

Jody Gray

# A different approach to diversity outreach

## Partnerships and collaboration at the University of Minnesota

In the fall of 2005 the University of Minnesota (UM) created a System Wide Academic Task Force on Diversity. Due to the recommendations of this task force, the creation of a new position known as the vice president/vice provost of equity and diversity was developed and the Office for Equity and Diversity (OED) was restructured to include the following offices:

- Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence (MCAE),
- Disability Services (DS),
- Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgender Alliance (GLBTA),
- Women's Center (WC), and
- Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (EOAA).

Parallel to the realignment of OED, the UM Libraries were seeking to increase their efforts for multicultural outreach. The mission of the University Libraries is "[to] inspire learning and discovery through information resources, collaboration, and expertise."

In the spirit of this mission, the University Libraries proposed collaboration with the Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence (MCAE). MCAE is the office within OED that works specifically with undergraduate students from traditionally underrepresented groups. This collaboration resulted in the creation of a diversity outreach librarian.

### **Diversity outreach librarian position**

The diversity outreach librarian works in partnership with faculty and other campus professionals to develop programs that

extend library collections and services to traditionally underrepresented populations, with an emphasis on multicultural programs and undergraduate students of color.

The position and salary is split 50/50 between MCAE and the University Libraries. The primary supervision of this position is maintained through the University Libraries, and the librarian in this role takes part in the Continuous Appointment Track process. This position is a part of the Coordinated Educational Services (CES) Department of the University Libraries. CES works with partners within the University Libraries and the wider UM community to identify and address public service needs.

The intent of this split was to encourage the diversity outreach librarian to provide outreach in a more organic and integrated manner. This would be accomplished by gaining a strong understanding of the MCAE goals and flow of work, as well as the connections to the other OED offices.

The diversity outreach librarian is an advocate for both the University Libraries and MCAE. The librarian is able to identify and prioritize when and where it would be beneficial for MCAE and the University Libraries to support and collaborate with one another. As a result, the diversity outreach librarian holds a second title of academic progress associate, and is responsible for brokering

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services to students and providing advocacy, referrals, and academic programming.

Both MCAE and the University Libraries developed a working job description that initially split the time of the diversity outreach librarian's duties 50/50. However, because the creation of this position was experimental, the development and growth of this position has needed to be malleable; the job description has changed to reflect the actual work that this position provides.

Changes in the initial role of the librarian came from an environmental scan of the University Libraries diversity efforts. It became clear that one of the largest groups that use the library services is the international student body. The organizational structure within UM identifies the international support through the Office for International Programs and the support of traditionally underrepresented groups through OED as two separate offices.

However, because the international population was identified as important to the University Libraries, the diversity outreach librarian has taken on the responsibility of partnering with the offices within the OIP that provide direct service to the international student population, in addition to collaborating with the OED. This has culminated in the University Libraries participating in the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) orientation for international students, the creation of a brochure for international students describing how to use the University of Minnesota Libraries system and the ISSS Department providing "Cross Cultural Communications" workshops for the University Libraries.

### **Benefits and drawbacks**

The first assignment for the diversity outreach librarian was to do an environmental scan of the University Libraries. This scan focused specifically on public service efforts. One of the suggestions that resulted from this scan was the creation of a Diversity Outreach Collaborative.

One person alone cannot work with all of the diversity populations. The collaborative is comprised of librarians from across the institution that provides leadership and guidance to the libraries as a whole.

The purpose/focus of the Diversity Outreach Collaborative is to:

- Communicate regularly with University Libraries staff. Establish a staff wiki with diversity resources about various departments and roles on campus.
- Collaborate with the Office for Equity and Diversity, as well as the student services offices that report to OED.
- Assess need for, develop and deliver, campus programming in partnership with campus stakeholders.
- Develop a mechanism for ongoing environmental scan and inventory of issues, including attention to campus priorities, interests, and needs. Investigate what is happening in the colleges and create a basic inventory of these efforts.
- Assist with the continued development of a campus climate and culture that supports and celebrates diversity.
- Serve in an advisory capacity to University Libraries to meet diversity goals outlined in UM's Strategic Plan.
- Collaborate with and build coalitions among campus groups.
- Provide trainings for University Libraries' staff to work with diverse populations.

Projects taken on by this collaborative have included a proposal to do a study on international graduate student understanding and use of the American academic library, the development of a Peer Research Consultant program that hires students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds and trains them to provide reference/research assistance at public service sites.

The environmental scan offered the opportunity to identify other partners for the diversity outreach librarian to work with. Some of the partners include:

- Bridge to Academic Excellence, a six-week summer bridge program out of OED, for incoming freshman from diverse back-

grounds. The University Libraries have been an active partner and have been working to integrate information literacy instruction into this program.

- Student Excellence in Academics and Multiculturalism (SEAM), a program that revolves around a small cohort of freshman seminars that focus on a particular field of study. The diversity outreach librarian and the information literacy librarian are collaborating to assist in adding information literacy skills into the curriculum.

- Multicultural Kickoff is a two-day orientation for incoming students of color. The diversity outreach librarian has provided a forum for the University Libraries to highlight their services to the incoming freshmen participating in this program. As a member of MCAE, this position is also responsible for parts of the planning and set up of this event.

- System-wide Equity and Diversity Action Network (SEDAN), this is a group developed from OED that brings together staff from across the UM systems who work with traditionally underrepresented groups in an effort to increase communication and sharing of knowledge.

- American Indian Cultural House, which is a living and learning community for incoming freshmen with an interest in American Indian Cultures. The intent is to provide these students with specialized library services for American Indians by developing a freshman seminar for these students and also developing a film festival.

Some unexpected benefits have also occurred. The diversity outreach librarian was also given the liaison and collection development responsibilities for the Department of American Indian Studies. This has proven to be an interesting model, because of the overlap in staff, faculty, and students within the Department of American Indian Studies and the Circle of Indigenous Nations (COIN), which is an office under MCAE; both COIN and the University Libraries strive to create partnerships and programming with the Department of American Indian Studies.

The dual nature of this position puts the librarian at many conversations and events they would not normally have the opportunity to join. As a result, the librarian becomes more than a liaison to a department, but a member of their community.

Another unexpected benefit is providing professional development opportunities for the staff at MCAE and OED. This has become an ongoing effort to create strong allies within the ranks of those shown to be the first point of communication for undergraduates.

Some of the sessions taught so far include information literacy, Web 2.0 trainings, mobile librarian referral, and research support for the staff of MCAE. The staff has responded exceptionally well to this. They have a better understanding of what is available, not only for their students, but for their own work.

The biggest drawback to this partnership is in relation to time management. When the position was initially created, there was a clear divide between the job duties for the libraries and the job duties for MCAE. It became clear early on that providing outreach for both the University Libraries and MCAE had quite a bit of overlap.

A position like this has to be flexible, since there can be so much overlap in duties and priorities can change often and quickly. This is one of the reasons this position has changed its job description several times since its inception and will continue to do so.

## Conclusion

The traditional outreach model in libraries involves developing relationships with outside groups. The UM Libraries and Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence collaborated to create a different kind of model for outreach work.

The malleable nature of this position has allowed for many positive partnerships and collaboration. It is a unique model that truly has shown to have many more benefits than drawbacks and is worth exploring. *zz*