Reaching Out and Bringing In: Understanding and Encouraging Diversity in the Library

Dorothy Tao
ARLIS
April 18, 2009
Diversity in the United States

- Nation of immigrants – always diverse

- Diversity in the 21st Century – changing...
U.S. Demographics

U.S. Population 2000
Total Population: 287.7

- Caucasian / White: 70.60%
- Hispanic / Latino (a): 12.50%
- African American / Black: 12.30%
- Asian / Pacific Islander: 3.70%
- American Indian / Native American: 0.90%

U.S. Population 2050 (Projected)
Total Population: 403.7

- Caucasian / White: 52.00%
- Hispanic / Latino (a): 24.00%
- African American / Black: 15.00%
- Asian / Pacific Islander: 9.30%
- American Indian / Native American: 1.10%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2000 Data

- In 50 years, Hispanic, African American, Asian Pacific populations in the US may double.

- General population expected to become older.

- Even today, many older and returning students; half of undergraduates over 21

Trends in postsecondary enrollment of minority/female populations:

- 1976 and 2004 -- percentage of minority undergraduate students increased from 17 to 32%.

- By 1980, the percentage of female undergraduates surpassed percentage of male undergraduates.

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2007-039, September 2007
Other trends:

- Traditional college student -- Caucasian male -- 18-20 years old, now in the minority
As reflected in libraries:

“...there is no easily defined user...we find hosts of users from every imaginable background, age, ability, viewpoint, and preparation.”

LaGuardia, 2000
Tips:

- First rule of effective instruction... Know your audience...

- Become aware of demographic, social and technological changes.

- To better serve changing populations, assess how changes may impact user composition and professional education/training for librarians.

Questions?

- Who are the populations?
- Characteristics?
- Methods?
- Commonalities?
- Recommendations?
Examples of Diverse Populations:

- International students
- Multicultural students
- Non-traditional students
International Students

India

Taiwan

Peru

Serbia

Japan

Syria
International Students
Some Characteristics:

- Highly motivated; intense competition to get to US.

- May be disoriented by American culture -- unfamiliar with life practices (laundry, driving, food); classroom culture; research methods, technology; etc.

- Language difficulties -- understanding English and being understood in English, written and spoken.
More....

- Unfamiliar with library facilities, terminology, procedures – reserve.

- Don’t know how to do research or what a reference librarian does; hesitant to ask for help.

- In some Asian cultures, unfamiliar with Western classroom culture; may be used to rote learning; have not been required to give input/opinions; may think it disrespectful to ask questions.
International students: What they say:

Tasneem -- India
Capil (India)
Recommendations:

- To lessen dislocation, create and maintain a welcoming, positive atmosphere.

- Become aware of students and their cultures. Show sensitivity and a genuine concern for them. Know your own sensitivities and trigger points.

- Provide basic information on facilities, terminology, library resources, and services, research process, in multiple, accessible formats.
Recommendations continued...

- Provide models/examples of research and writing expectations.

- Partner with other departments involved with diverse students.

- Solicit the participation of international students when planning library activities.
Improve communication:

- With a difficult accent, practice “careful listening.” Avoid library jargon; define acronyms; in orientations use universally known examples, i.e. Sphinx, Great Wall, Parthenon.

- Offer alternate methods of communication, including email and Web 2.0 technologies (Facebook, Delicious).
Nontraditional or returning students:

- Over half undergraduate population in the US is over 21
- 1% over 24
Nontraditional or returning students:

- 2000 Census -- population will get older

- Trend of older students expected to continue
Some Characteristics:

- Highly motivated; goal oriented – need the degree and specific skill(s). Taking personal/financial risk to return to school.

- Results oriented – tend to test learning against life experience.

- Independent learners – find own way.
Characteristics:

- Insecurities: concerned about being behind in new technologies or lacking in academic background; concerned about competition of younger, more with-it students.

- Have additional responsibilities -- work, families; may have to juggle work, family, school.
Andre, a returning student:

- Mature/serious; had worked in another field -- MA in Urban Planning, first step in career change.
- Highly motivated; hardworking...
- Asked: did you feel unsure of yourself?
- “Yes, very much so, especially when younger students complained library skills classes were boring. I knew I needed them.”
- Suggested special classes for returning students to bring them up to speed before the beginning of classes.
Recommendations:

- Again, reach out -- create and maintain a welcoming, collegial atmosphere, a flexible learning environment.

- Work toward a collaborative environment – foster the consultant model rather than teacher/note taker.

- Design relevant and subject-oriented instruction; point out how instruction will help meet objectives and aid in reaching long-term goals.
Recommendations:

- Provide multi-format guides (Printed or online or interactive tutorials; e-mail, chat, Web 2.0 reference) which are portable, can be accessible on the fly outside of school.

- Try to build flexibility in scheduling; provide service give out your card and make yourself available via e-mail, etc. if possible.
Multicultural Students:

- Racial minorities: Americans from under-represented or historically discriminated-against groups:
  - African Americans
  - Asian Americans
  - Hispanics/Latinos
  - Native Americans
Characteristics:

- May have feelings of isolation as a result of racial/cultural differences.
- May have had limited access to technology and other educational experiences.
- May experience feelings of cultural displacement.
- May experience language problems.
Recommendations

- Again, to lessen isolation -- create and maintain a welcoming, positive atmosphere.
- Become aware of student populations and their culture(s): assess student characteristics and needs, as well as your own preconceptions and biases as a teacher.
- Provide basic information on facilities, procedures, terminology, library resources, and services.
- Make provisions for those not exposed to library skills, information technologies or other gaps in educational background.
- Explore biases in vocabulary and resources and offer alternative perspectives.
Initially select universally relevant examples and contexts for instruction – Pyramids, Coliseum, Golden Gate Bridge, etc.

Encourage use of popular, universally-known e-technologies: e-mail, chat, etc. that encourage communication and minimize embarrassment.
Conclusions:

- Know/assess your student population, their culture and experiences, how they seek information.

- Assess yourself as well -- your knowledge and preconceptions of all groups; if you recognize conflicts with students, work to resolve them.
Conclusions:

- Common characteristics of diverse populations include: isolation, cultural dislocation, and real or perceived barriers between themselves and others.

- To break down barriers, create and maintain a welcoming, inclusive learning environment.

- Insure that basics – where things are, how to find a book, an article are covered in instruction, guides, and handouts. Share expectations. Know-how builds confidence – breaks down barriers.
Conclusions:

- Put instruction in a universally relevant context.
- Practice careful listening and speaking; avoid/explain jargon and idioms.
- Reinforce with multi-sensory, multi-format guides, handouts, and other techniques. Offer alternative and accessible modes of communication, including email and Web 2.0 technologies to encourage feedback and interchange.
- Include active learning to help students integrate new concepts into their own contexts.
Variety is the spice of life! Enjoy!
