Initiatives for Improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications

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A post from Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications

A few weeks ago, we wrote about the importance of diversity and equity in peer review, but concerns about who gets to create, curate, distribute, and preserve knowledge extend far beyond the moment of peer review.

A few examples of both grassroots and institutional initiatives: take a look at the ACRL’s Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future (2019). This study examines the diversity of people working in research libraries and their working conditions; the diversity of the content created, collected, and evaluated in libraries; and the accessibility and sustainability of the systems undergirding the work that libraries do. The ACRL also offers its members a Diversity Standards Toolkit. Why are such things necessary? According to a 2013 ARL study, as of 2012-2013 the staffs of US university libraries were largely white—86 percent—with only 6.6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 4 percent African American, 3 percent Hispanic, and .4 percent American Indian/Alaska Native (13). By comparison and according to the same report, in 2010, 67.5 percent of Americans were white, 15.2 percent Hispanic, 11.8 percent African American, 4.6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and .9 percent American Indian/Alaska Native.

On the publishing side, surveys have shown that university press staffs are also disproportionately white. A 2016 international survey found that just over 90 percent of employees in scholarly publishing identified as white. And while academic publishing, like librarianship, is a female-dominated profession, the leadership remains largely male. In 2016 four university presses—Washington, MIT, Duke, and Georgia—received a three-year grant from the Mellon Foundation to support fellowships for members of groups underrepresented in the field. As the AUP’s press release stated, “The fellowship program represents a significant investment in creating career development opportunities and a supportive environment for diversity in the workforce” (2016). Mellon supported an extension and expansion of the program in 2018, with presses at Cornell, Ohio State, Chicago, and Northwestern joining the program. Results of a survey on gender and career development among AUP members are due out later this year. Meanwhile, the Scholarly Communications Institute has made equity the theme of its 2019 meeting. We hope to write about the AUP survey and the SCI event later this year.

Similarly, many academic fields have recently seen renewed efforts to address racial, gender, and other inequities, from the ferment in medieval studies (Medievalists of Color, 2017; Tom Bartlett, “A Field Goes to War with Itself,” Chronicle of Higher Education, June 28, 2019) to Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain’s “#CommunicationSoWhite” study in the Journal of Communication 68:2 (paywall). The Women in Environmental History Network issued a “Report on Gender and the American Society for Environmental History,” in 2017, finding "striking anomalies" in the number of...
publications by gender.

These are just a few of the struggles and initiatives I’m aware of; no doubt you know many others. How are they reshaping scholarly communications, and what should their impact be? If you’d like to write about what’s happening in your field, let us know. Guest posts are welcome!