Information Literacy in Higher Education: The Role of the Black Librarian in the Academic Success of the Black Student

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*Introduction*

During the late 1800s, the Industrial Revolution arrived to the United States at a time when Black Americans were not in a position to claim rewards for their contributions to technological innovation and creativity. Nor were Black Americans allowed to participate as equals in an economy driven by military technological advancement during World Wars 1&2 in the early 1900s. Issues of racial and educational inequality severely hindered the accumulation of technical and educational skills. The landmark policy changes during the mid 1900s, specifically the U.S. Supreme Court’s Brown versus The Board of Education decision and the Civil Rights Acts, contributed to the effort to provide equal access to education and employment opportunities. Which means that, today, at the turn of the Twenty-first Century, the opportunity to catch and ride the wave of the Digital Revolution is a realistically accessible possibility for Black Americans. Computers and information technology have affected economic markets ranging from agriculture, to car manufacturing, to military defense and more. Which means that those who understand the technology will have a distinct advantage over those who do not or will not making information literacy skills an urgent part of their economic equality. According to Jon Cawthorne, “If information will be the new currency in the twenty-first century, then libraries quite possibly can make us rich … The key, for anyone, is learning to decipher and use this technology competently … Obtaining hardware, software, and network capability is the first step. The second step is learning how to use and understand the technology.” In addition, Barber and Tait
state that, “The U.S. economy has evolved from industrial to information, wherein gathering, processing, and analysis of information are critical skills for obtaining employment.” Libraries and librarians have historically served as the socio-economic equalizer in an unequal society making information available and accessible to large populations who would otherwise have been disenfranchised.

*Information Literacy*

However, it is important to understand that availability and access to information is not sufficient to guarantee that a library user will acquire the skills necessary to comfortably survive in a digital world. Per the Association of College & Research libraries, “Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information…Information literacy is focused on content, communication, analysis, information searching, and evaluation whereas information technology fluency focuses on a deep understanding of technology and increasingly skilled use of it.” A clear understanding of the need for information and a capability for processing the information and applying the information to reach a goal is crucial to the information literacy equation. ACRL goes further to define information literacy: “An information literate individual is able to [1] Determine the extent of information needed. [2] Access the needed information effectively and efficiently. [3] Evaluate information and its sources critically. [4] Incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base. [5] Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. [6] Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally.” It is clear that information literacy is a complex
process that requires attention to complex issues more involved than ‘point and click, cut and paste.’

Carvin and Doby break down the various forms of literacy thusly:

Basic literacy: Can I read and write?
Functional literacy: Can I put my reading and writing skills to daily use?
Occupational literacy: Do I know the basics of working in a business environment?
Technological literacy: Can I use common IT tools effectively?
Literacy: Can I discern the quality of content?
Adaptive literacy: Can I develop new skills along the way?

At institutions of higher learning, where academic research and preparation for professional careers are extremely high priorities, “Information literacy competency extends learning beyond formal classroom settings and provides practice with self-directed investigations as individuals move into internships, first professional positions, and increasing responsibilities in all arenas of life,” according to ACRL. What is important for students to realize is that an institution for higher learning provides the perfect setting for learning or even relearning research skills and computer skills. However, again per ACRL, “incorporating information literacy across curricula, in all programs and services, and throughout the administrative life of the university, requires the collaborative efforts of faculty, librarians, and administrators.” And I will add that this collaboration requires the active participation of students as well.

*Digital Divide*

Digital Divide is the worrisome concept that information haves and have-nots exist based upon access or lack of access to information resources, usually technological, for various reasons. According to Carver and Doby, in their article, *More Than Just Access*, “Our economy, our education, and our democracy are but three of the many
reasons we need to bridge the digital divide.” Currently, the average Internet user is a thirty-three-year-old, college-educated White male who earns $67,000 per year. This reality makes it reasonable to suppose that the average content-provider, the person creating and distributing information across the Internet, is part of the same average demographic. Information literacy includes having the skills to not only access information, but also to ascertain its veracity, reliability, bias, timeliness, and context. Per Barber and Tait, “…It may be necessary to refocus the discussion about Blacks in the communication technology race from how they are falling through the Net, to how they can increase their skills and knowledge of computers, gain access to such technology, and make optimal use of it for improving their well-being and prosperity in the real world.” Rather than becoming victims of the Digital Divide, Black librarians and other information specialists can use their teaching skills to encourage students to embrace the possibilities of the Internet. Barber and Tait continue, “African Americans must strive to be not merely end-users of multimedia and other information but producers of the software and hardware that will propel the digital revolution…It’s time for African Americans to tell their own story in new Afrocentric content and form. The information age opens the door of opportunity.” Commonly known barriers to information literacy include a lack of local information, lack of relevant language, lack of cultural diversity, and lack of accessibility, and concerns surrounding privacy issues.

Jeffrey Young, in an article to the Chronicle of Higher Education takes an interesting view of the Digital Divide by stating, “Warnings about a continuing ‘digital divide’ could be doing more harm than good to African-Americans and other minority groups, portraying them as technophobic charity cases who lack the desire to adopt new
technologies on their own.” The Black American students who experiment with music mp3s, DVD players, video gaming, and satellite cable systems should not view themselves as victims of the Internet and the wonders therein. Nor should librarians or anyone else view them as victims. Young continues, “As well-meaning as it is as a policy initiative, it can be marginalizing and patronizing in its own terms.” Perhaps the goals of those struggling to close the Digital Divide are focused in the wrong direction. Perhaps discussions about the Digital Divide focus too often on installing computer hardware rather than on helping develop online content for underrepresented communities or on trying to use computers to solve problems.” Therefore, relevancy of content may be key in closing the gaps. Media accounts of the Digital Divide often exclude the contributions that Black Americans have made to technoculture such as metasites and portals that provide access to online content that is culturally relevant in terms of entertainment, health, social, economic, and political information. Such sites are Blackenterprise.com, Blackelectorate.com, Netnoir.com, and present themselves as partial solutions to making the online research materials and information interesting and relevant to the Black student.

*Role of Black Librarian*

How does the Black librarian function in the whirlpool of information literacy, the Digital Divide, multiple research resources, and the library as an institution itself? While much emphasis is placed on the need to recruit Black and other minority students to predominately-White institutions, even more focus should be placed on the efforts to retain those same students once recruited by supporting their research and academic needs. The worst-case scenario of recruitment is that the Black student eventually leaves
the institution prior to matriculation due to feelings of discouragement, marginalization, alienation, and academic unpreparedness. According to ACRL, “Academic librarians coordinate the evaluation and selection of intellectual resources for programs and services; organize, and maintain collections and many points of access to information; and provide instruction to students and faculty who seek information.” To achieve this end, ACRL recommends that librarians take a collaborative approach to information literacy by partnering with faculty. “In addition to assessing all students’ basic information literacy skills, faculty and librarians should also work together to develop assessment instruments and strategies in the context of particular disciplines, as information literacy manifests itself in the specific understanding of the knowledge creation, scholarly activity, and publication processes found in those disciplines.” It is highly recommend that university and library administration both include and inform themselves of information needs as a means of economic political support of targeted programming in the libraries. Cawthorne describes the main goal bluntly. “If students understand how to perform research effectively using library databases, the Web, and evaluating resources, it will certainly help them to complete their assignments.”

Obviously, just as having computer equipment available does not make information literacy automatic. Neither does the presence of librarians automatically make students comfortable and compatible with library research resources. On a large, predominately-White campus, with large collections of Westernized print materials, and Internet access to primarily Anglo-created web pages, cultural barriers to information literacy exist as described in the Digital Divide section of this paper. For this reason, Black librarians serve as an important motivating force to push Black students past the
hurdles of both digital and cultural divides. According to Mandernack, Lin, and Hovide, barriers to obtaining literacy skills include, “Deference to authority figures, cultural perceptions of gender, learning styles and rates, differences in the role of libraries in the education process, cultural concepts of research and independent thinking, language proficiencies, educational disadvantages, physical barriers, lack of appropriate equipment.” Also, “international student perceptions of U.S. academic librarians as rude, uncaring, snobbish, and not making any effort to understand the needs and concerns of international students in libraries.” In response, rather than taking the assertive step of verbalizing frustration, “politeness, diplomacy, mistrust, face-saving prevent some foreign students from making requests.” This phenomenon occurs with international students as well as ethnic American students, including Black American students, who may view the academic library as a cold and uninviting place depending upon the organizational culture and environment.

For these reasons, outreach on the part of the Black librarian with the support of university and library administration is required. Black librarians simply cannot wait for minority students to walk into the library. They must go where students are and learn about their research needs by attending cultural and ethnic and international student meetings and advertising/marketing the services the librarian and the library can offer of relevance. By partnering with teaching faculty and attending departmental meetings, the librarian can understand the coursework and departmental atmosphere the students encounter from day-to-day and then make library resources both accessible and relevant based on that feedback. Finally, offering private one-on-one consultations allows the student to make informational requests free from the scrutiny and peer pressure of a
classroom setting and free from the accidental audience that occurs during a research interview at the reference desk.

Lori Roth raises the importance of recognizing the changing trends and demographics among university students in general. “The enrollment patterns in higher education vary dramatically from those of previous generations: more students from more diverse backgrounds are pursuing college study; they are older; they work part-time; they “stop out” periodically to deal with family or work issues; they attend two or more different institutions during the course of their college careers; they take six years to get a degree; after earning a baccalaureate, they are likely to engage in continuing education opportunities; and many of them will change careers three or four times.” Also, in the age of point-and-click, cut-and-paste, access-and-download, librarians have an ever-evolving responsibility to serve as teachers in the research process. “Seeking instant gratification, students can be indiscriminate and uncritical in evaluating information. Overwhelmed by the sheer number of possible sources available on the Internet, they find it difficult to determine the authenticity and quality of the various sources.” Information overload and information wallowing are two of the most common results of instant access to electronic resources. Without library instruction, information that is out-of-date, non-peer reviewed, and blatantly false and misleading can be mistaken for legitimate research. Roth emphasizes that, “Students must be able to work independently on computers, understand the nature of electronic databases, grasp Boolean logic, think critically, analyze and synthesize, be familiar with copyright, and understand issues of free speech and censorship, access, and privacy.” Plagiarism is another key issue that arises when information becomes so readily accessible. For all of these reasons,
“Information literacy of students is a responsibility shared by faculty and librarians and is achieved by integrating information skills into the academic curriculum,” according to Roth. One of the easiest and best ways to achieve Roth’s goal of integrating information literacy into curriculum are recommended as follows: “…include workshops to help professors themselves become more adept at using the electronic library… Research skills, as well as content, have to become the focus of class sessions, group projects in the library under direct guidance of librarians and professors, student information skills need to be evaluated.”

Per Miller, several concerns that remain part of the U.S. higher education system are “1. Lack of minority role models among faculty and administration. 2. Environment not supportive of non-white cultural values, one that does not affirm minority cultural dignity. 3. An atmosphere that generates a feeling of isolation for minority students.” This raises the realization that the ethnic breakdown of Black librarians in higher education is rather small there is a pressing need to recruit Black librarians and other librarians of color to develop a staff make-up that is reflective not only of the student body, but also the entire university community. The recruitment of Black librarians serves several purposes: [1] Developers of information content and accessibility. [2] Mentors for student researchers. [3] Mentors for other Black librarians and faculty considering affiliation the university. Therefore, recruitment of Black librarians serves as a benefit to the students, the library itself, and the university as a whole. Just as inbreeding weakens an animal species, so does the drive to homogeneity among faculty and administration stifle creativity and the pursuit of knowledge thereby weakening the research mission of the university. Another benefit of constructing culturally inclusive
organizational environments is that “Fewer minorities will leave the library and take their newly acquired skills with them if they are exposed to a supportive, developmental mentoring environment.” Edward Garten outlines four steps for planning and programming that will allow administrators to change the work environment and encourage the retention of Black and other minority librarians: “[1] Understand that at a deeper level cultural differences do exist. [2] Develop self-acceptance of one’s own cultural background and style. [3] Learn about other cultures. [4] Aspire to a higher degree of flexibility as one inter-relates with minorities in the workplace.” The hardest reality for many institutions of higher education and their libraries to acknowledge is that forms of subtle racism and sexism do exist within their organizations and workplaces.

Many institutions have responded by creating library positions especially designed to promote diversity in the organizational culture. These positions make a good first step, but with a few caveats. Per Linda DeBeau-Melting and Karen M. Beavers, it is often the case that the diversity librarian is ghettoized and marginalized.” The two maintain that, “diversity is not the sole responsibility of people of color.” If this myth is not corrected, “...other library staff might not take the responsibility for issues related to diversity, racism, and privilege.” Sometimes other librarians within the organization misunderstand the position of diversity librarian. It is important that the diversity librarian’s role is understood clearly. “Be careful to not promote the idea that the ethnic librarian is the only person responsible or capable of handling diversity issues.” It is the responsibility of everyone who includes himself or herself in the organizational culture. DeBeau-Melting and Beavers recommend that there be a “re-examination of the belief
that individual ethnic groups need to blend in with the mainstream – with the perceived ‘norm for American’.”

**Recommendations**

This paper raises concerns of information literacy and the role of the Black librarian in addressing those concerns. While efforts to implement those solutions exist, a new sense of urgency presents itself considering in its 2003 fiscal year budget, the White House stripped over $100 million in public investments previously available for community technology grants and IT training programs—programs that offer real payoffs to rural communities, the working poor, minorities and children. This means that new Black students recruited from various communities whether urban or rural may face the special challenge of acquiring information technology and literacy skills while, at the same time, adapting to the new university environment and accelerated educational curriculums. Itibari Zulu remarks that the digital society is marred by disparities between the “information rich versus information poor” and calls for “computer and information technology activists with a progressive agenda.” According to Barber and Tait, “Some who are advocating for racial minorities to shift their focus from civil-rights to cyber-rights say the economy has changed to an information-based market where the gathering, analysis, and dissemination of information, increasingly within the computer-mediated environment, will continue to predominate.” Therefore, a level of information literacy activism is necessary on the part of the Black librarian in terms of outreach and creating and acquiring resources that are culturally relevant.
Currently, several national organizations exist to promote services to diverse library populations including students, librarians, faculty, and institutions. Two, in particular, are affiliated with the American Library Association – The Spectrum Initiative and Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA). The mission of BCALA from their website is to serve “…as an advocate for the development, promotion, and improvement of library services and resources to the nation's African American community; and provides leadership for the recruitment and professional development of African American librarians.”  The Spectrum Initiative's major focus is “…to recruit applicants and award scholarships to African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American/Alaskan Native students for graduate programs in library and information studies…” and also to Improve service at the local level through “…the development of a representative workforce that reflects the communities served by all libraries in the new millennium. It is a troubling reality that our current ranks do not represent the communities served by libraries.”

Mentorship of new Black librarians is another key to achieving success in a continuous cycle of outreach to Black students. New Black librarians must feel motivated and inspired to have an affect on the academic communities they serve. Edward Garten lists the characteristics of strong mentors: “Strong interpersonal skills, organizational knowledge, technical competence, personal power and charisma, willingness to be responsible for someone else’s growth, ability to share credit, high degree of patience and willingness to take risks.”
However, recruitment of Black librarians is still met with some amount of resistance in the academic world. According to Wheeler, “Many librarians, who would be the first to argue for equal access to information, are not supportive of equal opportunities in employment.” Which means those willing to think outside the box and work for cultural diversity must go over, under, and around barriers mounted to protect the status quo and preserve an organizational culture dominated by European and Western ideals. And Wheeler states that, “One of the most important steps that a Black librarian can take is to accept the responsibility for his or her own career and future development.” The three components necessary for leadership by the Black librarian are training and educational experiences, a network of people both in and outside the library profession, and a mentor or group of mentors. Wheeler also states that, “…in very restrictive work environments, sometimes the only opportunity to demonstrate a broader range of skills may be outside the library.”

In conclusion, three places for Black librarians to focus their energy to meet the information literacy needs of their students are [1] The Workplace, [2] The Local Community, and [3] The Professional Community. Lori Roth sums up the role of the Black librarian perfectly by stating, “Teaching our students to be more discriminating and sophisticated in the areas of research and critical thinking is a job for the entire campus community, with librarians leading the way. Information literacy promotes the vision of what all universities want, work for, and hope for: students more actively engaged in their learning at the university, and students better prepared to be lifelong learners in their years after higher education.”
Bibliography


