
Academic libraries and the culturally diverse student population

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Becoming aware of the special needs of minority and international students.

The growing cultural diversity and its impact on the "traditional" American way of life is being seriously discussed and analyzed by academic institutions, city governments, and many other organizations alike. Today the nation stands at a crossroads facing the challenges as well as the opportunities of a truly multicultural society in an increasingly internationalized world. At the rate the number of ethnic minorities is growing here in the United States, after two decades or so, the changes in numeric realities will be so stunning that it will be hard to tell who is majority and who is not. With this astounding demographic trend, the nation is now at an opportune time to take necessary steps in the right direction.¹ A little late may be too late.

The Central Administration of the State University of New York has been committed to a "pluralistic educational community" for several years. This year, the Office of the President at SUNY College of Fredonia prepared a flier entitled "Preparing for the Nineties." One of the five major issues which the College is committed to deal with is pluralism in ethnic and cultural diversity. Re-

cently, an article in the *New York Times* discussed a new SUNY task force that is being established that would be able to travel to the various SUNY campuses to ease racial tensions when and if they occur.²

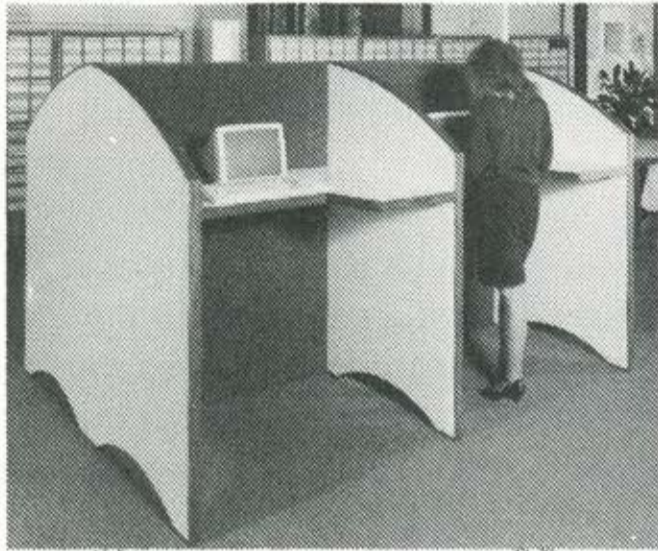
Our interest in libraries responding to culturally diverse student populations began when we were preparing for a session at the SUNYLA Annual Conference in June 1989. At this time we focused on some of the issues and problems that foreign students and American culturally diverse students face in confronting the complexities of academic libraries. A panel of five represented Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, American Indians, Asian-Americans, and all other international students.

As a result of our program, a Special Interest Group sponsored by SUNYLA was formed. The Special Interest Group intends to sponsor regional activities and to establish goals for ensuring a favorable cultural environment among all the SUNY libraries. We are especially concerned that we do what we can to avoid the type of racial and ethnic

¹"NCLIS Task Force on Cultural Minorities Reports," *Library Journal* 108 (1983), 2190+.

²"SUNY Adopts New Strategy to Ease Its Racial Tensions," *New York Times*, December 24, 1989, p.23.

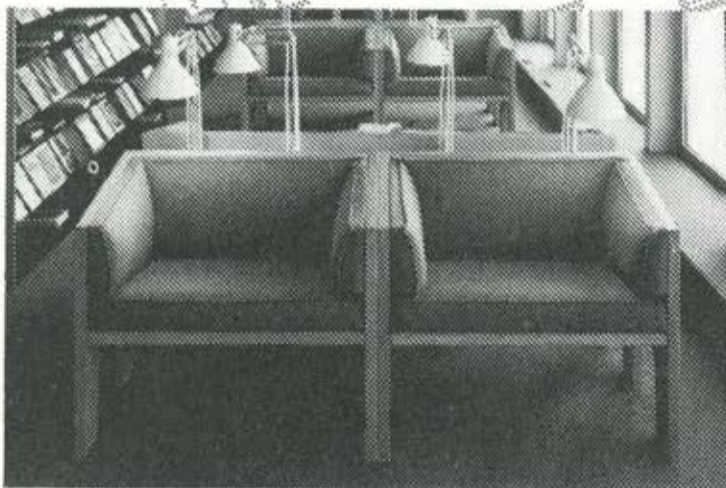
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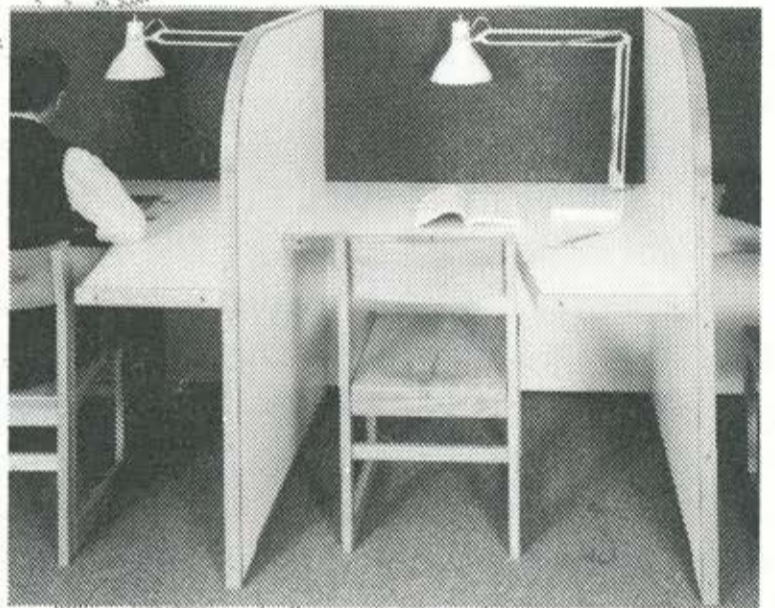
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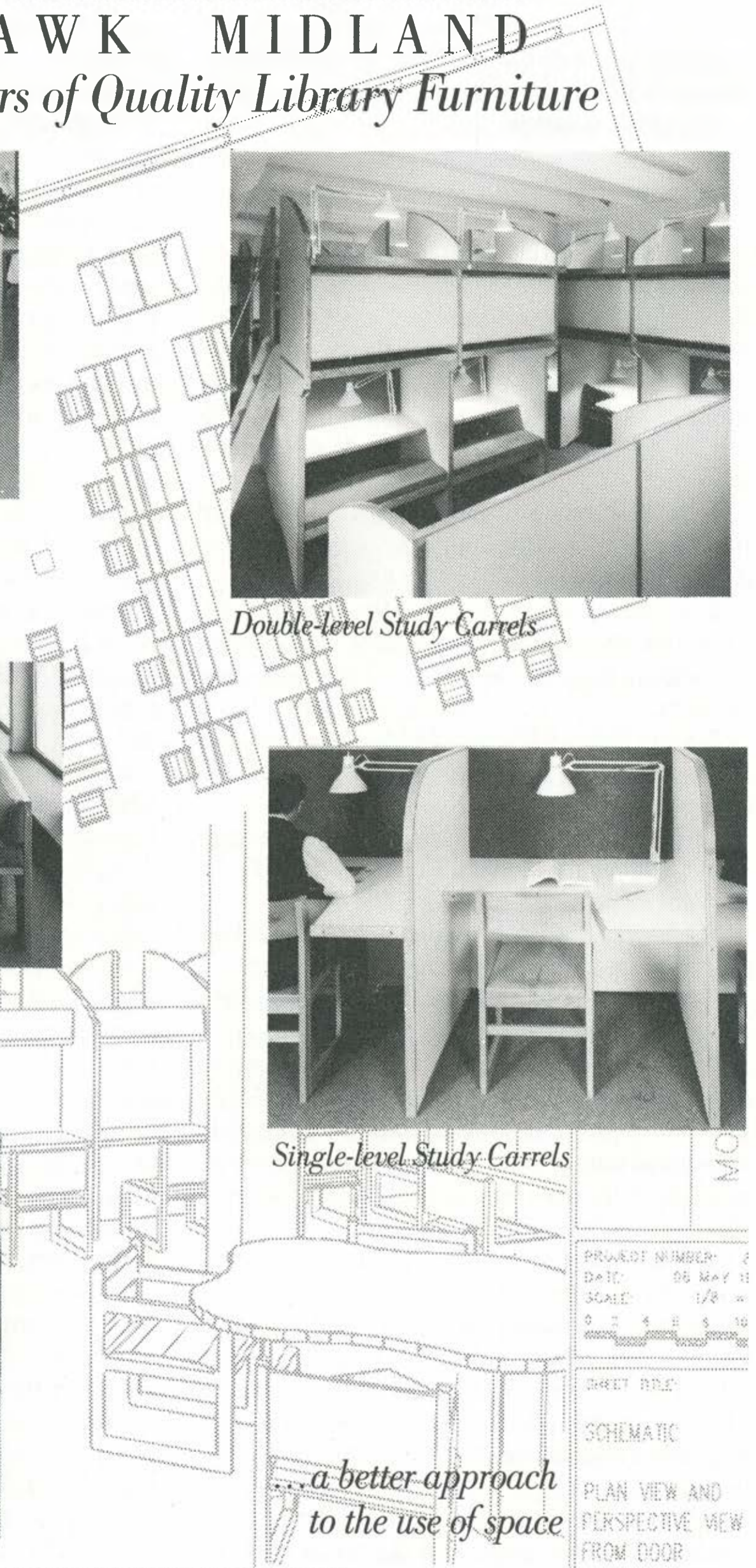
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incidents that have been occurring regularly on campuses all over the United States in the last few years.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on some of our observations and to provide suggestions that will help academic libraries encourage and welcome culturally diverse students. We will address the needs of ethnic "minority" students as well as international students.

Minority students

For librarians to be able to serve ethnic minority students, it is essential to educate ourselves on the hard ethnic realities which this nation is facing. Only then can we offer functional and meaningful service, and facilitate excellence in education for minority students. Among some of the hard realities we have to be aware of are facts such as the following:³

1. Among minority teenagers, the functional illiteracy rate is 40% compared to 13% of the American youth overall.

2. A 1985 survey showed that the average reading proficiency of 17-year-old black students was just slightly higher than that of 13-year-old white students.

3. Only 20% of 17-year-old black students had sufficient reading proficiency to engage in college-level work.

4. In disadvantaged urban settings the high school dropout rate is 40-50% compared to 25% for the general population.

5. Minority students frequently lack the library skills required to succeed in higher education.

6. Minority students are most often perceived to be "information poor."

All these did not happen without a reason. In spite of the historic legislation, *Brown vs. The Board of Education* (1954), which put an end to segregated education, the scholastic achievements of minority students have not achieved parity with their fellow white citizens.

The historical, as well as several current social and cultural factors, have been identified as impediments confronting minority students' quest for excellence in education.⁴ What librarians need to do to help minority students make effective use of library services is first to make ourselves knowledgeable about the issues affecting ethnic minorities.

Benjamin Carson has written a significant article that describes environmental factors of minority

children that affect learning in scientific fields. (It occurs to us that these factors affect learning in any field.) First, parents of minority children are said to be rarely present to help direct their children's lives. Whoever is caring for them is usually too busy trying to survive to pay much attention to the children.⁵

Another problem is that, in general, people in the black and some of the other ethnic minority communities, lack scientific expertise. They are unable to provide the same proportion of scientific role models as more privileged communities. At John Hopkins Medical School, for example, top applicants were found to have been exposed to a high level of scientific and technical knowledge from the time the children are born. In fact, many medical students' parents are renowned scientists, teachers, and practitioners in various scientific fields.

Along with knowing about the backgrounds of culturally diverse students, it is important for librarians to *avoid stereotyped attitudes* about the abilities and achievements of these students. When necessary, it is not difficult to generate in-house ways and means to bring disadvantaged students up to college level. These students benefit from intensive bibliographic instruction, library orientation and term paper clinics. Studies have been conducted and have validated the contention that bibliographic instruction programs do have a positive influence on students' educational pursuits.

At Westchester Community College, the pre-college level students who are enrolled in a course called Advanced Reading have two separate library assignments. One is a *New York Times* assignment which involves analyzing the news that occurs on their birthday. In this assignment the students become thoroughly familiar with the microfilm machines and the concept of storing back issues of periodicals. The second assignment has to do with looking up one book and two articles on a particular topic, all of which need to be summarized. Thus, the students learn how to use the online catalog and the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*.

By the time these students take the freshman English course, Composition and Literature I, they are completely at ease in the library. In fact, they often help the other students who have not needed to take a developmental course.

A well-thought-out collection development program would also be another logical move towards meeting the needs of ethnic minority students. Of course, the collection of any academic library should support the curriculum and also develop a wide and varied general collection. It is also impor-

³James A. Hefner and Leila G. Rhodes. "Excellence in Education: Libraries Facilitating Learning for Minority Students." *Eric Document No. 284590* (January 5, 1987), 5.

⁴Hefner and Rhodes, 6.

⁵Benjamin S. Carson, "Factors Affecting Minority Learning in Scientific Fields," *Journal of College Science Teaching*, March/April 1988, 341.

tant that libraries buy resources that are relevant and reflective of the students' cultural backgrounds. Materials should be in a variety of formats, print and non-print.

It has been said that cultural or ethnically oriented library collections have enormous potential for fostering self-validation among culturally diverse students. This type of collection enhances the understanding of their cultural background.

International students

The other group of students that librarians should give due consideration is the international students. These are the students who are in the United States temporarily, and are primarily here on student or diplomatic visas. They plan to return to their home countries when their studies are completed.

Mary Alice Ball and Molly Mahony of the University of Michigan said, "if we show foreign students that we do not expect perfect English from them and that we value the considerable effort they are making by studying in the United States, they will return by opening up and trusting us to help them." The same authors continue by mentioning that foreign students will not hesitate to ask for assistance once a librarian is recognized as a person who is willing to help.⁶

Needless to say, building a good relationship is very important. It is essential to realize that a positive or negative experience may influence *any* student's perception of the entire staff. As one of the panelists mentioned at the SUNYLA Annual Conference session in June 1989, if you dislike the professor you hate the course. If you dislike the librarian, you have a bad impression of the library.

While conducting bibliographic instruction for international students, it helps to use teaching aids such as hand-outs, overhead transparencies, and blackboards to reinforce what you are teaching them. A glossary of library terms is also helpful. It is very likely that services such as database searching, interlibrary loan, and term paper consultation may not exist in the developing countries from where most foreign students come. It is important, therefore, to make a point that the students are aware that these services exist.

It is useful for librarians to be aware that different cultures have different concepts and perceptions of what is acceptable and normal behavior. For example, there is the matter of personal space. North Americans feel comfortable with a conversational distance of about five feet. Arabs are used to a two-foot distance. As a result, North Americans

may feel uncomfortable in this type of communication situation.

It is helpful for librarians to become informed, through the office for international students or the foreign student adviser, about the composition of international students who are enrolled in a particular semester. Find out which foreign groups are likely to have the most problems with adjustment. If a college or university is educating a large number of Egyptians, for example, the library should have a reasonable amount of materials on Egypt and, at least, one Egyptian newspaper.

Something that has been especially helpful at Westchester Community College has been having two librarians as club advisers. A librarian from China is adviser to the Far Eastern Club. The other librarian is an adviser to the International Friendship Club. These librarians share an office, and their office is the focal point for both clubs.

Needless to say, librarians *must avoid* patronizing attitudes towards our culturally diverse students. Endless patience and persistence are absolutely necessary, but it will be effective in the long run. Last spring, at Westchester Community College, there was a woman from Jamaica who seemed to need our help constantly. It was difficult at times to be patient, but she was trying so hard that we continued to assist her whenever she needed anything. This last summer, the same woman from Jamaica was not only doing all the work herself, she was helping all the other students around her.

Conclusion

Being culturally alert is essential for minority ethnic groups as well as international students. For librarians, and other service professions such as nursing, it is especially important. One author in the nursing field suggests that a failure to understand the cultural heritage of a patient can lead to culturally inaccurate and inappropriate judgments. This can contribute to ineffective and even unsafe interventions.⁷ Librarians must also become adept at cultural appraisal and cultural empathy. When this occurs, librarians are able to automatically and naturally choose the best methods for helping each student most effectively.

The goal of any academic institution is for students to enjoy satisfying educational experiences by means of a positive learning environment and stimulating social interaction with peers and educators. The college or university library is the ideal setting in which these goals should be realized, especially for minority and international students. ■ ■

⁶Mary Alice Ball and Molly Mahony, "Foreign Students, Libraries, and Culture," *College & Research Libraries* 48 (March 1987): 160-166.

⁷Susan Mattson, "The Need for Cultural Concepts in Nursing Curricula," *Journal of Nursing Education* 26 (May 1967): 206.