

The Diversity Necklace: Reflections on the State of the Art in Canadian Research Libraries

by Toni Olshen, Associate University Librarian, York University

As a result of my work as Visiting Program Officer with Kriza Jennings and the Diversity and Minority Recruitment Program from November 1995 through May 1996, I have identified several issues that impact upon the shape of a library-wide diversity program for Canadian universities. The impetus for exploring ARL's diversity program with Canadian institutions sprang from a diversity concern close to home: ARL membership is predominantly made up of American university libraries but it also has some public, government, and Canadian libraries as members. There are, in total, 15 ARL members across Canada so the question we wanted to answer was: Is the well-developed eight-component ARL library-wide diversity program relevant to Canadian libraries?[\[1\]](#)

When introducing diversity efforts in our libraries and on our campuses, we are several steps ahead if we can utilize existing research on diversity and existing models at other institutions. Identifying effective models for administrators, staff, faculty, and librarians to create change has been part of my ongoing research. In November 1995, I distributed a call for information on diversity activities to the twenty-nine members of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL). I received fifteen responses, nine of them from ARL libraries. One objective was to take a snapshot of diversity activities in the libraries and assess their relation to a diversity agenda on campus. Another objective was to identify some of the factors that differentiate Canadian and U.S. approaches to diversity.

Kriza and I made four site visits to Canadian universities: the University of Guelph (14,000 students) in rural Ontario, the University of Toronto (50,000 students) and York University (37,000 students) in Toronto, one of the world's most multicultural cities, and the University of Victoria (16,000 students) on Vancouver Island, B.C., part of Canada's Pacific Rim. These institutions represent different points on a diversity continuum. We met with as many people as possible on campus with an interest in, knowledge of, or concern about diversity issues.

Think of a university-wide diversity program as a long-range plan with many components that are well publicized and well understood. A metaphor that comes to mind is a necklace, with several well-crafted and colorful beads strung along a cord, that fits comfortably around the neck and can be pointed to with pride. As of now, my research indicates that there are no multi-faceted diversity programs on Canadian campuses. There are, however, institutions which have begun to string together some very impressive beads.

The history, legislation, political principles, and social climate that shapes Canadian universities come together to function as the cord needed to create the support for campus-wide diversity initiatives. I have identified these strands that make up the cord in the resource book *Canadian Perspectives on ARL's Library-wide Diversity Program*. The existence of these strands led me to conclude that ARL should indeed bring a library-wide diversity program to Canada, one that recognizes the unique characteristics of the Canadian experience.

Examples from Canadian universities in general and academic libraries in particular illustrate four themes that relate to Canadian interpretations of the broad ARL diversity definition, i.e. those human

qualities or characteristics that make people different, unique, the same, and similar. These themes are:

- the multicultural nature of the Canadian population and the contrast between the "mosaic" of multiculturalism in Canada and the "melting pot" in the United States;
- human rights and the focus on anti-racism;
- employment equity for four designated groups; and
- the promotion of the concept of education equity in Canadian higher education at the same time that government support is shrinking and privatization is becoming a hot post-secondary issue.

Multiculturalism

The establishment of multiculturalism as government policy began with Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau's Statement to the House of Commons, October 8, 1971.

A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework [English and French] commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians...National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity, out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share these ideals, attitudes, and assumptions...It can form the base of a society which is based on fair play for all.

This commitment to diversity has been strengthened on a federal level with the passage of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985, the Employment Equity Act in 1986, and the Multiculturalism Act in 1988.

Multiculturalism represents a distinctive way of thinking about diversity. Racial or ethnic minorities are entitled to recognition of their culture as well as to attainment of equality at political, social, and economic levels. Ethnocultural differences are thought of as an integral part of Canadian life and promoted through active government intervention.

A demographic profile of Canadian society reveals that there are three major forces: the Aboriginal Peoples, the colonizing groups - both English and French - and the racial and ethnic minorities who fall outside the charter group categories, those native- and foreign-born Canadians with non-French and non-British ancestry. Historically, the majority of immigrants to Canada were of various European backgrounds. However, lately there has been an increase in immigration from other sources, particularly Asia and South America. The proliferation of immigrants and refugees from non-conventional sources has contributed to an emergent multicultural mosaic. This demographic diversity is sustained by the recent resurgence of ethnic pride and affiliation. Not only are Canadians more diverse as a result of changing immigration patterns, but many have also chosen to identify with select elements of their cultural, historical, or linguistic past, both individually and collectively.

Multiculturalism has proved to be a controversial social policy. Early indications were that Canadians supported the concept of multiculturalism although the degree of support varied across the country. More recently, however, opposition to the policy has surfaced. This has coincided with increased immigration from non-European sources. Attitudes toward multiculturalism are known to vary according to region, ethnicity, financial status, educational levels, age and characteristics of particular communities.

The mosaic metaphor with its emphasis on the principle of different but equal when applied to language and culture contrasts with the American, the melting pot where everyone is expected to assimilate. Over and over again people we talked to during site visits remarked that Canada's mosaic concept of pluralism leads to an emphasis on those things that make us different from one another. Value is placed on maintaining unique ethnic and cultural heritages, which should be respected by the community at large. This belief is the reason that ARL's broad, expansive definition of diversity is so attractive. It encompasses so many other aspects besides race and ethnicity that everyone has something to relate to above and beyond the characteristics of their particular group that defines them as the same or similar.

Human Rights and Anti-Racism

A central thrust of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that came into effect in April 1985 is the elimination of all forms of discrimination by guaranteeing both equality and fairness to all under the law, regardless of race or ethnicity. This is evident from the preamble to the Charter and in the key clause (15:1):

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, age, sex, or mental or physical disability.

In May 1996, the Supreme Court ruled that the rights of gays and lesbians are protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Anti-racist work in Canadian educational circles is firmly rooted in the awareness that race and racial discrimination are systemic and embedded within the policies and practices of institutional structures. The goal is to change organizational policies and practices which have a discriminatory impact and to change individual behaviors and attitudes that reinforce racism. Canadian universities are up front and proactive about anti-racism initiatives. Several institutions have written anti-racism policies as a starting point, rather than a conclusion to the process of institutional change.

Employment Equity

Commitment to diversity in Canada has never been more evident than in the assumptions underlying affirmative action policies and programs. One of the most contentious affirmative action programs promotes employment equity. The federal Employment Equity Act of 1986 ruled that visible minorities, women, Aboriginal peoples, and persons with disabilities are to be represented in the workplace in numbers proportionate to their presence in the local workforce and are not to be denied employment opportunities for reasons unrelated to ability or merit.

Under the government's influential Federal Contractor's Program, companies - including universities - with at least 100 employees that have taken on federal contracts worth over \$200,000, are required to comply with government employment equity provisions. Accountability is built in by means of periodic reviews and mandatory reports. Provincial employment equity laws are also in place although a change in some governments have resulted in their repeal. Nevertheless, the Federal Contractor's Program remains a prime mover in employment equity practice across Canada.

Educational Equity

The concept of educational equity in higher education focuses on improving access and retention of

under-represented, educationally disadvantaged groups. Universities are particularly ripe for reform because minority group participation in higher education is seen as a path towards social and economic equity with other Canadians. In addition there is a need to provide a supportive and welcoming learning environment for all students. Educational equity initiatives address issues such as: access, curriculum, climate, and teaching practice.

Canadian universities are under increasing pressure to respond to diversity with fairness and sensitivity. Federal and provincial statutes are forcing public organizations to examine the impact of their policies and structures on members of diverse groups. At the same time, socio-economic barriers to access to post-secondary education are becoming greater with cutbacks to universities, increasing tuition fees, and declining opportunities for employment. As shrinking government support redefines assumptions about higher education in Canada, universities are thinking about alternative funding. They are thinking about fee deregulation, that is, more freedom to charge full prices for professional degree programs, and less government control. A shift from public to private realms alarms students who previously paid about 20% of the share of their education and over the last five years are moving toward paying 50% of their education costs. The concern is that a two-tier (public/private) education system will erode Canada's postwar commitment to accessible, affordable mass education.

Stringing the Beads

As expected, there is no single Canadian perspective on diversity. The situation changes from region to region and institution to institution. Presently, on an institutional level, there is a growing interest in diversity and equity issues, policies are on the books relating to these matters, and offices are in place to act as educational, advocacy, and complaint centers.

One of the reasons for an interest in the ARL diversity program in Canada is that the universities have emphasized equity and diversity as an institutional goal. A library diversity program thus furthers the goals of the university. A few institutions have made these issues a priority and are now struggling to make their policies operational in the hearts and minds of community members but the majority have not yet reached this stage. Some libraries, by actively working to further the diversity agenda within the library, have taken a leadership role on campus. One hopes that a library's diversity program may serve as a model for the larger institution. Libraries see the ARL initiatives as a catalyst to additional thinking, planning, and action.

Times of constraint do not undercut the need for diversity as a document by the Council of Ontario Universities, *Keeping Equity in the Decision-making Process*, eloquently points out:

Focusing on equity has not been at the expense of excellence but rather in the service of excellence. We have been attempting to increase faculty diversity not because of legislation but because we have wanted better institutions. We have focused on career development for administrative staff not only because this will make our 'employment equity' numbers look better, but because we want to ensure that everyone's full potential is realized. We have attempted to diversify curriculum not because of 'political correctness' but because we want to teach at the 'cutting edge' of academic scholarship and to have our teaching reflect the needs of our students.[\[2\]](#).

The diversity necklace is too valuable to allow it to be unstrung.

One of the successful features of ARL's treatment of sensitive diversity issues in the U.S. is the telling of stories that make an immediate connection between the listener and the idea being communicated. We

need to start collecting Canadian narratives that will serve the same purpose. Keeping in mind the characteristics of diversity as they play themselves out in the Canadian context, the eight-component ARL framework has great validity on Canadian campuses. The vocabulary changes^[3], the narratives change - and then the program will be effective in Canadian research libraries.

¹ in [ARL's diversity program](#) was described in *ARL* #180, May 1995, pp. 12-13. See also the [program information on the WWW](#) <URL:/diversity/diversity.html>.

²Council of Ontario Universities, Committee on the Status of Women and the Committee of Employment and Educational Equity, *Keeping Equity in the Decision-Making Process*. Toronto: COU, 1995, p. 4.

³See the "Glossary of Diversity Terms from a Canadian Perspective" in *Canadian Perspectives of ARL's Library-wide Diversity Program*, p. IC. This resource book is available from ARL; contact [Marianne Seales](#) (marianne@arl.org).

© ARL: *A Bimonthly Newsletter of Research Library Issues and Actions* 188 (October 1996). Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries.

[Table of Contents for Issue 188](#) | [Other Current Issues Articles](#) | [Other Cultural Diversity and Minority Recruitment Articles](#) | [ARL Newsletter Home](#)



[ARL Home](#)

© Association of Research Libraries, Washington, DC
Web Design by [Kim Maxwell](#)
Maintained by [ARL Web Administrator](#)
Last Modified: July 10, 2001