

Diversity in AALL—It Does Exist*

Joyce A. McCray Pearson**

Professor Pearson reflects on diversity in AALL, based on her personal observations, particularly those experienced as chair of the Committee on Diversity.

diversity (divə·rʹsiti, dəi-). 1.a. The condition or quality of being diverse,¹ different, or varied; difference, unlikeness.

b. . . . An instance of this condition or quality; a point of unlikeness; a difference, distinction; a different kind, a variety.²

diversity n. 1 _difference, _dissimilarity, dissimilitude, unlikeness, _disparity, deviation, divergence, departure, distinctiveness, diverseness, _variation, _variety, individuality, inconsistency, contrariety, _discrepancy, _contrast: *Flowers are impressive in their diversity.* . . . *multiformity: Democracy encourages diversity of opinion.*³

Whether or not diversity exists in AALL, as my title unequivocally states, depends upon how one defines diversity. Since I wanted to define diversity, I thought I'd better have diverse definitions from somewhat diverse sources. You get my point. The definition, concept, or notion of what diversity is, is personal. I can only discuss diversity in AALL from my personal experience as an African-American librarian. Therefore, in this article I will not use empirical data or cite surveys. Instead I will share my recent observations and experiences in the organization.⁴

The Committee on Diversity (COD) met twice at the 1998 AALL Annual Meeting in Anaheim. At that meeting we defined what diversity was not. One librarian stated that diversity was not just black people as opposed to white people. She suggested that that model, or notion, was prevalent in society and AALL. Not a very diverse idea of diversity. She further suggested that unless the voices of many different people were heard in a dialogue about diversity, it could not be an adequate discussion on the subject. I agree.

* © Joyce A. McCray Pearson, 1998.

** Director of the Law Library and Associate Professor of Law, University of Kansas School of Law, Lawrence, Kansas.

1. diverse . . . 1. Different in character or quality; not of the same kind; not alike in nature or qualities. THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 886 (2d ed. 1989).

2. *Id.* at 887.

3. OXFORD THESAURUS 114 (Am. ed. 1992).

4. *Editor's Note:* Professor Pearson served as chair of the AALL Committee on Diversity in 1997–98.

Another librarian stressed that the commonality that did exist between diverse people was that they had all experienced some sort of oppression or discrimination because of their status. Others felt that their sexual orientation qualified them for a seat at the table in any discussion of diversity. And yet another felt that we should be careful not to lose sight of racial inequity in hiring and education in law libraries when we broadly define diversity. I interpreted that to mean that an over-broad definition of diversity is so sweeping that it is meaningless.

I will understand if readers who attended the meeting take issue with my vague interpretation of a very brief meeting and discussion. This is what I thought I heard. And I could very easily have heard wrong. But I state those things loosely to drive home my point. No one knows how to define diversity in a way neutral enough that it doesn't immediately spark debate on the definition itself.

One could argue that everyone in AALL is diverse. A literal interpretation would allow each and every individual to be a member of the "Diversity Group." Applying the dictionary and thesaurus definitions noted earlier, we all, for a multitude of reasons, consider ourselves different, distinctive, and unlike everyone else. We all fit into the "Diversity Group."

If, on the other hand, we look at the history and origin of the COD, we find that it was called the Committee on Minorities from its creation in 1985-86 to 1994 when its name was changed by the Executive Board.⁵ I am sure when it was called the Committee on Minorities, the discussion of who was a minority came up a few times. The committee's charge consists of six lofty goals; among them the most interesting are: "Recognizing and celebrating the richness of an active, diverse membership"; "Encouraging active participation by the whole membership"; and "Identifying barriers and how to remove them."⁶ My favorite really opens the floodgate to include the entire membership: "Enriching the Association and profession through extensive integration of multiple perspectives and experiences."⁷ The charge is a good one and I agree with its overall concept. I also think other committees can claim they have the same or similar goals.

Judging strictly by my eyes—without reference to what people think or their ethnicity, religion, or orientation—I can say that I see more diversity in 1998 in AALL than I did in 1990, the year I joined the association. I recall going to annual meetings in the past and seeing a handful of people of color. And oftentimes the number of people of color you see depends upon where the meeting is. The buzzword while I was in California was diversity. While channel surfing in my hotel room, I noted an advertisement for a local restaurant that boasted of California's diversity and the diversity of its menu. So I take it that to them diver-

5. See MINUTES OF THE AALL EXECUTIVE BOARD, July 7-8, 1994, at 1947 (on file at American Association of Law Libraries Headquarters, Chicago).

6. *AALL Committees*, in AALL DIRECTORY AND HANDBOOK 1997-1998, at 393.

7. *Id.*

sity is important. And as long as the word or phrase has a good connotation, I don't mind being associated with it.

That the discussion about diversity continues is a positive sign to me. AALL recognizes that as the melting pot of America continues to have many more ingredients than it did a century ago, or that more flavors in the pot are distinguishable, the organization has an opportunity to reflect that in its membership.

In the Spring 1995 issue of the *Law Library Journal*, Dwight King, Rhea A-L Ballard, Helena Lai, and Grace Mills presented "a demographic and professional profile of AALL minority law librarian members based upon responses to a detailed survey that elicited information about work experience and skills, professional activities and participation, and career aspirations."⁸ This excellent article reflects a great deal of hard work, and it includes a variety of tables and comments that are very informative about minority law librarians. I made sure I read it several times before writing this article. I also read Roy Mersky's article, a commentary that contains a paragraph that empowers me every time I read it and that I turn to on days when no one sees things my way:

I think that sometimes it is important to take a person's skin color or ethnic background into account when hiring or promoting. I have learned firsthand the value of tapping the diverse resources that follow from including people from different backgrounds. A work environment that includes minorities—and I here refer to differences in race, national origin, religion, age, physical abilities, cultural diversity, and sexual orientation—is far more stimulating and convivial than one that is homogeneous.⁹

Many people, including me, define minorities and diversity the same way: race, national origin, etc., including physical abilities and sexual orientation. But how you define it should never be the argument. That you strive for it and argue about it is all that really matters.

I do not count heads to determine how many diverse people are in AALL. Instead I make a point of peeking my head into the CONELL meetings and marketplace every year to see who the new law librarians are. I don't set up a booth to do a survey or take notes. I observe with my own eyes how many new people of color come in. I make no assumptions, I have no expectations. I only hope they will continue to come to the meetings, get involved in the various activities in the organization, and let AALL benefit them as much as it has me.

There aren't enough diverse people in the organization in the strictest definition of the word. But if those who are in the diverse group can affect people around them and make them realize the importance of diversity, the sphere gets a little larger. All movements and groups with a small membership seem stronger when they are joined by those unlike them. Those people who at first glance are not "diverse" relate to the people in the group on a different level, or they just care

8. Dwight King et al., *Profiling Minority Law Librarians: A Report on the 1992-93 Survey*, 87 L. LIBR. J. 247, 247 (1995).

9. Roy M. Mersky, *AALL and the Road to Diversity*, 85 L. LIBR. J. 859, 860 (1993).

for the sake of caring. That is not my concern or an issue to me as a member of the group. Perhaps no one on the COD shares my point of view. But if some people agree with me and others don't, that is okay. It just shows that diversity exists amongst the "Diverse Group" as well as in AALL.