that ensures that all students are ready to effectively serve the full range of populations in their communities when they start their new careers.
The IMLS-funded “Diverse Populations, Information, and Library Education” scholarship program (http://ischool.umd.edu/content/specializations-0) funded 25 students in completion of their MLS degree with a specialization in Information and Diverse Populations at the University of Maryland. The four courses that were developed for this specialization are infused with diversity and inclusive components – such as a weekly focus on specific populations, project based learning with near-by libraries and government agencies, exposure to diversity literature and research methodologies for conducting studies with underserved or disadvantaged populations, and participation in diversity-related conferences and programming. Along with these activities, students also received mentoring from partner institutions that serve patrons from diverse communities, shadowed their mentors and trained to be mentors themselves. Students also completed internships in partner institutions. Such educational entrepreneurship benefits the students tremendously, but also benefits the information institutions and the communities that they serve, as students bring fresh and valuable ideas and work on projects that benefit these communities.

The unique curriculum development, community partnerships, mentoring and internship models and the related best practices and lessons from this project revealed much about the future construction of LIS programs to promote diversity and inclusion. These best practices of educational entrepreneurship with a focus on diversity and inclusion can be weaved into the current offerings of LIS programs in other institutions, enabling all LIS institutions to embrace diversity and inclusiveness.

References