

Are Ethnic Minority Public Librarians Becoming an Endangered Species?

A Look at Fourteen Public Library Systems in North Carolina.

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The public library system in North Carolina has undergone major changes and improvements in the last twelve years. Some of these changes have included on-line databases, computerized circulation systems, and the use of networking to improve library services. Even though there have been technological advances, there are still more changes in the areas of recruitment and personnel development that need to be addressed. The administrations of larger library systems (i.e., those which serve populations of at least 75,000) are dominated by white males. According to the 1980 census, twenty four per cent of North Carolina's population is ethnic/minority. Consequently, there should be a concern that few ethnic/minorities in these systems are in policy-making positions which can affect the future of public library services.

This concern was expressed on a national level in 1974 when the Black Caucus of the American Library Association conducted a survey of twenty-four leading libraries throughout the United States. Twenty-two libraries responded and of the twenty-two, ten were public libraries which served large ethnic/minority communities. The combined total of professional librarians employed by the ten systems was 2,383. Of that number only 185 were ethnic/minority.¹

This article is based on a study conducted by the authors, the purpose of which was to look at fourteen North Carolina county and regional public library systems, the demographics of the populations they serve, and the number of professional ethnic/minority librarians they employ. The study focused on systems which serve a population of 75,000 or more, whose local ethnic/minority population is 20% or more, and whose staff consists of five or more librarians holding the M.L.S. degree. This study also determined the existence of affirmative action programs in the fourteen library systems, and considered future trends in employ-

ment and/or upward mobility for professional ethnic/minority librarians in their systems.

Thirteen questionnaires were mailed to library directors. Twelve responded. In addition, six other systems were contacted by telephone. The libraries which responded were Central Regional, Craven-Pamlico-Carteret Regional, Chapel Hill Municipal, Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, Cumberland County, Durham County, Forsyth County, Gaston-Lincoln Regional, Guilford County, Hyconeechee Regional, Neuse Regional, New Hanover County, Onslow County, Pitt County, Rockingham County, Rowan County, Sandhills Regional, and Wake County. Only those library systems which met the criteria were included in the study.

The questionnaire asked for the following information:

- Number of professional librarians employed by the library system.
- Number of professional ethnic/minorities employed by the library system.
- Number of professional librarians in top and middle management.
- Number of professional ethnic/minority librarians in top and middle management.
- Outlook for upward mobility and/or promotion of ethnic/minorities.
- Whether or not a written affirmative action policy exists in the system.

The combined total of professionals employed by the fourteen systems is two hundred fifty-two, of which twenty-nine are ethnic/minorities. One hundred twenty-five of the two hundred fifty-two professionals are in middle management. Seventeen of those are ethnic/minorities. There are forty-one professionals in top management and three are ethnic/minorities. (See Table I.)

Findings recorded on Table I reflect the disproportionate number of professional ethnic/minority librarians employed in North Carolina in 1986. It is obvious that the level of employment of ethnic/minority librarians has remained relatively unchanged compared to the findings of the 1974 ALA Black Caucus Survey. That survey

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reported that twelve years ago the Durham County Public Library employed fifteen professional librarians, four of whom were ethnic/minorities. In 1986 there are twenty-five professional librarians in the system, six of whom are ethnic/minorities. Fifteen of these professionals are in middle management, and four of the fifteen are ethnic/minorities. In top management there were two professional librarians in 1974 and one was ethnic/minority. In 1986 there are six professional librarians in top management and one is ethnic/minority. Durham County Public reported to the ALA survey in 1974 that the outlook for upward mobility and promotion of ethnic/minorities was good.² However twelve years later it appears that the outlook is not as good. According to the library director, the fact that opportunities seem to come infrequently for all professionals and the lack of turnover may account for a dimmer outlook.

Studies have shown a gradual decline in the number of ethnic/minorities graduating from accredited library schools. Three-fourths of the respondents who participated in this study felt that there is a paucity of applications received from ethnic/minorities who hold the M.L.S. degree. According to the director of Wake County Public Library in his response to the study's questionnaire, vacancies are advertised in national publications, on the state level, and in all library schools east of the Mississippi. However, the response of ethnic/minorities remains low. Other directors indicated that salaries are not attractive enough to draw top ethnic/minority candidates.

All of the participants in the study expressed a desire to employ more professional ethnic/minority librarians in their systems. In spite of the fact that there is an apparent lack of professional ethnic/minority applicants, several of the library systems indicated that they are seeking ways to address this concern. Seven of the fourteen systems surveyed have written affirmative action policies. Several directors foresee employment and upward mobility of ethnic/minorities through expansion of facilities and creation of new positions. Some indicated that they employ ethnic/minorities in paraprofessional positions. Forsyth County, Wake County, Neuse Regional, and New Hanover County stated that they currently have in their employ paraprofessionals who are pursuing the M.L.S. degree. The administrations of these libraries encourage and support the efforts of these employees. Upon completing their degrees, the status of the paraprofessionals may be upgraded to that of professional librarian.

In reviewing the data of this survey it is evident that the key to solving the problem of the shortage of ethnic/minority public librarians is not beyond our reach. All of the in favor of employment of ethnic minority librarians if qualified applicants could be found. However, the authors feel that library administrators should be actively involved in recruiting ethnic/minority librarians for their systems. Ethnic/minority librarians already employed by a system could possibly serve as resources for attracting like candidates. Most of the systems surveyed indicated that they wanted only superior ethnic/minority candidates; however, it is difficult to find

TABLE I.
1986 Survey of N.C. Public Library Systems

Library System	% Minority of Population Served*	Total No. of Professionals In System	Total No. of Minority Professionals In System	Total Management In System		Total No. of Minorities In Management	
				Middle	Top	Middle	Top
Central Regional	21.0	8	0	7	1	0	0
Charlotte-Mecklenburg	27.9	46	7	23	6	6	0
C-P-C Regional	22.0	7	0	4	3	0	0
Cumberland County	36.0	23	1	9	4	0	0
Durham County	37.3	25	6	15	6	4	1
Forsyth County	25.0	40	7	18	4	3	1
Guilford County	26.0	26	2	10	4	1	0
Hyconeechee Reg.	25.0	5	1	3	1	1	0
Neuse Regional	40.0	11	2	4	2	1	1
New Hanover Co.	22.3	9	0	3	5	0	0
Pitt County	35.0	6	0	5	1	0	0
Rockingham Co.	20.9	9	0	4	1	0	0
Sandhills Reg.	32.0	7	0	6	1	0	0
Wake County	23.2	30	3	14	2	1	0

*Source: North Carolina State Government Statistical Abstract, Fifth Ed., 1984.

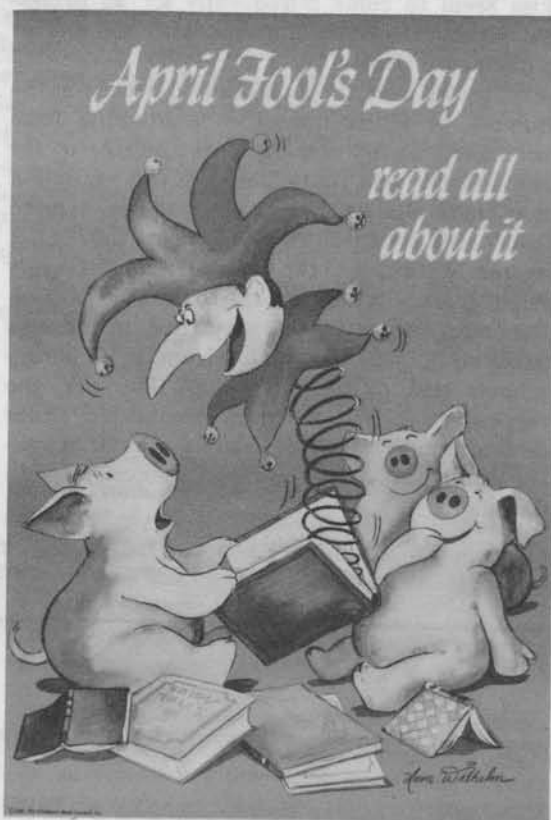
superior applicants even among the dominant ethnic population. The authors suggest that it is possible to hire the average ethnic/minority applicant and develop him or her into a superior employee by providing quality work experiences and exposure to exemplary mentors.

According to Dr. Benjamin Speller, Dean of the School of Library and Information Sciences, North Carolina Central University, "Practitioners need to be more concerned about recruitment issues than they have been historically. The major effort for recruitment *must* be made by those in the profession who are close to sources of potential librarians—school librarians, college and university librarians and public librarians. All major

sections, roundtables and committees of the North Carolina Library Association should have as one of their top priorities active participation in the process of recruitment, admissions, enrollment, and education of minority librarians. This action would insure quality library and information service for all citizens of North Carolina and increase everyone's quality of life as well."³

References

1. E.J. Josey, "Affirmative Action for Blacks and Other Minority Librarians," *Negro History Bulletin* 38 (June 1975): 423-27.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Dr. Benjamin Speller, Jr., "Minority Representation in Librarianship: Some Problematic Facts," *REMCO Newsletter* 3 (Winter 1987):4-5.



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