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LIS Programs and the Need for Diversity

by

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I feel lucky to have grown up in Miami, a primarily Hispanic city, where I am not very different from any other Hispanic American. However, as I have grown and traveled across the country, that has changed. What I look like is politics. The color of my skin and the second language I speak are judged in ways that I cannot control. During a road trip from Miami, Florida to Seattle, Washington I could see the way people reacted to me, the looks they gave, and felt uncomfortable. I thought, if I am feeling this way, what are patrons in different states, in different libraries, all across the country feeling? As information professionals or librarians, in whatever role you play, a big part of your job will be to serve a community. The community may be public, academic, rural, or urban, but I guarantee you it will be filled with people from different races, social classes, age groups, etc. It has become evident that a basic understanding of social issues and the state of the profession is missing from LIS education, and perhaps, in the profession itself.

I thought I was the only one with thoughts on the lack of diversity in libraries until I started to realize, I am not alone. This realization occurred when I met [Chris Bourg](#) and an amazing group of people who continue to inspire me daily. I was in the room when Chris spoke about the future of libraries, the same talk that inspired the post; [“whiteness, social justice and the future of libraries”](#). We, as LIS students, as the future of librarianship, need to ask ourselves; how is my program preparing me for librarianship? What are the current issues in librarianship? Why aren't we having these discussions in class? What can I do to learn more about this? I decided to revive my Twitter account and delved deep into Library Land. I found allies and resources through [#CritLib](#) chats, interactions with librarians, and blogs. I followed conference hashtags and other LIS students who introduced me to events like the [Diversity, Equity, Race, Accessibility, and Identity in LIS](#) (DERAIL) Forum. I attended virtually and learned about issues that have not been addressed in my core courses, such as ensuring accessibility for disabled or colorblind patrons and serving refugee populations, to name a few.

Nevertheless, I continue to encounter situations reminding me I am part of the 3%* of librarians who are Hispanic, and in this instance, not even part of the equation.

*([Librarianship is 88% white](#)) In one of my online courses we were asked to read Daniel Traister's article, [“The Rare Book Librarian's Day”](#). It is a short article describing a day in the life of the curator of special collections. It began with this;

“In the autumn of 1975, I entered library school, where I was pleased to find a program especially designed for the preparation of rare book librarians. I was less pleased to hear my instructor inform my class, at its first meeting, that jobs in rare books generally went to rich WASP males. But I am a baseball fan and know that .333 is a respectable major league batting average. So, even though I failed both “rich” and “WASP,” I gambled on “male” – and, I suppose, I have won my little bet”

According to his instructor, I would have a 0% chance, as I am Hispanic, lower-middle class, and a woman. Not to mention the different obstacles people of color must overcome, and structures we must learn to work within in order to succeed. (A great article by Angela Galvan provides context [here](#).) That week a classmate posted a comment saying that if you want something bad enough, you can achieve it, as Traister did. But not all of us have the same opportunities as a white man, or a white woman, and many people of color are perceived and judged in ways we cannot control that effect those opportunities. Furthermore, as students, I believe it is our job to be critical of the information we receive. I also think that some readings are there to spark conversations. Unfortunately, professors do not get involved in discussion posts so I took it upon myself, to very respectfully, say something. As the saying goes, if you see something, say something.

The reality is that important discussions are taking place, just not in library school, and that is a problem. We need to address this in LIS programs when students first learn the policies, practices, and theory of librarianship. This problem inspired a big, wild, ridiculous question. What if there was an LIS association, specifically for LIS students, where we can voice our concerns and help get the information that library school is not currently teaching? My program does not have an ALA student chapter but with a general LIS chapter we could have those benefits, and have conferences like DERAILED or the [Symposium on LIS Education](#). Either way, let's start a discussion, both on blackboard and in our programs. Let's approach things differently when we post our introductory bios and help introduce people to new resources. We need to create a foundation for dialogue within the LIS curriculum. To quote Bell Hooks in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; “To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences.” (pg.130)

Denisse Solis works as copy cataloguer at FIU Libraries. She is pursuing an MLIS at Kent State University where she is specializing in archives, digital preservation, and special collections. She is an ALA Spectrum Scholar (2016-2017) and an ARL Diversity Scholar.

