Emerging Voices in Diversity and Inclusion Leadership: Applications of the Strategic Diversity Manifesto

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Editorial

This special issue of *IJIDI* (vol. 2, no. 4) spotlights select student work of library and information science (LIS) graduates in the "Diversity Leadership in Information Organizations" course (INSC 590) that I taught during the spring of 2018 at the School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee. The course was designed to prepare future information professionals to develop inclusive services to underrepresented populations based on race, ethnicity, color, national origin, gender, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, veteran status, education, income, age, geography, and religion, amongst other factors.

The work of four emerging voices from the class, showcased in this collection, serves as a test-bed for applying the framework of the Strategic Diversity Manifesto (SDM) (Mehra & Davis, 2015) to the critical analysis of existing information responses to diversity in the organizations where students worked or volunteered. These thoughtful pieces propose a range of strategies that advance cultural competence, inclusion, and effective leadership in the diverse workforce environment (Gay, 2018). The insightful evaluations include a variety of existing information responses (e.g., collections, services, programs, resources, policies, and best practices) to ensure the equality-equity of representation, inclusion of underserved populations, access, and the information use of diverse stakeholders in a community-centered organizational setting of choice.

As part of the coursework, acting as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1984), all students in class developed a strategic diversity action plan for their chosen information organization, identified future directions of progressive growth and professional practice, and created a Diversity & Inclusion ePortfolio (D&I-eP) using Wordpress. This ePortfolio publicly represented their analysis while they were still in touch with their respective organizations (see http://insc-diversity.cci.utk.edu/). A combination of personal and work-related factors accounted for four students continuing to develop their projects beyond the course, ultimately turning them into publishable peer-reviewed articles. This issue of *IJIDI* builds on these students' articles that have been peer-reviewed and reworked for the general audience of *IJIDI* readers.

Diversity and inclusion are an integral reality of the 21st century life experience. They are threads that weave the fabric of the world in which we live. We are all also part of diverse

workforces and communities we engage. However, the LIS profession has struggled with developing systematic and meaningful approaches to integrate cultural competence in leading our organizations to become more inclusive and respond effectively to the diverse challenges and opportunities available to us in our complex and interconnected society (Jaeger, Bertot, & Subramaniam, 2013). Similarly, there is a lack of solid, well-developed practice models in our fields related to diversity, inclusion, and assessment (Jaeger, Sarin, & Peterson, 2015). The SDM provides one possible and systematic approach. It is operationalized in students' critical theory-to-practice applications that not only integrate a social justice agenda in LIS curricula but also advance diversity and inclusion as an instrument for promoting positive organizational change (Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2009; Rioux, 2010). The pedagogy of embedding SDM for developing a research-based and reflective organizational assessment of diversity and inclusion responses is focused, concrete, systematic, and intentional. As an applied example of "diversity by design" (Dali & Caidi, 2017), it provided an opportunity for emerging leaders working in information settings to contribute to both professional practice and the published body of scholarship, and to extend the relevance of classroom experiences into the workplace environment.

The four articles included in the collection present a variety of information responses in different organizations, demonstrate the merit of classroom assignments for addressing real-life diversity questions, and strengthen diversity conversations between academia and the field of practice. Based on education-field collaborations, they were successful because the authors and organizational contacts were involved in ongoing communication and because organizational collaborators saw value in the contribution of librarians-in-training to assess the state of diversity in their workplaces (Mehra & Elder, 2018). A spirit of inclusion appropriate for the discussion of diversity in workplaces was the connecting thread in the published works.

Laura E. Smith's article "Diversity and Inclusion at East Tennessee State University's Archives of Appalachia" holistically applies the SDM through a top-down approach in order to understand diversity and inclusion that impact the archives at both university and departmental levels; the article focuses on local/regional communities and LGBTQ communities. The next contribution, entitled "An Exploratory Case Study of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Inclusion at a Metropolitan Library in the Southeastern U.S." by Liz Movius, is eye-opening in its analysis of information challenges experienced by this marginalized population; it discusses six action steps to foster inclusion for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals in an anonymized public library. Joseph Winberry's article "Shades of Silver: Applying the Strategic Diversity Manifesto to Tennessee's Knox County Office on Aging" creatively implements the SDM in a case study of a non-traditional aging service that meets the needs of the fast-growing population of older adults; it examines how this organization can extend its information outreach to include more diverse communities of seniors. The last but not least is Olivia G. Forehand's timely piece entitled "Efforts to Overcome Homelessness in the Pruitt Branch of the Nashville Public Library," which discusses how a small branch of a large public library addresses homelessness in its rural community and how it can improve its services to the homeless people.

A few concluding thoughts on creating course experiences that provided students with opportunities to develop peer-reviewed articles on diversity and inclusion for this special issue (Dow et al., 2015). The experience was challenging and exhilarating at once for both the students and myself. A major challenge was the structure of assignments and the pressure of semester deadlines vis-a-vis *IJIDI* submission deadlines. On my end, it involved difficult decision making about selecting the course content (what to include and what to leave out)

given that the coverage of diversity and inclusion topics is so scarce across the board (Kumasi & Manlove, 2015). On the students' end, there was a significant expectation for producing tangible results, be it D&I-eP (for all) and/or manuscripts for publication. That is in addition to ensuring effective communication between the students and the organizations they worked with; dealing with apprehension, reservations, and anxieties related to developing a publishable product for the first time; and so on.

Significant positive factors included student enthusiasm and drive to learn and apply diversity and inclusion content to improve the work environments and public domain reports that showed accountability for their work and proposed actions. They sharpened their lens of critical analysis to deepen an understanding of the social, cultural, political, economic, and other historical dimensions of diversity and inclusion in the U.S. and of the problems, challenges, and opportunities unique to working with diverse populations in their localized community contexts (Marcinkowski, 2016). The value of engagement was two-fold: it was a contributor to both students' personal growth and organizational improvement, by way of rectifying the power differentials associated with the information creation and dissemination within organizations as they applied to diverse and/or underserved constituencies (Turner & Gorichanaz, 2016). This assignment was an important exercise in sharpening leadership skills and integrating community engagement, social justice, activism, and human resource management to further diversity concerns and inclusion in the contexts outside of students' immediate milieu (Mehra, 2015).

A much appreciated partnership with *IJIDI* has proven invaluable in giving students a chance to have their experiential work on diversity and inclusion published through a peer-reviewed venue. Nicole A. Cooke's *Information Services to Diverse Populations: Developing Culturally Competent Library Professionals* (2017), as required course text, served as an excellent primer and guide for creating a "safe space" learning environment for students; it enabled them to engage in difficult conversations surrounding diversity and inclusion based on their experiences in their personal, professional, and/or community-embedded workplaces. The generosity of anonymous reviewers in providing timely and extended feedback on student work was humbling.

Reflections gathered in the process of making the LIS classroom relevant to mobilizing greater community impact will shape my continued pedagogical practices. I hope that insights raised in this issue will help *IJIDI* readers to think about their own teaching and mentoring as well. The types of engaged scholarship that draw connections from research to teaching to service (and their multidirectional intersections) will stay with me for years to come and serve as a guide in my future leadership roles. Experiential and embedded learning and mentoring, such as this one, presents important opportunities for faculty members to promote and build community around diversity and inclusion, community engagement, and social justice initiatives as part of the pedagogy and practice of our field.

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