



## **The Diversity Imperative for Cultivating 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarians: The Knowledge River Model**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper discusses Knowledge River, a program at the University of Arizona School of Information Resources and Library Science designed to address the need for more Latino and Native American Library and Information Science professionals. Key elements of the program's success include participation in a residential cohort, library work experiences, financial support, community outreach, diversity curriculum and opportunities for networking and mentorship with other minorities. With a high retention rate and a large number of alumni and students taking on leadership roles, the program epitomizes the new face of the LIS profession.*

### **Introduction**

The advent of the Information Age and rapidly changing demographics have irrevocably transformed the landscape of Library and Information Sciences (LIS). The proliferation of technology and the world's growing interconnectedness has impelled a shift in roles and competencies for information professionals. It has also introduced unprecedented opportunity to explore the needs of diverse communities and understand the information access challenges they face.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States, where population shifts have increased the size of ethnic minority groups, and shed new light on the information needs of previously underserved groups. Today's new generation of librarians is uniquely positioned to bridge inequities related to information access and literacy. One

way that this can be achieved is through cultural competency training and the diversification of the LIS workforce.

The literature provides compelling evidence for the need for library workers to represent the communities they serve. This was underscored by Davis and Hall (2007) in the *Diversity Counts* report from the American Library Association (ALA): “That the library’s existence is necessarily predicated on its relevance to the communities it serves demands that we pay more than cursory attention to our burgeoning national diversity and our ability thus far, to fully reflect that diversity among our ranks” (p. 3).

Nonetheless, racial and ethnic minorities are sorely underrepresented in the profession. A review of the latest statistics shows a dramatic lack of representation of Hispanics and Native Americans in the profession. According to the latest report from the Association for Library and Information Science Education (2009), a strong disparity exists between the number of ethnic minority students earning the American Library Association (ALA) accredited Master’s degree in 2008-2009, and the United States population in 2009. While Hispanics make up 15.8% of the US Population, they only earned 5.4% of the degrees awarded in 2008-2009. American Indians and Alaska Natives earned 0.6% degrees while making up 1% of the country’s population, according to the ALISE report (2009). Students who identify as White made up 82.3% of all degrees awarded and make up 79.5% of the U.S. population. A similar situation is observed when comparing the number of credentialed librarians (Davis and Hall, 2007) to the United States population (ALISE 2009).

LIS professionals who are members of underserved communities have distinct socio-cultural knowledge and linguistic skills that are assets in reaching diverse users, as well as organizing and preserving the information objects they produce. Diversifying the LIS profession and training all LIS students to be culturally competent are critical steps in championing the information needs of diverse communities. In so doing, we will solidify the ongoing significance of library and information centers.

Several models, such as the Knowledge River (KR) program, have emerged in the United States to prepare new librarians to serve and advocate for traditionally underserved user groups. These include the American Library Association’s Spectrum Program, the Honoring Generations Program at the University of Texas at Austin, and Knowledge River’s predecessor at the University of Arizona, the Graduate Library Institute for Spanish-Speaking Americans (GLISSA). From 1976 to 1980, the GLISSA program at the University of Arizona educated fifty-four Latino librarians under the direction of Dr. Arnulfo Trejo, who envisioned a program that would address the need for Latinos in the profession (Trejo, 1978; Trejo & Lodwick, 1978).

### **Establishing Knowledge River**

Knowledge River moved Dr. Trejo’s vision forward by again addressing the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the LIS profession, particularly Latino and Native Americans. With a successful model that incorporates a cohort experience, mentoring, and real work experience, combined with financial assistance, the Knowledge River program has successfully added more than 100 individuals from Latino and Native American backgrounds to the field since the program’s inception. The program at the University of Arizona based in Tucson, Arizona is a graduate support

and funding program concerned with the information needs of Latino and Native American communities. Knowledge River is offered through the University of Arizona's School of Information Resources and Library Science (SIRLS).

Established in 2001 through funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Knowledge River has received additional support from numerous local and state partners. These include: The University of Arizona Libraries, Arizona Health Sciences Library, the Pima County Public Library, and the Arizona State Library, Archives and Records. Diversity advocate Carla Stoffle, Dean of the University Libraries and the Center for Creative Photography, provided the support needed to launch the KR program, along with Patricia Tarin, the program's first director. Together, with strong support from the campus partners and SIRLS, they formed the initial framework that would become the core of the KR program. The program also relies on the guidance and support of the KR advisory board, which includes representatives from Latino and Native American librarians and professionals, as well as other key stakeholders, including alumni and community partners.

### **The Knowledge River Model**

A national exemplar for diversity recruitment and training, Knowledge River is the only graduate program with a focus on the information needs of Latino and Native American cultural communities (Montiel-Overall & Littletree, 2010). The success of this program is achieved by involving a broad range of constituents in learning about and promoting services to these groups through a diversity curriculum, research, service learning opportunities, enrichment activities, and more.

The program recruits an annual cohort of Knowledge River Scholars. Selected students must demonstrate, through their application, a strong combination of knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and commitment relating to Latino and/or Native American populations. They must also be willing to participate in Knowledge River enrichment activities, and be active members of the program's learning community.

Knowledge River Scholars pursue a Master of Arts degree in Information Resources and Library Science within the School of Information Resource and Library Science (SIRLS). They are eligible to receive a financial aid package and opportunities for academic support, conference travel, professional development, and regular SIRLS services and activities. Students also benefit from specialized advising and mentoring support. Financial aid is granted in the form of Graduate Assistantships, which provides students with hands on experience in libraries and other information environments.

Knowledge River Scholars have an opportunity to enroll in a selection of diversity related courses offered through SIRLS which are designed to broaden students' understanding of diversity issues in LIS. In 2006, SIRLS implemented a requirement that all SIRLS students must take at least one course from this cadre of diversity-focused courses in order to graduate from the MA program. This diversity requirement distinguishes SIRLS from other LIS degree programs in the United States.

## **The Knowledge River Cohort Experience**

Each year, incoming students become part of a cohort of Scholars that begin the program together. These students represent diverse cultural, geographic, academic, and professional backgrounds, etc., but are united in their interest in Latino and Native American information needs. The cohort model builds a community dedicated to diversity issues, and provides social support to new students. This facilitates retention and academic success. Knowledge River is now on its 10<sup>th</sup> cohort.

All new students take a foundational course together during their first fall semester, *Information Environments from Hispanic and Native American Perspectives*. This class is an introduction to the information needs of the two targeted cultural communities and includes a strong service learning component. It lays the groundwork for ongoing study and practical experience throughout the course of their degree. Because many of the courses at SIRLS are offered online, this face-to-face course gives students a chance to get to know each other and begin building relationships that often last beyond the semester.

KR students often form their own community of learners through study groups, informal social events, and involvement in SIRLS student organizations, such as the Library Student Organization (LSO), and the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG). Many students and alumni are also heavily involved with the local Tucson REFORMA Chapter.

The Knowledge River program also offers students the opportunity to learn more about underserved communities by providing lectures, seminars, guest speakers, outreach opportunities, and professional development opportunities. Recent public events have included “Research With Respect: Ethical Approaches to Native American Cultural Research and Archival Practices”; “Digital Repatriation, Reciprocal Curation and the Ethics of Circulating Native Knowledge in the Plateau Region,” as well as public lectures by Irving Nelson, Navajo Nation Library Director, and Janice Kowemy, Laguna Tribal Librarian. Knowledge River is also currently working with Arizona Tribal Librarians on an oral history project titled “Stories of Arizona’s Tribal Libraries”.<sup>1</sup>

## **Knowledge River Work Experiences**

In recent years, the basis for Knowledge River funding has come from graduate assistantships, which provide opportunities for students to work in libraries on campus and in the community while providing tuition support. With the support of partner libraries and IMLS funding, Knowledge River students have had been placed at partner libraries (the Arizona Health Sciences Library, the University of Arizona Libraries, Pima County Public Library) as well as have opportunities to work in tribal libraries and on special projects such as WE Search (Wellness Education)<sup>2</sup> or assisting with the Knowledge River Program. Each location provides a wealth of benefits, including real work experience, networking opportunities, informal mentorship, and professional development. Student work projects have ranged from processing archival collections

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<sup>1</sup> See Everett-Hayes, L.M (2011, May 3). Oral History Project Emphasizes Tribal Libraries. *UA News*. Retrieved from <http://uanews.org/node/37281>

<sup>2</sup> See WE Search 2010. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/a/email.arizona.edu/we-search-2010/>

in the UA Special Collections to developing programs for refugee and immigrant populations in Tucson through the Pima County Public Library. The graduate assistantship program has been an invaluable benefit for students as they begin their careers.

### **Signs of Success**

In the last 10 years, Knowledge River has graduated more than 100 minority LIS professionals, more than any other program of its kind. As of May 2011, the program has graduated 124 students, including 43 Native Americans and 81 Latinos, or individuals whose area of interest focused on one of these ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> As of May 2011, only 10 students have withdrawn from the MA program, giving KR a 93 percent retention rate.

Knowledge River graduates epitomize the new face of our profession: alumni have received numerous state and national recognition; are active in professional associations; and many hold management/administrative duties in their current professional positions.<sup>4</sup> Forty-five percent of alumni surveyed in 2010 indicated being extremely active to very active in professional associations. KR students and alumni are particularly active in the local Tucson REFORMA Chapter, as well as the National REFORMA Chapter and the American Indian Library Association, serving as elected leaders and very active members.

Several KR students have been selected as ARL (Association of Research Libraries) Diversity Scholars and ALA Spectrum Scholarship recipients. Other KR alumni have been named ALA Emerging Leaders, Arizona Library Association Emerging Leaders, *Library Journal* Movers and Shakers, *New York Times* I Love My Librarian Award winner, and Discovering Librarianship Field Recruiters, to name a few.

Current KR Scholars are highly encouraged (and expected) to continue the tradition of leadership that has been exemplified by previous KR Scholars through mentorship, community outreach, and valuable work experience. Plans are underway to develop an alumni network to mentor students, build the program's resource capacity, and capitalize on the group's collective skills for greatest impact. Students and alumni often credit the Knowledge River program for assisting them in achieving their graduate degree.

### **Conclusion**

Knowledge River is a value-added program to the general graduate curriculum, by providing rich academic experiences and opportunities to develop cultural fluency in serving minority communities. It also serves to increase the diversity of the student body, which creates an inclusive and dynamic learning environment for all SIRLS students. Through a variety of strategies and innovative practices, the program

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<sup>3</sup> The "interested" individuals make up a small portion of Knowledge River students, in compliance with the University's Non-Discrimination Policy.

<sup>4</sup> See Everett-Hayes, L.M (2010 May 6). Knowledge River Graduates Improving Arizona, U.S. Libraries. *UA News*. Retrieved from <http://uanews.org/node/31459>;

leverages the special cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities of its students to cultivate future leaders.

Today's LIS professionals must be prepared to meet the various needs of multiple and distinctive constituencies. The future of our profession depends on our ability to rethink existing paradigms and practices; recast traditional roles; and re-image the face of our profession. This will only be achieved by purposefully growing a diverse workforce, and fostering cultural fluency across the profession. Knowledge River is a compelling example of how this challenge can be addressed. Similar initiatives have also been established at other institutions, and through organizations like the American Library Association.

Successful models and best practices must be evaluated on a broad scale to launch parallel programs of international scope. Ultimately, our ability to reach new and previously underserved users, and bridge digital and information divides is the key to creating new forms of relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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