

A New Look at Diversity

*Caucuses and committees
find common ground at
Diversity Symposium*

By Nichelle J. Perry
photos by Brant Bender



Diversity Symposium speakers from left to right: Katie Brown, Gen X/Gen Y Caucus; Allen Moye, Black Caucus; Meg Butler, Standing Committee on Lesbian and Gay Issues; Sherri Thomas, Native Peoples Law Caucus; and Andrew Evans, Asian-American Law Librarians Caucus.

2009 Diversity Symposium: “Rethinking Diversity: Defining Ourselves for the 21st Century”

Presenters: Ron Wheeler, moderator, Georgia State University College of Law Library; Raquel Gabriel, City University of New York; Andrew Pulau Evans, Washburn University of Topeka School of Law; Allen R. Moye, DePaul University College of Law; Kathleen Brown, St. Thomas University Law Library; Ulysses Jaen, West Virginia University; Meg Butler, New York Law School; and Sherri Nicole Thomas, University of New Mexico Law Library.

In keeping with the 2009 AALL theme “Innovate,” the AALL Diversity Committee decided to re-explore the idea of what diversity is within AALL and to examine the common threads that tie the diverse groups in AALL together. Since diversity has recently been “reexamined” and “revamped” in society, the committee thought “Rethinking Diversity: Defining Ourselves for the 21st Century” was the perfect topic for this year’s Diversity Symposium.

To begin the dialogue, the committee invited representatives from some of the major groups within AALL that have established themselves as “diverse” to speak at the symposium. These are groups that many members have heard of but may not know much about. By offering these groups the opportunity to present their mission and history, the committee hoped to expand members’ understanding of diversity within AALL and to help them learn more about the goals and objectives of these groups.

Connecting and Learning from Each Other

Groups with representatives on the diversity panel included: Asian-American Law Librarians Caucus; Black Caucus of the American Association of Law Libraries; Standing Committee on Gay and Lesbian Issues; Gen X/Gen Y Caucus; Latino Caucus, and Native Peoples Law Caucus. Each representative spoke for approximately five minutes about his or her group. While all of the representatives provided “official” information about their group (such as when they were formed, their mission and projects, etc.), most gave more personal accounts, including what it meant for them to be a members of the groups.

Andrew Evans of the Asian-American Law Librarians Caucus spoke of how belonging to the caucus for him was very personal. He indicated that he felt like he had found brothers and sisters in the profession that he could call on for support.

Allen Moye of the Black Caucus provided the symposium with a wonderful timeline of the history of African American involvement in AALL and noted that much of the history of

minorities in AALL is chronicled in the book *Celebrating Diversity: A Legacy of Minority Leadership in AALL* by Carol Nicholson, Ruth Hill, and Vincente Garces. There was definitely pride in his voice when he spoke about the caucus and the vital contributions the group’s members have made to AALL.

Katie Brown of the Gen X/Gen Y Caucus indicated that this newer caucus was founded in 2005 to provide a forum for younger AALL members to connect and increase their knowledge so that they may grow in the profession and AALL.

Ulysses Jaen of the Latino Caucus, another fairly new caucus, shared some astounding statistics regarding the representation—or, rather, underrepresentation—of Latinos in the legal profession and librarianship. He underscored the need to recruit Latinos to make diversity a true reality for law librarianship and AALL.

Meg Butler from the Standing Committee on Lesbian and Gay issues within the Social Responsibilities Special Interest Section of AALL relayed the important role this committee fills by allowing gay and lesbian AALL members the opportunity to “come out” to other members and avoid isolation within the Association.

Sherri Thomas of the Native Peoples Law Caucus discussed the significant role her caucus plays in fostering the preservation of Native American law in accordance with cultural traditions. She also noted the caucus’ work with developing and maintaining an information network for tribal laws, which are often not available electronically.

It was easy to see the enormous amount of diversity in AALL from the representation of the groups that presented at the symposium. I think we could have very easily stopped right there and answered the question of whether there was diversity within AALL with a resounding “yes.” But there was more to come.

By the time moderator Ron Wheeler took over the program, it was standing room only in the meeting room. He started off the discussion by asking the panelists and symposium audience for a definition of diversity within AALL and whether we have missed the mark when it comes to defining diversity within the organization. A lively discussion ensued regarding the varying views on diversity

and its ever-changing definition. I don’t think there was ever a consensus on what diversity is within the Association; however, I think it is safe to say that all seemed to recognize that diversity is a broad, subtle, and complex issue, and that AALL has always done a lot to promote diversity in the organization as well as the profession. This was most notably pointed out by an audience member who has been active in AALL for over 20 years and remembered AALL including diversity in its Strategic Plan long ago.

It appeared to me that diversity for most of the people at the symposium is more than a definition based on race, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation; rather, it is about exposure, support, and the ability to find someone you can relate to and feel comfortable with within AALL. It also appeared to me that the caucuses play a key role in keeping the profession and AALL diverse.

The Next Step for Developing Diversity in AALL

The conversation quickly and almost seamlessly turned to the need for AALL to pay closer attention to a wider range of recruiting activities to interest students of all ages in our profession. Panelists and audience members were eager to discuss how they could spread the word about our profession. Some current recruiting ideas included attending middle and high school career fairs; working with the Black Law Students Association; speaking at library school career programs; and creating internship programs for high school students. (One law librarian from a rural community volunteered that one of

the ways law librarians in her state reach out to the community is by sponsoring a car in the local demolition derby with the code sections for driving infractions printed on its side.) “Reach them any way you can” seemed to sum up the feelings of most everyone at the symposium.

The final point of discussion related to the fact that everyone is doing a lot of work to recruit diverse persons to the profession, but these efforts are not being recorded or collected anywhere. Perhaps what is really needed is a place

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where all of these recruitment ideas can be collected and showcased. One idea is to create links from the AALL recruitment page or Diversity Committee website to a page that allows people to showcase and provide others with wonderful recruitment ideas. It is only through this type of information sharing and dialogue that we can create a more diverse and stronger profession and organization.

The time allocated for the symposium flew by quickly, and attendees continued the discussion and networking at a wine and cheese reception. There never seems to be enough time to discuss an issue as vast and personal as diversity, so the thought and dialogue will continue. This dialogue was yet another effort toward rethinking diversity that will continue for quite some time. Fortunately, we have the help

of the AALL caucuses and committees to lead us in the quest for diversity and how it will be defined in the 21st century. ■

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