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Abstract

This article is based on the panel presentation offered at the Ontario Library Association Super Conference in January 2013. Six of the ten founding members of Visible Minority Librarians of Canada (ViMLoC) Network were able to attend and offer a panel presentation on the challenges faced by visible minority librarians. Topics varied from finding the right job, education, lack of financial support, upgrading skills, lack of mentorship opportunities, and socialization at work. Although Canada has always been a land of immigrants, the social makeup of immigration has shifted from Eastern Europe to the Middle East, Africa and Asia. There is an influx of immigrants to historically not so popular destinations such as Saskatoon and Winnipeg. Are there more visible minority librarians in Canada as a result? If not, will there be room for them? Based on feedback received at this presentation, ViMLoC will focus on two major projects: gathering statistics on the number of visible minority librarians working for Canadian institutions, and creating a mentorship program.

Keywords

Ontario Library Association Super Conference; Visible Minority Librarians of Canada Network; mentorship program; immigrants; ethnic librarians; socialization

Introduction

In January 2013, Visible Minority Librarians of Canada (ViMLoC) Network had an opportunity to present at the Ontario Library Association (OLA) Super Conference in Toronto, Ontario. Founding members May Chan, Chau Ha, Maha Kumaran, Grace Liu, Norda Majekodunmi, and Kam Teo offered a roundtable session on the challenges faced by many visible minority librarians. Topics ranged from finding “the” job, developing education and professional skills, and lack of mentorship and socialization.

Canada’s Employment Equity Act refers to visible minorities as “persons other than aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.”
Visible minority classification includes people who are Chinese, Indian, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese. The term minority librarians includes visible minorities who were born and raised in Canada and those who were born elsewhere and moved to Canada for better job or life opportunities.

Presenters began by providing information on the state of immigrants in Canada and the steady increase in numbers since before 1961. While the number of immigrants to Canada generally fluctuates year to year, the social makeup of the number of immigrants has shifted. It is no longer just Europeans and Americans immigrating to Canada in high numbers: there is an influx of Asian and African immigrants as well.

Statistics Canada’s data shows that the number of immigrants born in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Oceania and other countries are steadily increasing, while popular immigrant points of origin such as the United States and Europe are either fluctuating or decreasing.

Table 1. Place of birth by period of immigration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Period of immigration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total immigrants</td>
<td>894,465</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>745,565</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>936,275</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>34,805</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>46,880</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>62,835</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>809,330</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>515,675</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>338,520</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>28,850</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>90,420</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>311,960</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>4,635</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>23,830</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>54,655</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean, Central and South America</td>
<td>12,895</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>59,895</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>154,395</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania and other countries</td>
<td>3,950</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>8,865</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>13,910</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Includes data up to May 15, 2001
Source: Statistics Canada

Citizenship and Immigration Canada data, in a chart developed by Brillinger, shows that the number of immigrants in popular metropolitan cities such as Toronto and Vancouver is either fluctuating or decreasing, whereas immigrant populations in cities like Winnipeg and Saskatoon, that historically were not popular destinations for immigrants, are on the rise.
Saskatoon is seen as a favourite immigration hub by immigrants from India, China, UK, the Philippines and Ukraine (Kaur), while Winnipeg’s population grew by 30,166 between 2006 and 2011 (“Census 2011”).

Could there be a correlation between an increase in the immigrant population and an increase in the number of visible minority librarians in Canada? There is currently no data available on the number of visible minorities working in Canadian institutions. Even with data, it would be difficult to establish a correlation between the two. If there is any correlation, this steady increase in immigrant population could mean more potential minority librarians in the field; if there is no correlation, it is important that libraries hire more visible minority librarians to represent the population using their libraries.

What are the barriers preventing minorities from entering librarianship or succeeding in librarianship and leadership possibilities? Panellists listed some of the major challenges as lack of education, lack of financial support to upgrade professional skills, lack of mentorship, and lack of socialization – and where possible offered some suggestions to overcome these challenges.
Education and Professional Skills

It can be overwhelming to be in a new country, and new immigrants may find it difficult to locate information about library education requirements. When deciding to enter the profession, potential candidates should chat with librarians in public, academic, school, and special libraries in their localities, and visit websites of library schools and library associations (provincial, national, and the American Library Association (ALA)). If possible, candidates should visit potential library schools, examine their course offerings, and talk to current students, recent graduates, and faculty about the program. For many of the newly arrived visible minority librarians who have formalized library training from their home countries, there is the challenge of getting their library degrees accredited in Canada. They may have to reacquire their library degrees from an ALA-accredited institution. Some are lucky in that their hiring institution values their degree and experience and offers them a position. Both the Canadian Library Association (CLA) and ALA offer a directory of ALA-accredited library schools and programs.

Financial Support

Applying for and enrolling in a Master’s program could mean a need for financial assistance. Financial constraints are not exclusive to immigrants and visible minorities; however, for new immigrants who may not be able to apply for a loan or have family support in their new country, this is more of a challenge. ALA offers scholarship programs such as the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA/LSSI) Minority Scholarship, (LITA/OCLC) Minority Scholarship, Spectrum Scholarship Program and scholarships through ethnicity-based library associations such as the American Indian Library Association, Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, Black Caucus of ALA, Chinese American Librarians Association, and REFORMA (Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking). ALA has a Financial Assistance for Library & Information Studies directory. Of course, one has to be a citizen to be eligible for these scholarships, and this can pose a challenge for new immigrants who may not yet be citizens. While Canadian citizens are eligible to apply for some of the ALA scholarships, it is a major deterrent that CLA does not have a scholarship program for its visible minority librarians.

A Master’s degree is a major accomplishment, but the degree alone is not enough. Minority librarians need skill sets and knowledge to work in Canadian libraries. As noted by ALA’s “Core Competences of Librarianship”, librarians should also have good foundational knowledge about various libraries and their functions, technological knowledge and skills, evidence of knowledge of concepts, principles and techniques of reference and user services, research knowledge, and an aptitude for lifelong learning.
Socialization

Once hired, visible minority librarians experience a number of major challenges. According to the library literature, visible minority librarians speak of racism, tokenism, negative stereotyping, and feelings of isolation and alienation within their work environment (Moore et al.; Bonnette; Damasco and Hodges; Curry, Blandy, and Martin).

Portilla and Young refer to socialization as the primary goal of orientation and suggest that socialization should focus “on how individuals learn the beliefs, values, orientations, behaviours, skills and so forth necessary to fulfill their new roles and function effectively within an organization” (22). A good orientation program that includes socialization will make new librarians feel welcome and comfortable in their settings. Socialization can be done in both formal and informal ways. While most libraries have formal settings where librarians might have time to socialize, informal socialization can be more relaxing.

Black and Layson report that entry-level librarians often feel “alone and disregarded” (15). To combat this negative trend, researchers suggest that supervisors and library administrators act as mentors and provide psychosocial support to visible minority librarians. This could include providing opportunities to develop and practice professional and leadership skills, offering candid professional advice and professional guidance, helping them identify political landmines, and introducing them to resources and individuals in the library. Being accepted by colleagues and supported by supervisors will also help immensely with retention of visible minority librarians and in building their individual knowledge, expertise and confidence.

Mentorship

Research shows that professional advancement is slower for visible minorities. A couple of reasons for this are that visible minorities are not proponents of self-promotion and do not play the necessary politics for advancement (Howland). Having a good mentor is essential for new minority librarians to map out their career path, set professional goals, and seek guidance on promotion and tenure status (Lee 34). A good mentorship program will help with retention and instil confidence, and therefore, the possibility of creating future minority leaders in libraries. Kawasaki offers a list of recommendations that will help with retention. While he doesn’t use the term “mentorship”, he recommends that libraries “provide opportunities to make connections within the library organization and the institution” and “create an environment that provides elements for asking and seeking out” (126). Mentorship programs can only be successful if the mentee-mentor relationship is based on trust and respect. There should be no room for micromanagement (Olivas and Ma) or exploitation, and the program should allow for ease of leaving the relationship without any repercussions.
While there are many mentorship programs in the United States that Canadian visible minority librarians can join, there is not a similar mentorship program in Canada. As the panel pointed out, it would be good to have a mentorship program external to one’s own library to avoid institutional political trappings.

**Diversity Initiatives by Libraries and their Parent Institutions**

Many libraries are focused on diversity, and some libraries such as the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) have diversity programs embedded into their human resources recruitment practices. Libraries and their parent institutions need to demonstrate their intention to value diversity by hiring a diversity representative who will help to ensure the hiring of minority individuals. Financial support, lack of manpower, and lack of training and education in diversity-related topics are all issues that would impede a library or its parent institution from implementing a diversity initiative. Visible minority librarians can do many things to bring more awareness to diversity in their organizations. To raise staff awareness, they can promote diversity events in the library and collaborate with like-minded individuals or groups to host diversity events. Bilingual or multilingual library staff can help non-English speaking users. All librarians can share their different cultural backgrounds and learn from each other.

**Conclusion**

At the end of the presentation, the floor was open for questions and suggestions. Attendees suggested that ViMLoC choose a couple of key topics to focus their attention and work on during the upcoming year. With these suggestions in mind, ViMLoC will work on two initiatives in the near future: 1) ViMLoC will develop and distribute a survey to determine the number of visible minority librarians working in Canadian institutions, and 2) ViMLoC will establish a visible minority librarians’ mentorship network. To keep up-to-date on our progress, follow our website at http://vimloc.wordpress.com.

**Content provided by**

May Chan, Chau Ha, Maha Kumaran, Grace Liu, and Norda Majekodunmi.
Works Cited


*Employment Equity Act*, SC 1995, c 44.


