
History and Status of Native Americans in Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE WILL PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW of the development of tribal libraries, the events which have affected them, and their status today. Issues of recruiting and retaining Native American/Alaska Natives within the profession are discussed with suggestions for successful strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Native Americans and librarianship is fundamentally different from that of other ethnic groups. Native Americans are unique in that their tribal governments have a formal relationship with the U. S. government set forth in the Constitution, in treaties, statutes, and court decisions. No other minority or ethnic group in this country has this mutual interdependence with the nation's government. Interaction between federally recognized tribes and the federal government is that of a government-to-government relationship and, by treaty, the United States agreed to provide certain benefits to tribal groups, including health, education, and general welfare (Patterson, 1995). While this status would seem to prove an advantage for those endeavoring to provide library services on Indian reservations or for Native Americans who want to pursue an education in librarianship, that has not been the case.

The passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in the mid 1970s enabled tribes to contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to manage their own affairs and has some positive effect on library development on reservations. In 1994, Congress passed the Tribal

Self-Governance Act which enabled tribes to negotiate annual funding agreements that allow them to have greater involvement in program management and operation (Patterson, 1997). Tribes can now plan and set priorities for themselves and, in many instances, having a library is high on their list. Libraries, however, must compete for scarce funds with roads, utilities, and other basic services on reservations. Where libraries do exist, most are staffed by non-degreed personnel who often have little or no training in operating a library. Even in instances where there are professional librarians available, tribes generally cannot afford to pay adequate salaries to attract qualified personnel; thus large segments of native people on reservations are without adequate library services.

Approximately one-half of the estimated 2 million Native American/Alaska Native populations live on reservations. According to 1990 census figures, almost one-half of these are living on the ten largest reservations and trust lands located in the Western part of the country (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). In the past, many of the people living on reservations were without libraries and almost none of them envisioned librarianship as a career. In the latter part of this century, this has begun to change. This article will discuss how these two aspects, Native Americans in librarianship and tribal libraries, have developed in recent years.

NATIVE AMERICAN LIBRARIANS

The history of Native Americans in librarianship is really a history of tribal libraries. The two are inescapably interwoven. A search of the literature finds that scant attention has been paid to Native Americans in librarianship and not much more devoted to tribal libraries. Perhaps this is not a reflection of a lack of interest but rather that information on both of these subjects is not easily obtained. Tribal librarians are often not in the mainstream of the profession, and tribal libraries are just as often stand alone operations with no ties to state library agencies or other library systems. Therefore, much of what is known about these libraries comes from the few articles published in library journals, reports, and other narrative and anecdotal accounts.

The total number of Native Americans who hold master's degrees from American Library Association-accredited schools is not verifiable and neither is there an accurate count of existing tribal libraries. Some documentary sources related to the numbers of American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) librarians are available but provide limited information. Statistical data on ethnic categories for persons awarded degrees by ALA-accredited programs in the U.S. and Canada are collected annually by the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE). The report for academic years 1995-96 shows nineteen American Indian/Alaska Native graduates at the master's level; 1996-97 lists twenty-six master's and two doctorates. At the master's level, the 1996-97 figures represent only

one-half percent of all graduates for that year (American Library Association, 1998). This is considerably better, however, than the year 1994-95 which identifies only seven, almost the same number (six) recorded ten years earlier in 1984-85. The year 1992-93 discloses twenty-two and years 1993-94 twenty-five, numbers which are approximately one-half percent of all graduates for those years (McCook & Lippincott, 1997).

Interestingly, the 1996-97 number of American Indian/Alaska master's graduates in Library and Information Studies (.5%) is the same percentage of American Indians reported enrolled in U.S. graduate programs in 1996 according to figures released in *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (1998, p. 24). This source also showed that 1,692 master's degrees were conferred on American Indians in 1996; those receiving degrees from library and information studies programs represented less than 2 percent of those (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1999a). The number of full-time American Indian faculty listed for fall 1995 were 2,156 (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1999b). At this time, there were three full-time American Indian faculty in all schools of library and information studies, a number which represents less than .5 percent.

It should be stated that the identification of those who are American Indian/Alaska Native is somewhat problematic and without a uniform and accepted definition of who falls within the category. Therefore, the validity of some statistical reporting can be questioned. In some institutions, such as the University of Oklahoma, students and faculty who claim status as AI/AN and are to be recipients of scholarships or minority hires designated for that purpose must provide documentation that they are enrolled in a federally recognized tribe. In other institutions and organizations, self-identification as AI/AN is accepted. The U.S. Census Bureau's Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, which will be used in the 2000 decennial census, defines American Indian or Alaska Native as: "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment" (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999, p. 16). It remains to be seen if this ambiguous definition will be accepted by other non governmental institutions. Tribes will retain their right to determine (often by blood quantum) who is a tribal member. The same Census Bureau document, detailing the principles which governed the review process, listed the following: "1. The racial and ethnic categories set forth in the standards should not be interpreted as being primarily biological or genetic in reference. Race and ethnicity may be thought of in terms of social and cultural characteristics as well as ancestry" (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999, p. 3).

In their analysis of the ALISE statistical reports, McCook and Lippincott (1997) advised that common themes emerged among those library schools reporting modest success in graduating minority students.

These included having faculty from ethnic or minority groups, mentoring by minority faculty or professionals, and financial support (fellowships and scholarships). It may be, in fact, that fluctuation in the number of graduating Native American students can be directly attributable to funding priorities set in Title II B fellowships. It can also be said that mentoring of Indian students by American Indian faculty is grossly insufficient since the analysis showed only three full-time American Indian faculty from a total of 539 in ALA-accredited schools and two of those are in the same school (Oklahoma).

Data collected in 1998 by the American Library Association's Office for Research and Statistics showed .57 percent of the librarians in academic and .25 percent in public libraries were identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (American Library Association, 1999). The sampling of 1,267 academic and public libraries, however, excluded public libraries serving populations of less than 25,000 which would eliminate most tribal libraries.

The genesis of recruitment of American Indians into the profession of librarianship lies with the activism of the 1960s. In the late 1960s, priorities in federal programs included reaching out to the "disadvantaged" to bring them into the profession. Within the Indian community, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which at that time had almost total influence over tribal affairs and Indian education, began bowing to Congressional pressure to look at Indian preference in hiring practices. Over the next few years, these two circumstances created opportunities for Native Americans to enter the field of librarianship. The numbers of native people in library school have always been the smallest of all minority groups. The same is true of library school faculty. Gollop (1999), in commenting on the lack of representation of blacks holding faculty positions, stated:

Even more remarkable is the fact that the segment of the population least represented within LIS education in the nation happens to be American Indians. This is somewhat ironic given the fact that they are descendants of the original peoples of this land. Presently, fewer than five American Indians hold full-time faculty positions at schools of library and information science. (p. 388)

Josey (1993) stated that none of the four major ethnic minority groups had increased as a percentage of the entire population in library and information science education programs since the passage of the Civil Right Act of 1964. If, as some authors suggest: "Librarians of color are crucial to the provision of services in communities where knowledge of the language, the values, and the cultural heritage of the growing racial and ethnic minority communities is imperative" (Knowles & Jolivet, 1991, p. 189), then recruitment of underrepresented racial and ethnic librarians must be intensified.

A number of librarians as well as library educators have suggested that library education needs to respond to this issue by offering curricula that are relevant to today's clientele in libraries and information centers. Doing so is viewed as an important avenue for recruitment of minority students, but it is also fundamental in the education of non-minority students. A study conducted by East and Lam (1995) concluded that multiculturalism needed to be part of the library science curriculum to prepare librarians for work in an increasingly diverse society and library environment. Freiband (1992) identifies multilingual and multicultural issues relevant to library and information science curricula and provides strategies regarding pedagogical methods and course content to serve as a guide for doing so. In an extensive examination of library schools' advances toward effecting a multicultural library and information science education, Chu (1994) concludes: "It is evident that much remains to be done to fully implement library and information science education in a culturally diverse society" (p. 149).

If the numbers of American Indians and Alaskan Native students and faculty are to be increased, then the issue of recruitment becomes paramount. In the author's experience, the recruiting of native people to library school is most successful when it is done on a one to one basis. No amount of press releases, announcements, career fairs, recruiting trips, and other techniques often used to attract minority students, works with any degree of success with this segment of the population. Native Americans, especially those from a reservation environment, respond best to personal contact. Even then, it may take two to three years of encouragement before the potential student is ready to leave his/her job, families, or environment to come to library school. Smith (1983) cited a number of reasons library schools had limited success in attracting Native Americans. Among the ones given were the lack of role models in Indian communities, a lack of employment opportunities in their own communities and reservations for those with a library science degree, and a lack of other Indians in the programs.

The increase in the number of libraries on reservations has heightened awareness of the need to have native librarians in those communities. Hills (1997) advocates using staff development funds to provide credentials for untrained Native staff. He explained the importance of this effort by saying:

It is easy to overlook the fact, for example, that newly acquired Native staff in a library serving a Native community or a multicultural community with a Native population bring the invaluable gifts of cultural affinity and perhaps a Native language fluency, something worth a great deal to the library's service capability. (p. 256)

Tribal officials who seek to hire an M.L.S. Native American librarian often discover they cannot afford to pay adequate salaries and the result is that

Native librarians often do not return to the reservation to work. Hills (1997) expresses it this way:

I suspect that, unless economic conditions improve markedly in the respective Native communities, a high percentage of Native Librarians will be those who no longer have very close ties with home, who live in the cities or only visit home infrequently, and who feel comfortable moving around and working in new settings. In some very traditional and conservative tribes, a full-blood may be under strong pressure to stay home, or to come home and take a traditional leadership position. When away from home, the tendency is often to apply for those jobs within federal or state government, or the many non-profit corporations and foundations, that deal with native services and resources. (p. 257)

This represents something of a Catch-22 for library schools trying to recruit Native Americans from traditional communities. While on the one hand library educators would like to have Native people from reservation communities obtain degrees and return to serve their own people in libraries where the need is so great, when a native person obtains her/his M.L.S., they will often be attracted away from the reservation community.

Recruiting a native person from a traditional community regardless of the outcome after obtaining a graduate degree requires certain knowledge on the part of library educators. In the authors' personal experience, it takes extraordinary steps to assure success. First, one must recognize that most ALA-accredited schools are in large universities with all the accompanying bureaucracy and what seems like endless barriers to someone who is not accustomed to it. This is very discouraging to students from remote or isolated areas of the country and some cannot, or will not, cope with it successfully. Christine T. Lowery (1997), a Hopi-Laguna professor now teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, used the term "cultural loneliness" to express the pain she felt on separation from the reservation. Later, as a faculty member, Lowery found that it was not easy to reconcile her native philosophy with that of an academic institution. "Take for example, the academic merit review. At best, this is a hostile act. The rules are ambiguous and unwritten, but one is evaluated and measured and publicly ranked nonetheless" (Lowery, 1997, p. 7). The failure of recruiters to recognize the power of cultural ties is to predict negative results.

In order for many Native American/Alaska Native students to survive in a large university environment, it is crucial that a strong support system be in place. The normal institutional offices, such as those found in student services, are not enough. It often falls on one individual who is willing to commit much personal time and energy to assuring that the student's needs are taken care of; this may include locating appropriate housing, child care, orientation to the campus, and interceding when problems arise. This takes a toll on a faculty member and is more than what is usually

thought of as mentoring. This role is often carried by a minority faculty member thereby increasing that person's work load and, more often than not, taking time that should be spent on research and writing. If academic institutions are truly committed to recruitment of minority students, then adjustments in faculty expectations should be made. Kriza Jennings (1994), diversity consultant in the Office of Management Services in the Association of Research Libraries, stated it best when she addressed the recruitment issue. She said that schools should individualize recruitment by learning each person's needs and that people, not programs, recruit students.

It will take a concentrated effort on the part of library school faculty to actively recruit American Indian/Alaska Natives if the number of librarians from this ethnic group is to increase. Retention in the program is an additional issue. Arranging mentors, recruiting from the ranks of the paraprofessional workers in libraries, providing financial aid, having an extensive support system in place, and having Native American role models as practitioners and library school faculty are all important elements in attracting and retaining students of this ethnicity.

NATIVE AMERICAN LIBRARIES

Accurate data on the number of tribal libraries is equally difficult to obtain. Since no agency—state or federal—consistently gathers statistics or other reporting data on tribal libraries, there is no permanent reliable source of information that can be consulted for information about them (Patterson, 1998). In a survey of 300 tribes in the lower forty-eight states, Patterson and Taylor (1994) found that approximately one-half reported having a library. Personal experience with many tribes has led the author to observe that, of those reporting, a substantial number of these libraries have extremely small collections, sporadic staffing, and virtually no services. An earlier study of library services to Native Americans (Heyser & Smith, 1980) found less than fifty tribes reported having a library, evidence that, while the number of tribes with libraries is still relatively small, they have increased nearly threefold in the past two decades.

Native people in Alaska have a very different arrangement in terms of library services and their relationship with the state agency. The more than 200 Alaskan native villages are served almost exclusively by their state library agency (Patterson, 1998).

Tribal libraries are relatively recent in their origin. No authoritative history of them has ever been written, but it is known that, as early as 1958, the Colorado River Tribal Council in Arizona established their library (Patterson, 1998). Another began in the Southwest when, in the 1960s, Vista volunteers placed small collections of donated books in tribal buildings where they could be accessed by tribal members. The Mohawks in New York State and the Shoshone-Bannock on the Fort Hall Idaho reservation also initiated efforts to establish libraries in the late 1960s.

There was not much development in creating libraries for these groups until the advent of federal programs which gave high priority to minorities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the U.S. Department of Education began issuing competitive grants under the Higher Education Act Title II B which provided not only for fellowships targeted toward minorities but also for research and demonstration projects. Many of the Native American librarians practicing today and most of the library educators were recipients of Title II B fellowships. In addition, a number of tribal libraries currently operating were established under the auspices of a research or demonstration project. The importance of this piece of federal legislation in the development of tribal libraries cannot be overemphasized. Not only did the funded projects have an influence on the establishment and improvement of tribal libraries, they may have planted the seeds which later became the impetus for some Native Americans who lived on reservations to go to library school and pursue librarianship as a career.

During the 1970s, the director of the Department of the Interior's library, Mary Huffer, became concerned about the lack of library services on reservations, especially in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools which, at the time, provided a majority of the educational institutions on reservations. She asked a small group of individuals to assist her in drafting a plan of action for her agency to improve library services. Her stated purpose was to improve library media programs to:

meet the diverse needs of American Indian and other Native Peoples for information necessary to successful living in a multi-cultural society . . . , to provide the basis for informed decision making and self-determination in Indian communities; and to ensure that American Indian and other Native People served by the Bureau of Indian Affairs attain access at least equal to that which is recognized as basic for other American citizens to library/media/information services and resources. (U.S. Department of the Interior. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Office of Library and Information Services, 1977)

This document served as a planning tool for the 1978 Indian White House Pre-Conference and a revised version served the same purpose for the second Indian Pre-Conference (U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1991).

The 1980s saw a surge in the development of tribal libraries as a result of new federal legislation. This legislation, a rewritten Title IV of the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) and targeted for tribal libraries, was a direct outcome of the 1979 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services and more indirectly of the Native American Pre-Conference (National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1978). The Pre-Conference, held in Denver in 1978, produced an omnibus bill for library services for American Indians which was accepted in its totality and passed by the delegates to the White House Conference.

Following the White House Conference, the National Commission formed a Task Force to study and make recommendations on library services to cultural minorities (U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1981). Included in the testimony were issues related to library services on reservations. Soon after, then U.S. Congressman Paul Simon took the initiative and, after holding Congressional hearings, drafted legislation which eventually was passed by Congress as the revised Title IV of LSCA. Although revised periodically, this piece of legislation has withstood funding cuts and other challenges to remain the single most important event in the development of libraries on reservations.

During the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s, the National Commission continued to monitor library services to this segment of the population and conducted a series of site visits followed by a number of regional hearings to assess local issues and concerns related to library services on reservations. Reporting on the hearings, Pelzman (1992) observed: "Not everything was bleak. Obviously the level of support for libraries varies with the size of the tribe, the extent of its resources, its own leadership, and the level of responsiveness at the state level" (p. 30). Pelzman continued by saying that most of the testimony scrolled through a repetition of unkept promises, makeshift efforts, and a diminution of small funding: "[O]ne of the requests most often heard was for again funding the former TRAILS (Training and Assistance for Indian Library Services) program" (p. 31). This well received fifteen month program conducted by the author from the University of Oklahoma was cut short by a newly appointed U.S. Department of Education officer who, in a personal conversation, stated she was not going to fund the TRAILS program again (it had only been operational five months when she took office) because she had three years to make a name for herself and it was not going to be with Indians. She added that Indians did not need libraries anyway because they could not read (unnamed, personal communication, January 1986). So much for success from a political appointee's perspective.

Another outcome from the 1978 pre-conference was the founding of the American Indian Library Association which today includes more than 300 members and publishes a quarterly newsletter aimed at keeping tribal librarians and others working with Indian materials informed on current events and new recommended publications.

In preparation for the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services, Native Americans again held a pre-conference where recommendations from the delegates were made and carried to the White House Conference. Although some of them were adopted by the delegates to the White House Conference, no substantive action has yet been taken on them (U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. White House Conference on Library and Information Services, 1991).

Currently, interest in this topic by the National Commission has waned, and no further efforts are being made to maintain a high level of participation in this area. The results of the last major effort of the Commission can be found in their publication, *Pathways to Excellence: A Report on Improving Library and Information Services for Native American Peoples* (1992a). A summary report (which is part of the full report) is published separately (U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Services, 1992b). These reports provide ten major challenges involving federal, state, and local governments and agencies, the tribes themselves, and the nation at large. Among these are strengthening technical assistance to Native American communities, improving access and strengthening cooperative activities.

As we turn toward the twenty-first century, we can agree that some progress has been made in library services to Native American reservations but the anticipated increase in the number of librarians of Native American/Alaskan descent has not occurred.

Looking forward, it would appear that the arrival of technological advances holds promise for reducing the existing inequality of access to information for reservation citizens but, as one tribal librarian remarked to the author recently, "how can I worry about technology when I don't know if the heat is going to be working when I come in, or what I'm going to do with the toilet that overflows" (unnamed, personal communication, October 1999). A number of tribal librarians, including the one just cited, are making extensive use of the Internet and other online databases to enhance their collections and services and have found it has brought new users into the library. As tribal libraries increasingly make access to electronic communications available, it is changing both the clientele and the nature of the services they provide. The importance of this service is illustrated by Anderson (1999) who reported in a Benton Foundation publication: "Native Americans on reservations have historically lacked the high level of telecommunications services enjoyed by many Americans Native Americans, Eskimos, and Aleuts, some who live in the most geographically remote regions in the nation, have the lowest rate of household telephone penetration of any American racial or ethnic group Twelve percent of rural Native American households, for example, don't even have electricity."

A comprehensive study conducted by the National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) reported that, in rural areas, only 9 percent of Native Americans have Internet access at home (<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/digitaldivide/>). The study also reported that Native Americans are more likely to access the Internet at schools and libraries than any other ethnic or racial group. The lack of telecommunication services in native people's homes can present a formidable barrier to elimination of the technology gap. The library may offer

the only interface in this gap. The unanswered question is, however, will this increase in patrons and visibility bring any accompanying increase in budget and staff?

A most significant development in tribal libraries in the 1990s has been the expansion of tribal colleges. Located mostly in the western part of the country, these institutions now receive direct funding from the U.S. Congress and due, in part, to concerns about accreditation, their libraries also function as public libraries for the reservations where they are located. They tend to have better educated library personnel with a small number having M.L.S. degrees from ALA-accredited library schools and others working to obtain them. Indian author and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. (1993) has said: "Tribal colleges may be the most important movement we have in Indian country today. In certain fundamental ways, they are the only transitional institutions standing between the reservation population and the larger society that can bring services and information to Indian people" (p. 31). On the twenty-seven reservations where these colleges are located, libraries are a paradigm for educational and cultural survival for both the college and tribal communities (Patterson & Taylor, 1996).

CONCLUSION

In terms of libraries and library services for America's native people, this brief overview has attempted to examine the past. The recruitment of native people into librarianship and the continuing development of libraries on reservations are enduring challenges. It will require leadership among those in the profession—both native and non-native. Participation in this effort presents an opportunity to make the next century better for library services to native people.

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The American Indian Library Association (AILA) is an affiliate of the American Library Association (ALA), and is a membership action group that focuses on the library-related needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives. The organization's members consist of both individuals and institutions that are interested in improving library services to Native American people in any type of library in the United States.