Do You Really Want a Diverse Program?

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Despite multiple calls for diversifying academia in general, and Library and Information Science programs (LIS) specifically, the number of faculty of color working in higher education remains low. This work presents the points of view and suggestions of a faculty member concerning the diversity dilemma in LIS. The work relies on personal narratives in order to present the experiences and point of view of a member of the LIS community who constantly navigates the spaces of academia while negotiating the many aspects of their experience through the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender. The main objective of the work is to present areas for consideration to those who are interested in bringing change and supporting faculty of color.

Keywords: diversity in LIS, LIS faculty, non-native English speakers, people of color in academia

I started seriously thinking about what it means to have a diverse workplace, especially in academia, not too long after starting my first job as a faculty member. Many years later I was invited to participate on a panel for the ALISE 2018 annual conference. The panel was based on a paper on which I had worked along with other faculty members of color working at different Library and Information Science (LIS) programs throughout the United States. I did not hesitate in accepting the invitation as I definitely wanted to be part of the panel, which explored the experiences of faculty of color in LIS. The organizers of the panel provided us the following questions to address in our presentation:

- Tell us about a time when you experienced discrimination as an LIS faculty member?
- What do you want the rest of the world to know about the experiences and/or needs of faculty of color?

KEY POINTS

- Despite multiple calls to diversify LIS as a field, efforts have not yielded as many people of color (POC) joining the ranks, especially among LIS educators.

- Lack of diversity in LIS makes the work environment much harder for individuals who come from different backgrounds, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender.

- Concrete actions need to be taken in order to help faculty of color thrive in academe and move beyond the simple act of hiring POCs.

My notes for the panel, and this essay as well, basically wrote themselves. It was hard to stay on topic, actually; there was so much I wanted to say. And yet I struggled a lot. It was the same experience I had when we were working on our paper *A Critical Dialogue: Faculty of Color in Library and Information Science* (Ceja Alcalá, Colon-Aguirre, Cooke, & Stewart, 2017). The questions and doubts are always there: How much should I really say? How much of myself should I give to the world? Writing about this topic requires a certain degree of exposure; you have to give your audience a glimpse into who you are, not just you as a professional, but you as a person as well. Writing this type of work requires us to make ourselves vulnerable, in a field that does not appreciate this but instead expects us to be strong, resilient, and focused.

What follows are some of my innermost thoughts, ideas, and experiences. I share them here in the hopes that the stories will resonate with others, that they know they are not alone, but also in the hopes that those in positions of power can understand and take action in order to fix a system that is not only broken but also in denial of its own shortcomings. I will follow the guide questions I received as part of the panel in order to help keep my thoughts in order and focused.

Tell us about a time when you experienced discrimination as an LIS faculty member

I really struggled with this premise. Even now, when I think of it, I struggle to produce an answer. Not because I don't have any, but because I cannot find a way to verbalize the ones that I have experienced. I have felt "weird" in some situations and I have been in situations that cannot be explained in any other way than acknowledging that I have experienced discrimination. This might be because although my experiences with overt discrimination and racism might be few, my experiences with microaggressions are too many to number. The one that is most common is when I have been to various activities representing the institutions where I work and, after being in conversation about scholarship in the field of LIS and the nature of work in LIS organizations and teaching in higher education, the person talking to me will just say, "And what is it that you do at [name of academic institution]?" To which I always try a chipper answer of "I teach. I am a faculty member." More often than not, the follow up will be something along the lines of an uncomfortable "Oh really?" on the part of my conversation partner. These exchanges have always left me feeling slightly troubled. What is it about me that does not match with being a faculty member? I would love to think it is my youth; but I know that as a 40-year-old, who looks like a 40-year-old, that explanation does not really make much sense.

There are many situations like these. The maybe, maybe not is always there, the seed of doubt regarding the answer to the question "Why did that happen to me?" In most cases when I try discussing my discomfort or my outright anger for being in some sticky situations, others just look for

ways of rationalizing what just happened and painting it in a benign way. So I am paranoid, or so it appears. It is not until I talk to other faculty of color that I start seeing the parallels between their experiences and mine. It is not until I talk to these beloved colleagues that I start seeing the reason behind my discomfort and feel validated for not being able to ignore it or just get over it.

For the panel, I decided to share some experiences that were more tangible for a general audience. So instead of attempting to talk about an anecdote of outright discrimination at work, which would have required a lot of context, I chose to share three actual exchanges I had with students. Students only. My idea was to portray the way in which I am treated by those I teach and in whose presence I spent most of my time. I summarized the exchanges in three questions or comments I have been presented with, some not in isolation, meaning I have been expected to produce an answer to this question or comment more than once by various individuals:

- Comment by student: you said "academia" in class the other day and I looked it up in the dictionary and it is a real word. You did not invent it!

    I know college is a time to learn new things and explore, but how many of you are questioned by your students as to the authenticity of the words you use? For me, it is almost part of my day to day. I am not alone in this realm, as research shows that non-native English-speaking faculty members at all levels experience various degrees of discrimination from their students, particularly focused on students questioning the instructor's competence based on their linguistic and cultural differences. (Ates & Eslami, 2012; Lazaraton, 2003)
- Why do you want to work in the US if you don't even speak English?

    Just to be clear, I have never taught in a language other than English. I only communicate in Spanish with others who speak Spanish and never when in the presence of people who do not speak the language. My students do know where I am from and that I moved to the continental United States as an adult in order to join a graduate program. And the reality is that I did not grow up in a bilingual household; just like the majority of Puerto Ricans on the island, I only spoke Spanish at home, English being a school subject to which I dedicated 50 minutes a day and some homework time. But the insinuation that I do not speak English due to this is not a fair assessment of my language skills. This remains, to this day, one of my most baffling encounters with a student, and I still have no idea what an appropriate answer would have been.
- What is the history of US/Puerto Rico relations and how has it affected hurricane response?

    This question came after the Hurricane Maria humanitarian crisis on the island, where all of my family still resides. The question

comes from a place of genuine concern and curiosity, but it is still unfair to expect me to produce an articulate, concise, and clear answer. The topic could not be explored in a conversation, not even on a dissertation, due to its complexity. Also intertwined with the aftermath of Hurricane Maria was my own emotional state. What was for many a news headline was for me a personal crisis, as all of my family were completely cut off for weeks. My concern during that time, and even months after, was not with the state of libraries in Puerto Rico or the history of US/PR relations: It was trying to locate my family members and finding a way of sending them necessary provisions.

All of these experiences left me in a state of unease, some left me completely baffled, and some left me feeling defeated. They are part of my day-to-day interactions and in some cases not just at work but also in my social life. When I first encountered some of them I was more likely to take my time and try to explain what I do, how I feel, or where I come from. But as time goes by I grow more and more tired of having to carry the burden of explaining myself at every turn. And yet when anyone, including me sometimes, looks at these, they are not overtly discriminatory comments, but I am tired of having to face them over and over and over again.

What I want the rest of the world to know about the experiences and/or needs of faculty of color

When this question was posed to me, I started jotting down notes in order to prepare for the panel presentation. I started writing a few times, and each and every time I would stop myself and think "But my colleagues are going to be there." Or "I should not say that because my words can be misrepresented or misinterpreted and I'll get in trouble." Whereas the panel presentation was prefaced by an agreement with the audience that the experiences we were about to share and the opinions we were about to voice were highly personal, delicate, and potentially dangerous and that discretion was advised, this article does not present me, or my colleagues, with this consideration. And yet I do not see any other way in which I can make my voice heard. So I will preface the following comments in the same way in which I prefaced my answers to the questions posed that day: I am coming from a place of love, but I'm being as blunt as I can be because I realize now that being quiet or diplomatic has only led to conformity and inaction.

My main concern with the state of diversity in LIS as of late has been this: Why do we want diversity in LIS? This might seem like an unusual question, but I still think that LIS program managers, faculty, students, and employers alike need to have some self-reflection around this question. About two years ago, Marybeth Gasman (2016), a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote an article, later reprinted in the *Washington Post*, titled "The Five Things No One Will Tell You about Why

Colleges Don't Hire More Faculty of Color." The main point made in the article was as follows: "The reason we don't have more faculty of color among college faculty is that we don't want them. We simply don't want them." These remarks sparked all kinds of reactions from those inside and outside of academia, but they highlighted an issue that has been on the minds of many of us: Why are there still so few people of color in academia? The problem seems to go beyond the usual suspect of a limited pipeline of qualified people of color (POC) going into academia, to one that is more worrisome: the reluctance of many academic institutions to hire faculty of color, especially the highly coveted full-time tenure-track positions.

Faculty of color may present "problems" for academic programs due to some hiring and retention practices that function to exclude faculty of color in academic programs. For example, many faculty of color pursue lines of research that deal with more complex and time-consuming methodologies and research topics, such as action-based and qualitative research methodologies with minority or protected groups. These issues can lead to smaller research outputs than other areas of research (Stanley, 2006). An issue like this not only affects the new incoming candidate, who will most likely have fewer publications, but is also connected to the issue of retention, which demands an ever-growing body of work.

Issues of publication output can be combined with the attitudes of hiring committees in academia, which value "quality," something that, as pointed out by Gasman (2016), is usually measured by a candidate's attendance at an elite institution and mentorship by a prominent person in the field. What committees do not take into consideration, asserts Gasman, is that these are social capital systems that systemic racism practices have made sure stay out of reach for people of color. These are only some of the issues that faculty of color face in academia which render them less desirable as candidates for academic institutions. When other factors are added, including language barriers, cultural expectations, and overt racist and sexist practices, the prospects for faculty of color in academia are as grim as they can get.

These points are well explored in the literature. In fact, I see a lot of initiatives to hire, train, and retain POC in academia, including LIS. And yet I do not see a lot of minorities working in academia. It might be a matter of time; these initiatives are fairly new and it will take time for their effects to "kick off." But the feeling I cannot shake off is that we are getting lost in a Catch-22 of wanting minorities to join academia but not wanting academia to support minorities. After all, even some job advertisements have explicit statements informing applicants that minority candidates will be given priority, but hiring is only step 1 in a long road to tenure and a career.

So my main point for LIS, before paying lip service to the mandate of hiring more faculty of color and espousing more diverse workplaces just because it is "the right thing to do" or "what everybody is doing," is this:

Why do you want to do this? Do you want to do it because you value our contributions and you see the need for different voices and perspectives of marginalized groups? Or do you do it because everyone else is doing it, and the faculty profiles website looks colorful?

If the answer is the first one or one that is close enough, then in my opinion your heart is in the right place. Now comes the difficult part: hiring and retaining faculty of color. You will need to consider the following:

- We might need protection from organizational practices, from some colleagues, and in some cases even from students—it is a reality that POC, especially women, are more undermined and ignored in academia. If you seek evidence, look no further than the book *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). Spoiler alert: Women in academia are presumed by colleagues, administrators, and students to be token hires. Their abilities and talents are constantly questioned, overlooked, and minimized, with their intersectionality as women and POC being used as the only rationalization or the outstanding reason that they were even hired for their job.
- We might need time to develop complex research agendas that are not easily publishable, so we might need to be defended against the tenure clock—the required research pipeline or, as a friend of mine called it once, the "research irrigation system" is not sustainable. The ever-growing demands of academic jobs are not really sustainable for anyone, not just faculty of color. But the time to publication in some cases is much longer and the productive output of the academic year is lower since scholars who are POCs tend to do research work with populations that require embedding themselves into their groups and gaining their trust, which takes a significant portion of time. Their research also tends to rely on the employment of more engaged research methodologies (such as ethnography), which require much more time to develop. In addition, these forms of research carry the additional load of self-reflection and validation of methods in order to avoid violating ethical norms (even questioning our own morality in doing so). This translates to smaller research output and heavier representation of qualitative methodologies. Interestingly enough, this field requires this type of work in order to understand and improve services to those who belong to underserved populations.
- We need to be treated as individuals and not as representatives of an entire race, gender, or nation—tokenism is not good, and the emotional labor that accompanies being a minority is not good either. I can only explain to people that I am an American citizen by birth, that I learned English as a second language in my rural public school, and that I have nothing in common with any of the characters in *West Side Story* so many times before I just start telling

them to read the Wikipedia article on Puerto Rico and that I will be glad to fill in any necessary additional information. However, this is a dangerous offer, as I am not a historian, a political scientist, or an economist, so you will have to take my answers with a grain of salt.

- We need your support and understanding—this goes for everyone, not just POC, but in this context it is important to remind some people that POC are individuals. We do not need sympathy; we need empathy. I have had people justifiably correct my grammar or pronunciation in such a rude, condescending way that it left me feeling not only humiliated but also as if I do not belong in higher education; yet I have also experienced occasions when colleagues laugh *with* me at how badly I have pronounced a word. There is a huge difference between both interactions, and close relationships are not the determining factor. One comes from a point of sympathy (and hopefully) an effort to make me a better person, but its delivery is dehumanizing and inconsiderate. The second one is empathetic, acknowledging that the way we speak and write says a lot about us and recognizing my status as an outsider still learning the nuances of a language that is still not mine, no matter how long I have been learning it. One approach pokes fun at who you are, while the other laughs with you and reminds you that, really, nobody is perfect.

Here are my points of view, for better or for worse. I have presented my position here in a place of vulnerability but with the intent of helping the profession I love to grow and thrive. I believe in what I do as an LIS educator and I believe that we can all do better when it comes to diversity and inclusion efforts in our academic institutions. My points might not be supported by the literary canon, but they constitute a genuine assessment of somebody who lives her life as a person of color, negotiates her multiple identities every day, and wants LIS to be a model field in all aspects: diversity and inclusion being among them.

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