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Roundtable: What is holding librarianship back from being more inclusive of visible minorities?

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For this issue, we asked three librarians and one MLIS candidate to respond to the following question: “According to Statistics Canada, 19.1% of the Canadian population identify themselves as visible minorities, but in the CAPAL census, only 9.1% of respondents identify as members of visible minorities. What is holding librarianship back from being more inclusive of visible minorities?” Enjoy!

Norda Bell

Associate Librarian, York University Libraries

This is a very complex question that requires uncomfortable self-reflection and courageous conversations from all in the field, including input from a diverse range of individuals and experiences, as mine is but one of many.

It is tempting to provide a simplistic explanation to this question and respond that we need more diversity initiatives to recruit and—more importantly—retain librarians from underrepresented groups. However, the “problem” of the lack of diversity in librarianship will not be solved with diversity initiatives, however lacking we are in such initiatives in Canada.

Our profession claims that “libraries have a responsibility to contribute to a culture that recognizes diversity and fosters social inclusion” (CFLA, n.d.). However, in a 2014 article, Kandiuk surveyed Canadian academic librarians and found that only 43.5% “felt

that their institution should be doing more to reach out and encourage applications from visible minority librarians” (p. 502). One respondent stated that “our library seeks to hire the best qualified candidates, regardless of non-merit-based characteristics” (p. 502). In other words, the lack of diversity in Canadian librarianship was not because of systemic barriers or racial discrimination encountered by visible minorities, nor because of the white privilege held by the majority, but instead because libraries only hire the best librarians based on merit.

This head-in-the-sand approach is symptomatic of attitudes around the issue of diversity in librarianship. The Canadian Federation of Library Association’s rather weak position statement on Diversity and Inclusion states that the organization “believes that a diverse and pluralistic society is central to our country’s identity” and that “libraries are committed to tolerance and understanding” (CFLA, n.d.).

This statement fails to acknowledge that we live in a racist society and that institutions, including libraries, often mirror and uphold the “social system based on or perpetuating the political, economic, and cultural dominance of white people” (“White supremacy,” 2018). Studies show that we all, regardless of ethnic and racial background, have unconscious bias toward certain groups (Smith et al., 2017), but we neither acknowledge this nor attempt to address this in our field. In *The Equity Myth*, Malinda S. Smith et al. (2017) does a great job tracing some of the structural barriers and unconscious biases encountered by female and racialized academics through the pipeline, from applying to graduate school to tenure and promotion. I believe that many of these experiences are analogous to those experienced in academic librarianship.

Despite the myths we tell ourselves about library neutrality, our collections, our services, and our library staff reflect the values and knowledge systems of the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon culture. With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) report and Calls to Action, we are beginning to acknowledge and talk about colonialism and its legacy within Indigenous communities as well as find ways to “decolonize” the library (collections, cataloguing, descriptions, services, etc.). If we can engage in this conversation, why can’t we also push past the discomfort and discuss systems of oppression, structural barriers, and power inequities that contribute to the problem of under-representation of racial and ethnic minority librarians in Canada? As R. David Lankes aptly states: “If we do not address inequities, we are not neutral—we are harmful and instruments of oppression” (Carlton, 2018).

Until we start having honest conversations about racism, exclusion, and these structural barriers, solutions built on rocky foundations of denial and exclusion will not help to “fix” the lack of diversity and inclusion in Canadian academic librarianship.

May P. Chan

Collections Librarian, Saskatchewan Legislative Library

Several years ago at a professional conference, I was talking to some colleagues who were promoting the [Visible Minority Librarians of Canada Network \(ViMLoC\)](#) in the

exhibits hall. They were surprised by someone who stopped by the ViMLoC's table and asked, "Why do we even need this group?"

For me, this incident helps to answer the question, "What is holding librarianship back from being more inclusive?" As a profession, we need to stop questioning why diversity matters and acknowledge that we have a diversity problem. To fix it, all of us will need to be more proactive, more creative, and more collaborative in developing a long-term strategy.

Based on my personal observations and interactions with other visible minority librarians, here are some possible solutions:

Library Administrators/Directors/Managers

- Make inclusivity a priority for your organization and set targets for recruiting, training, and retaining these individuals. Share your successes and failures with other libraries to help inspire, challenge, and build support for more diversity.
- Assess your organization to determine how inclusive your staff is at every level of the organization. Identify those individuals who may already be working in the organization and encourage them to pursue MLIS degrees.
- Be mindful. Some visible minority colleagues will feel too vulnerable to speak up about their issues. Learn to listen and find ways to engage them in meaningful dialogue.
- Work with library schools and library associations to recognize and hire candidates with non-ALA-accredited degrees.
- Establish a joint staff and community advisory group to implement cultural training for all staff. Use this group to evaluate, provide feedback, and hold the organization to account for its initiatives.
- Actively recruit ethnic and cultural leaders in your community to sit on the Library Board and engage them in helping to guide the organization's progress.

Professional Associations

- Help to recruit more diversity into the profession by participating in job fairs, community group discussions, public festivals, schools, etc.
- Partner with other associations to make ethnic diversity a major theme for the annual library weeks and conferences.
- Foster and celebrate the stories of visible minority librarians willing to share their challenges and successes with others.

- Track the profession's recruitment progress and help to identify gaps in educational opportunities, management opportunities, etc. for visible minority librarians.

Library Schools

- Develop educational training or standardized evaluation for foreign librarians with non-ALA-accredited degrees that will enable potential employers to hire them. Acknowledge that past grievances like systematic discrimination and lack of properly funded educational opportunities will deter many potential students. Find ways to bridge these societal and educational gaps.
- Actively recruit more diverse faculty members by partnering with library associations to scout potential candidates already working in the field.

Everyone can help out no matter what their role: do not stop discussing, brainstorming or engaging on this issue. Do not be that individual who asked, "Why do we need a group to represent visible minority librarians?" Instead, say, "How can I help?"

Guoying Liu

Head, Systems Department, University of Windsor Leddy Library

We should first discuss the CAPAL census data. It would be helpful if we could see more elaborate data, for example, the percentage of visible minorities broken down by age group.¹ Many librarians were hired decades ago when the Canadian demographics were different and perhaps we are seeing the residual effects. Moreover, one census is limited, and this can be addressed by monitoring future censuses.

Nonetheless, the CAPAL census does indicate that visible minority (VM) librarians are currently underrepresented in Canadian academic libraries. The gap would be even bigger if we consider the growing number of international students on campus (most of them are VMs) in addition to domestic VM students. Is there racial or ethnic discrimination in academic libraries? Are there any other factors? In recent years, I have seen an increase of awareness and research in this area. Equity and diversity have been recognised as core values in many workplaces. However, libraries often lack strategies or action plans to recruit and retain VM librarians. According to Kandiuk (2014), there were a significant number of VM librarians who felt their colleagues did not welcome differences and did not value diversity. They perceived a less positive climate for diversity in their workplaces compared to non-VM participants.

Kandiuk (2014) also indicated that the lack of proactive hiring efforts and the shortage of qualified applicants were the major difficulties for libraries trying to recruit VMs. The latter leads to issues related to library schools. Back in my library school days, over a decade ago, I found most of my professors and classmates were non-VMs. Although I do not have enrolment data, the trend seems to continue today when I look at the faculty listed on the school's website. What is obstructing VMs from entering this field? They may not understand what academic librarianship means. For example, Chinese

librarianship is quite different from Canadian. As a result, Chinese immigrants may misperceive the field. Cultural differences and language barriers could be other factors. In addition, for those librarians trained outside of Canada, the US, and a few European countries, the ALA-accredited master's degree requirement adds a financial burden to re-enter the profession in Canada. Library schools may need to consider providing additional support, such as adjusting curriculums or offering specialized programs to recruit and retain more VM faculty members and students, to promote diversity in librarianship.

In my view, another factor is the lack of voices from VM librarians. The VM Librarians of Canada Network has made significant contributions to raising awareness of ethnic diversity in the field via surveys and research since 2012. However, one voice is not enough. This year sees the establishment of the [Canada Chapter of Chinese American Librarians Association \(CALA\)](#) (of which I am currently president), which aims to provide deeper support to Chinese and other VM librarians in Canada. This new CALA Canada Chapter will help advocate for and promote diversity in the profession.

Astrid Ramos

Master of Library & Information Science (MLIS) Candidate, Western University

Prior to joining the library world, my perception of librarianship was very narrow. I had a mental picture of what I thought a librarian embodied, and I couldn't see myself in that image. That image has since been challenged and I have gained a better understanding of the work being done in our field. I believe there is a lack of awareness of the range of opportunities our field has to offer potential library & information students and professionals, and specifically to students belonging to visible minority groups.

Representation within our field and our training programs matter, so what can be done to make librarianship more inclusive? First, by implementing diversity initiatives, developed and led by diverse staff, that would utilize their valuable skills, perspectives, experiences, and stories. But most of all, by making diversity and inclusivity a top priority in each institution's recruitment and hiring policies and practices.

Some specific suggestions in recruiting a more diverse student body into the field include:

- Reach out to students at each phase of their academic careers, starting in elementary and continuing into middle school, high school, and undergraduate students.
- Have conversations with high school, college, and university career and guidance counselors. Let them know that librarianship is a viable option for diverse students.
- Go where the students are. Get to know diverse student groups, and attend events, fairs, and festivals.

While I am definitely not an expert on the subject, I am proud to be a part of this field and I am eager to share it with other visible minorities like myself. By actively changing the face of librarianship from the inside, we can establish a culture in which diversity is not only valued but is deemed necessary within our field and within the world in which we all exist.

¹ The full dataset of the 2016 CAPAL census is available for download on the University of Alberta's data repository: <https://doi.org/10.7939/DVN/ZTIWOR>

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