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## Cultural Competency in Universities and Library Services: Definition and Review

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## **Cultural Competency in Universities and Library Services: Definition and Review**

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## **Abstract**

Cultural competency is critical aspects that requires proper management in view of the fact that institutions of higher learning worldwide are more diverse with the greater rate of international student enrollment, expansion of opportunities for women and ethnic minorities, and increase in more affordable options for achieving a degree. This qualitative study sought to presents a literature review of the concept of cultural competency as it pertains to the provision of educational and library and information services at institutions of higher education. This literature review explores the various definitions for cultural literacy, how the concept has been used in higher education and library and information science research, and the questions about the concept and its use that remain unanswered. This review is intended to serve as a starting point for future discussion of cultural diversity and the inclusion of international students within the literature. The data was thematically analysed. The paper suggested some recommendations based on the results of the study.

**Keywords:** Cultural studies, Cultural competence, Library services, Universities,

## **Introduction**

Universities around the world are becoming more diverse with the greater rate of international student enrollment, expansion of opportunities for women and ethnic minorities, and increase in more affordable options for achieving a degree. According to a report by Espinosa et al (2019), the percentage of Black, Asian, Hispanic, and international students enrolled in U.S. universities all increased from the 1995-1996 to 2015-2016 academic years, with the percentage of Hispanic students nearly doubling to 20% and the percent of international students increasing nearly five-fold. During this same time, the percentage of students identifying as White dropped from 69.8% to 52.0%. Women represented 56.5% of students in 2015-2016. However, as diverse as the student population at many universities has become, the faculty of these universities decidedly lacks diversity. In 2015-2016, 73.2% of full-time faculty were White, with only 9.3% Asian, 5.7% Black, and 4.7% Hispanic (Espinosa et al., 2019). 58.1% of this faculty were men. While academic librarianship may be a bit more diverse in terms of gender, racial diversity is considerably worse than even among university faculty. According to a 2017 study of members of the American Library Association, 86.7% of respondents reported their race was “White” (ALA Office of Research and Statistics, 2017).

An ideal way to increase cultural understanding is by increasing representation of diverse populations among the faculty. All universities around the world would be well-advised to adopt policies that promote the hiring of historically marginalized populations. Additionally, universities must promote greater cultural competency among faculty. Several recent papers have explored different aspects of cultural understanding that stress the importance of this type of competency for university faculty and academic librarians. However, there has yet to be a review of the body of literature in LIS. This paper addresses this gap and provides avenues for increasing our understanding of the cultural competency concept and supporting future research.

## **Overview of the Cultural Competency Concept**

It is important to provide an overview of the cultural competency concept. The next section focuses on defining the Cultural Competency Concept and related terminology.

## **Defining Cultural Competency and Alternative Terminology**

The concept of cultural competency first appeared in the social work literature (Gallegos, 1982; Green, 1982) and the counseling psychology literature (Pedersen & Marsell, 1982; Sue et al., 1982). In the 1980s, in line with the social direction initiated by the civil rights movement, the federal government authorized local governments to incorporate cultural competency goals into funding requirements for service programs and requiring public institutions to comply with cultural competency standards required by law (Multnomah County, 2005). A decade later, several articles have been published calling for cultural competence in nursing education (Alpers & Zoucha, 1996; Chrisman, 1998). After the 21<sup>st</sup> century, similar articles appear in medical education (Suh, 2004; Bigby, 2003) and LIS (Foster, 2018; Overall, 2009).

Historically, there have been several terms used to refer to the same concept, with the most prominent being *cultural competency*, *multicultural literacy*, and *cultural literacy*. This section briefly explores how each of these three terms have been defined and used in the literature.

Burchum (2002) summarized the attributes of cultural competency in nursing literature as:

- Culture awareness: examining an individual's values and traditions to identify similarities and differences with other cultures;
- Culture knowledge: acquiring information about various cultures continuously and understanding the cultures through theoretical frameworks;
- Culture understanding: understanding the influence of culture on various groups' beliefs, values, and behaviors;
- Cultural sensitivity: developing based on appreciating, respecting, and valuing cultural diversity and being aware the diversity via individuals' professional or cultural identity;
- Cultural interaction: developing personal or professional relationships with individuals from diverse cultures through personal contact, communication, and exchange;
- Cultural skills: incorporating client beliefs, values, and practice into planning and service delivery based on effective communication skills.

Diamond and Moore (1995) described the term *multicultural literacy* as: "the process of linking the cultural experiences, histories, and languages that all students bring to school with language learning and academic learning that take place in school" (p. 7). Educational efforts emphasizing multicultural literacy would share certain values in their teaching, including that heterogeneity is valued and affirmed, individual responsibility is taken, democratic processes are employed, and focus is not only on content but also learning about people from different cultural backgrounds (Cogen, 2000).

Hui (2014) summarized knowledge and skills related to cultural literacy as including:

- Multicultural literacy: understand and appreciate the similarities and differences in the customs, values and beliefs of one's own culture and the cultures of others;
- Global awareness: recognise and understand the interrelationships among international organisations, nation-states, public and private economic entities, socio-cultural groups, and individuals across the globe;
- Self-direction: set goals related to learning, plan for the achievement of those goals, independently manage time and effort and independently assess the quality of learning and any products that result from the learning experience;
- higher-order thinking and sound reasoning: apply the cognitive processes of analysis, comparison, interpretation, evaluation and synthesis to a range of academic domains and problem-solving contexts;
- Teaming and collaboration: cooperatively interact and work together to solve problems, create novel products or learn and master content
- Interpersonal skills: read and manage the emotions, motivations and behaviours of themselves and others during social interactions or in a social-interactive context;
- Personal responsibility: achieve balance, integrity and quality of life as a citizen, a family and community member, a learner and a worker;

- Social and civic responsibility: promote the public good and protect society, the environment and democratic ideals

Ultimately, the three terms have similar definitions and can probably be used interchangeably. However, for the sake of reducing confusion among readers, it can be helpful to settle on a specific term.

### **Studies of Cultural Competency in Higher Education**

Modern conceptions of cultural competency in higher education have been shaped by the work of Ochoa and McDonald (Ochoa & McDonald, 2019; Ochoa & McDonald, 2020; Ochoa et al., 2016; Ochoa et al., 2018). It is the belief of Ochoa et al. that the acquisition of cultural literacy skills are best attained in educational settings through the exposure of students to the same types of unfamiliarity and uncertainty that they can be expected to experience in real-world situations, an approach they call “destabilization.” Following this destabilization, students are encouraged to reflect on their experience. In this sense, the experience is somewhat like that of experiencing avant-garde or postmodern artwork, where the purpose of the art itself may be to disorient and, in so doing, challenge preconceived notions of “being.” Here, that notion of being is one in which one’s experiences – educational, social – have all to this point been shaped likely by a single dominant paradigm, whether it be “western culture,” “white, Midwest culture,” or some other.

Ochoa et al. (2018) support the use of Open-Space Learning (OSL) techniques to enhance destabilization and improve cultural literacy. OSL is an approach to teaching that relies on physically open spaces, meaning that barriers like tables, desks, chairs, and dividers are all removed (Monk et al., 2011). Students “act out” roles and learn through embodiment of concepts. Many students will feel discomfort in having to act out concepts for learning, which may be the desired effect, certainly if the goal is to simulate the discomfort that international students and scholars feel when entering a new cultural context.

Shliakhovchuk (2021) reviews models of cultural literacy to negotiate what they call a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world. They note that many models of digital literacy these days incorporate cultural literacy (even if not in that exact name). The expanse of the digital world has made it impossible to avoid cross-cultural interactions, but it is up to the individual as to whether they are receptive to and learn from these experiences (Belshaw, 2012; Polizzi, 2020). Placing technology and multiple literacies in a central place alongside cultural literacy illustrates the important role that librarians can have not only by acquiring cultural literacy themselves but also educating students to acquire this same literacy. Shliakhovchuk (2021) also notes that the term “cultural literacy” has shifted in popularity in recent years, as terms like “cultural intelligence” have grown in popularity. The scope of “cultural literacy” has consequently also expanded to include roles inherited from these emerging terms and concepts, like intercultural group leadership and active curiosity and engagement with foreign cultures (Hassell, 2017).

Mayweg-Paus and Zimmerman (2021) discuss the production of Open Education Resources (OER) for a Cultural Literacy Learning Programme (CLLP). This OER is part of the DIALLS Project: Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools (<https://dialls2020.en/>). The project designed a program (part of this OER) that was designed with

two major aims: to provide education about coexistence and cultural heritage and identity, and to encourage dialogue about topics important to them and practice negotiating disagreement. In the latter case particularly, this method of education shares similarities with that of Ochoa et al.'s (2018) and shows that a common theme of cultural literacy programs overall is to enhance dialogue and role exchange.

### **Studies of Cultural Competency in Academic Libraries**

Supporting the cultural diversity of university students has long been a concern of academic libraries (Buttler, 1994; Chadley, 1992; Trujillo & Weber, 1991). Discussion of cultural competency concepts, understanding of the cultural contexts that shape the personal and professional frameworks rather than just asking if they exist, developed a bit later. Alpi (2001) discusses cultural competency in participating in reference interviews, noting several factors that librarians should consider, if they come up in conversation: number of generations/years in the country, English fluency, social support, immigrant status, as well as knowledge (or at least responsiveness to) the cultural practices of the individual. Alpi (2001) also recommends encouraging more open communication by asking open-ended questions, paraphrasing what you have been told, and avoiding stereotypes. Stanley (2007) argued that when students or library patrons did not see their culture among the librarians, they may find it challenging to seek help from librarians. That is, academic librarians from different cultures needed to understand students' cultural values for cultural backgrounds were as critical as, if not more critical than, their educational qualifications.

A framework for cultural competency introduced by Montiel-Overall (2009) has made a considerable impact within the profession of librarianship. Montiel-Overall argues that cultural competency must be acquired across three domains: cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental. In the cognitive domain are the development of cultural self-awareness, the identification underlying cultural assumptions, cultural knowledge, and sensitivity to cultural differences. For instance, librarians know whether eye contact is appropriate for certain ethnic groups by understanding cultural differences (Stanley, 2007). The interpersonal domain incorporates cultural appreciation and emotional connectivity (caring), interest in the culture of others, and engagement in cultural interaction (participation in activities). The environmental domain includes the setting and resources (e.g., languages spoken), access, and sense of security maintained. In order to attain a level of cultural competency, library professionals must be aware of, and create an environment that is hospitable to, all of these factors and their interrelations. Similarly, Lewis (2007) also believed that academic libraries should create a comfortable, lively, and active environment for users to communicate and support the use of library resources and relevant technologies to make the library a place to serve users with a diverse cultural, ethnic, generational, and digital background.

Mestre (2010) examined, using a survey and interviews, how practicing diversity librarians perceived the education they received in library school as preparing them for working with culturally-diverse populations. Most respondents indicated that little or no diversity training was offered in library school and that they often felt inadequately prepared for their role. Part of the issue appears to be that, while many respondents may have considered diversity content to be

requisite, library schools offered it primarily in elective courses. Respondents to the study were mixed in their feelings as to whether library school coursework prepared them to work with multiple cultures. Most major universities were found to lack any type of diversity librarian or liaison, which only makes coordinated efforts to welcome students from various cultures onto campus even more difficult.

Since the time of Mestre's study, evidence has shown that instruction for diversity and cultural literacy roles has improved. Tang et al. (2017) compiled a list of LIS education resources that may be used by educators in library schools. Cowden et al. (2021) presents culturally-responsive teaching as a way to promote cultural understanding in library instruction. Dali and Caidi's (2020) book *Humanizing LIS Education and Practice: Diversity by Design* contains several chapters relating to improving cultural literacies within library and information science.

Additionally, the Association for College and Research Libraries, in 2012, published *Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries*. A set of 11 standards were published:

- Cultural awareness of self and others
- Cross-cultural knowledge and skills
- Organizational and professional values
- Development of collections, programs, and services
- Service delivery
- Language diversity
- Workforce diversity
- Organizational dynamics
- Cross-cultural leadership
- Professional education and continuous learning
- Research (Association for College and Research Libraries, 2012)

Many libraries began to integrate these standards, such as at the University of Washington-Bothell, where new training and workshops were offered, assessment of current library services was implemented, and outreach employed among staff and toward service populations (Lazzaro et al., 2014). Kreitz (2007) explores how academic libraries best apply diversity management and provides a reading list for leaders and human resource managers to optimize diversity within their organizations. Koury et al. (2019) described approaches conducted by Carnegie Doctoral Research Institutions of Higher Education libraries for diversity and inclusions as building and strengthening library collections and recruiting and working with other units on campus. However, the lack of funds and resources was identified as a challenge. Napp and Sabharwal (2019) mentioned that academic libraries support diversity with various measures, such as diversity recruitment, collection development, and outreach to the international or marginalized population to understand diverse needs and knowledge organization formats. Cruz (2019) has also reviewed the impact that the Association for College and Research Libraries' standards have had on academic libraries, though these efforts often lack an emphasis on services for international students. So, while these efforts have propelled an effort to expand equity initiatives in academic libraries, they have often seemed to overlook foreign cultures.



Multiple LIS schools have provided cultural education opportunities. A biennial joint conference organized by the School of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University in the U.S. and the University of Sofia in Bulgaria aimed to explore the global impact and change on libraries, information infrastructure, and social development (Abdullahi et al., 2007). In 2012, the School of Information at University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, University of South Carolina, Valdosta State University, Uganda Christian University, and Mutesa Royal University established a cooperative program to promote collaboration among institutions in teaching, research, and publishing, and faculty and student communication (Tumuhairwe, 2013). In Uganda, the East African School of Library and Information Science at Makerere University attempted to integrate indigenous culture into their MLIS curriculum (Magara, 2010). Several smaller studies have also been conducted in recent years that further our understanding of current levels of cultural literacy among practicing librarians. Oztemiz (2019) surveyed higher education faculty in Turkey as to their cultural heritage literacy skills, finding that most had decent levels of literacy related to their own native culture. Lester (2020) found, among American engineering librarians, a broad range in levels of knowledge and competency about diversity and inclusion approaches to instruction. Pistorino (2020) notes that librarians can improve significantly in the area of intercultural communication, including being “culturally humble,” in order to promote a more welcoming environment.

Quinonez and Olivas (2020) discuss the incorporation of culturally relevant content in their information literacy coursework. Specifically, the content was designed to reflect the Latinx background of students – over two-thirds of the students in the information literacy courses identified as Latinx – by incorporating cultural concepts into the existing information literacy frameworks. Students were encouraged to self-disclose stories about their own cultural background, greater representation of Latinx scholars and research was incorporated, and a culture was created that valued vulnerability and trust (all aligning with core tenets of Ochoa et al.’s cultural literacy concepts). The researchers found that this approach elevated students’ sense of comfort and culture within the course.

### **Key Issues and Challenges for Cultural Competency Study in Academic Librarianship Research**

There are several potential challenges to address to improve cultural competency study and adoption within the research:

1. Agreement on terminology.

Literature on topics related to cultural competency can be difficult to identify due to the disparate terminology used to refer to, essentially, the same topic and set of ideas. In this review of the literature alone, “cultural competency,” “multicultural competency,” “cultural diversity,” “multicultural literacy,” “cultural heritage literacy,” “cultural awareness,” and “cultural literacy,” have been used. A lack of consistent terminology is an epidemic within library and information science particularly (Dow et al., 2020). Librarians work within the domain of information literacy. Librarians may call themselves “library instructors,” but information literacy is the content of that instruction. Similarly, researchers in information science frequently investigate “digital literacy,”

“scientific literacy,” “visual literacy,” “multiple literacies.” “Literacy” refers not only to the acquisition of a skill (as in the case of “competency”), but the “capacity to communicate” based on acquired skills (Foley, 2021). As such, “cultural literacy” may be the appropriate term to use, though “cultural competency” is likely the most common term used in existing literature. For that reason, adoption of “cultural competency” as the dominant term may be best to support retrieval of relevant literature on the topic.

2. How should we incorporate cultural competencies into information literacy/LIS instruction?

There are several publications that have discussed the incorporation of more diverse perspectives in library instruction. They are, however, quite limited in the applicability of cultural competencies in information literacy instruction. Cooke and Sweeney (2017) discuss the implementation of social justice concepts in LIS education, as do Gregory and Higgins (2017). Quinonez and Olivas (2020), as mentioned previously, discuss their integration of culturally-relevant content into information literacy instruction. Branch (2019) indicates that the LIS classroom is where the values of LIS that are associated with social responsibility are introduced to future librarians, and by extension where the ability to create positive change begins. It is thus crucial for academic librarians to design research on information literacy programs that has the potential to highlight important social issues such as cultural literacy as well as better engage with students. Napp and Sabharwal (2019) state that, “academic libraries are the intellectual hubs of their campus, and as such, they also have a role in shaping diversity and the conversation on diversity and inclusion through culturally competent collection management and hiring and promotion practices”. The study conducted by Napp and Sabharwal (2019) of American higher education concluded that best practices in promoting diversity and inclusion in the academic libraries is, however, a safe strategy for minimizing the gap across data sources and demonstrating the effectiveness of diversity initiatives in the academic library. Pillon and Umetsubo (2020) describe how they have evolved in their own information literacy programming to support international students. These all contribute to a growing body of research and discussion about culturally sensitive approaches to instruction. Some authors consider cultural competency in higher education to refer to intercultural competence. López-Rocha (2021) concludes that intercultural competence development is crucial in the preparation of students to create awareness of the interconnectedness of global issues, to consider different perspectives and understand dynamics of multicultural settings, to work and communicate more efficiently in a globalized world, and in general, to function as responsible professionals in a changing global environment. None, however, focus specifically on the tenets of cultural competency for instructional librarians who work with international students.

3. What skills and traits do librarians need in order to effectively incorporate cultural competency/responsiveness into their instruction?

Selig et al. (2006) quoted from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Health Resources & Services Administration about the cultural competency as “(it) comprises behaviors, attitudes, and policies that can come together on a continuum that will ensure that a system, agency, program, or individual can function effectively and appropriately in diverse cultural interaction and settings. It ensures an understanding, appreciation, and respect of cultural differences and similarities

within, among and between groups. (p. 249S).” Cultural humility is a respectful attitude towards diverse cultures and viewpoints (Fletcher, 2007) and a diversity effort and an ongoing endeavor instead of a skill to be acquired or knowledge to be acquired (Hurley et al., 2019). The fundamental difference between cultural humility and cultural competence was that cultural humility required individuals to be open to interactions under a cultural dimension without predicting what the dimension was (Hurley et al., 2019).

It is unrealistic for a librarian to have relevant cultural knowledge in every interaction with hundreds of patrons in a library context. Librarians need only recognize that there will be cultural elements and power dynamics in the interaction instead of assuming their manifestation (Hurley et al., 2019). Also, as librarians of color, cultural humility is not requiring them to hide their identity and influence. Mainstream culture may drive potentially inaccurate narratives of individuals of color, and it is difficult to change popular attitudes about them without access to their repressed history and knowledge. Librarians have an opportunity to lead efforts to break down stereotypes by providing accurate information that supports the practice of cultural pride and cultural humility (Hurley et al., 2019).

The Association of College and Research Libraries (2012) stipulates language diversity poses challenges to librarians and library staff as a whole. Language as a means of communication encompasses all languages spoken by librarians, library staff and library users, including users living with disabilities such as speech and/or hearing difficulties. According to Liu (1995) language could be a barrier for a nation’s linguistically diverse population, especially those foreign born individuals, when seeking information from librarians. This is because librarians and Library users in the same library often use different jargon. They may use specialized terminology or technical language that others may not understand (Smallwood & Becnel, 2013). The Association of College and Research Libraries (2012) noted that demographics in many countries including the United States have changed dramatically. The difference in the demographic composition of educators (librarians) and their students (clients) is cause for concern because research shows that race, ethnicity, and cultural background of students greatly influence their success (Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Kiba et al., 2011) and library usage. In academic libraries, this change has affected how librarians interact with each other as colleagues, co-workers, and as information service providers striving to serve diverse library users and to collaborate in multicultural library environment (Khoza, 2006).

Due to poor communication skills and lack of attention to reference services in their home countries, students from developing nations, rarely ask reference questions (Rehman & Mohammad 2001:3). Foreign students find it difficult to approach strangers at the reference desk because of their linguistic and social insecurities (Khoza, 2006; Ball & Mahony 1987).

Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (1998) found that students whose first language is not English have the highest library anxiety. The fact that English is used primarily as a means of academic communication at a tertiary level, making it difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to master tertiary learning (Arko-Cobbah 2004:266) due to language limitations. However, language is one of the most significant differences between cultures, expressing the language speakers’ beliefs, values, and worldviews (Mi & Zhang, 2017). Speaking a second language is

critical in fostering awareness and knowledge of cultural differences. Therefore, individuals who speak a language other than English can better understand the strengths of a particular culture, leading to higher cultural awareness and sensitivity, which underscored the significance of hiring librarians who speak the second language to enhance academic libraries' cultural competence.

Language barriers of students lead to technological barriers. Despite the focus on intercultural or cross-cultural competence and the implied language proficiency to develop such competence, the language that has the status as the international language of science, English, is often used as an indicator of the degree to which a higher education institution has an 'international' character (Van der Walt 2016). For instance, when comparing groups of students in the use of library databases Khoza, 2006 citing DiMartino et al. (1995), found that English-speaking students are able to carry out more and better computer searching than non-English speaking students. The fact that libraries today have more characteristics and technology that is new for students from different cultural backgrounds may exacerbate the situation. This suggests that academic libraries need to improve reference services for speakers of English as a second language, in order to maintain equal access to library and information services.

Intercultural communication theory may present an avenue for bridging these gaps. Carmack and Ahmed (2019) examined successful encounters between international students and university health center providers. In these situations, the providers were more willing to communicate in a way that is comfortable for the student (e.g., using simplified terminology, avoiding colloquialisms and jargon). Anxiety-Uncertainty Management is a theory that proposes an understanding of concerns experienced by international students in communicative exchanges, which can be applied to a variety of higher education and academic library contexts (Lund, 2021; Lund & Walston, 2020). These concerns fall into seven categories (Gudykunst, 2015): self-concept; motivate to engage in communication (cost-benefit); empathy for the other's perspective; expectations for how the exchange will likely proceed; power relations among participants; comfort in interacting with strangers; and receptivity to the ethical dispositions of others.

## **Conclusion**

This paper discussed cultural competency – a term that refers to the acquisition of the skills necessary to empathize, form understanding, and communicate effectively with individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds – in relation to universities and academic library services. Through a review of existing literature, several important themes were identified, including guidance on how to integrate cultural competency training into LIS education and the importance of cultural sensitivity and effective communication skills for attaining cultural literacy abilities. These findings provide a starting point for future research on these important topics.

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