

Recruitment Methods in the Information Technology Rural Librarian Master’s Scholarship Program (Part I and Part II): Implications of Social Justice in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region

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Abstract: The Information Technology Rural Librarian Master’s Scholarship Program Part I (ITRL) and Part II (ITRL2) are two grant projects funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to the School of Information Sciences (SIS) at the University of Tennessee (UT). The purpose of both is to recruit and train rural library paraprofessionals working in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region to complete their master’s degree part-time in the UT SIS’ synchronous distance education program. Sixteen ITRL students completed their graduate education from June 2010 – August 2012 combining work experience in regional libraries with a curriculum that focused in information technology (IT) and rural librarianship, while thirteen ITRL2 students will complete a similarly structured program from June 2013 – August 2015. This paper discusses the social justice implications in its analysis of the recruitment methods in the ITRL and ITRL2 that have been made to identify the best candidates from the rural SCA communities.

Keywords: social justice, Information Technology Rural Librarian Master’s Scholarship Program (Part I and Part II), ITRL, ITRL2.

1. Introduction

The Information Technology Rural Librarian Master’s Scholarship Program Part I (ITRL) and Part II (ITRL2) are two grant projects funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to the School of Information Sciences (SIS) at the University of Tennessee (UT). The purpose of both is to recruit and train rural library paraprofessionals working in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region to complete

their master's degree part-time in the UT SIS' synchronous distance education program. Sixteen ITRL students completed their graduate education from June 2010 – August 2012 combining work experience in regional libraries with a curriculum that focused in information technology (IT) and rural librarianship, while thirteen ITRL2 students will complete a similarly structured program from June 2013 – August 2015. This paper discusses the social justice implications in its analysis of the recruitment methods in the ITRL and ITRL2 that have been made to identify the best candidates from the rural SCA communities and actualize social justice efforts to bridge rural digital divides. For more information on the ITRL and ITRL2 grants, see <http://www.sis.utk.edu/rural-librarianship> and <http://www.sis.utk.edu/13-scholarships-available-itrl2> respectively.

Both the ITRL and ITRL2 were conceptualized to allow UT's SIS to collaborate with a team of regional library systems in East Tennessee that have included: Clinch-Powell Regional Library (Clinton, Tennessee), Fort Loudoun Regional Library (Athens, Tennessee), Nolichucky Regional Library (Morristown, Tennessee), Sevier County Public Library System (Sevierville, Tennessee), and the Watauga Regional Library (Johnson City, Tennessee). In both the ITRL and ITRL2 students are receiving a structured, individually tailored curriculum with formal and informal professional mentoring by educators and practitioners (Mehra et al., 2010). The three required courses (providing knowledge of core functionalities in the profession), six courses focusing on IT, and five courses on rural library management and services, allow students to develop tangible products that are improving ways to meet everyday information needs in rural libraries and communities (Mehra, Black, Singh, & Nolt, 2011a). For the ITRL and ITRL2 curriculum design, see http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl/course_requirements and <http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl2/course-requirements> respectively.

2. The Context: Social Justice in the ITRL and ITRL2

Mehra et al. (2012a) applied a social justice framework to reflect on the experiences in the ITRL making connections between research-teaching-service practices in the American academy towards social justice results and outcomes. The development of IT and management product integration achieved during the ITRL educational process in rural library contexts was also discussed (Mehra et al., 2012b). The framework consisting of social justice elements and principles was first presented as a short paper/poster during the 69th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science & Technology 2006 (Information Realities: Shaping the Digital Future For All) (Mehra, Albright, & Rioux, 2006). This provided a conceptualization to extend the library and information science (LIS) professions beyond traditional roles as mere service providers to active social justice advocates for people living on society's margins (Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2010).

The context of the ITRL and ITRL2 involves a disenfranchised population of rural librarians serving rural communities in the SCA region. Their information needs involve bridging digital divides experienced as a result of lack of access to information and communication technologies (ICTs); limited rural management skills/training; lack of human resources, computers, hardware/software infrastructure; limited knowledge and information resources; and gaps in LIS educational/professional competencies (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2004; Mehra, Singh, & Parris, 2010; Oden, Strover, Inagaki, & Lucas, 2004). An achievement of tangible outcomes in both the ITRL and ITRL2 have involved educating rural paraprofessionals in master's degree programs, developing LIS curricula tailored to meet the needs of rural librarians, and creating IT and rural management deliverables that are expected to be useful and directly applied to the local contexts of the SCA rural libraries and communities (Black, Mehra, & Singh, 2011). Program evaluation involves formative and summative evaluation that is ongoing, continuous, and participatory in nature.

Social justice principles in the ITRL and ITRL2 involve representing fairness and equity in social relationships where rural libraries and the SCA region are both underserved in the profession with respect to professional LIS education and lagging behind national trends in terms of IT and rural management development (Hildreth, 2007). The ITRL and ITRL2 facilitate individual, social, and community-wide empowerment since the students working in rural libraries develop self-identified IT and rural management deliverables in their courses that are most relevant in their SCA libraries and communities. Economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental impacts are generated because the ITRL and ITRL2 goal is to train and educate SCA paraprofessionals in IT and rural management skills so that they can provide better information support services in rural libraries that promote community-wide development and progressive outcomes at these levels. Efforts are involving community building and community development activities via collaborations and partnerships with SCA state librarians, regional library networks, public libraries, and community members, amongst others, to promote strategic planning and implementation in rural libraries and develop IT and rural management outcomes that make a difference in the lives of people in the SCA regions. The ITRL and ITRL2 are based on integrating diversity, multiplicity, and democracy in recruiting paraprofessionals already working in SCA rural libraries and supporting them as they use their experiences in SCA rural libraries to shape their educational journey in ways that have maximum impact on local community development. This is based on the concept of community informatics or the use of ICTs by the students to empower and enable local communities to participate more fully in the globalized information networked society in localized settings (Clement et al., 2012; Gurstein, 2000). For deliverables created by ITRL rural paraprofessionals in their UT SIS courses see URL: <http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl-program-deliverables>. For more information on the ITRL students, see their online profiles at URL: <http://www.sis.utk.edu/itrl-students>. IT deliverables

applied towards rural libraries include: technology planning, assessment, and analysis; database and web design, development, and usability; building digital libraries, web portals, and Library 2.0 tools; establishing hardware and software configurations for networking systems. Management outcomes include: service evaluation and assessment in rural libraries; planning and management of a rural library program for youth and adults; reader's advisory and other information services; grant writing and partnership development (Mehra et al., 2012c).

3. Recruitment Methods in the ITRL and ITRL2

The overall project design in the ITRL and ITRL2 covers the following conceptual phases and their overlapping temporal boundaries: 1) Recruitment and Applications; 2) Implementation of the Educational and Training Segment; 3) Ongoing Evaluations; 4) Formal Dissemination. During the ITRL a needs assessment phase provided feedback from rural SCA librarians about library services and information challenges experienced in their communities (Mehra, Black, Singh, & Nolt, 2011b). This section briefly discusses some of the most important recruitment methods adopted during the first phase in the ITRL and ITRL2.

3.1 Creation of Administrative Body Charged with Recruitment Responsibility

A Recruitment Board was established for the ITRL and ITRL2 with 10 members each (both MLS and non-MLS professionals) who are directors/staff members of partnering regional library systems and others in the SCA region. A graduate research assistant was hired for the ITRL and ITRL2 to assist in grant recruitment activities (including web development, evaluation, planning, organization, and management).

3.2 Development of a Recruitment Plan and Recruitment Resources

The authors as principal investigator (PI) and co-principal investigator (co-PIs) on the ITRL and ITRL2 along with the Recruitment Board members developed a strategic plan for competitive recruitment of students, including creating recruitment materials/resources and criteria for selection. Some of these included:

- The ITRL and ITRL2 recruitment flyers (URL: <http://www.sis.utk.edu/sites/default/files/docs/ITRL2FlyerFinal.pdf>);
- Web portals from the SIS homepage (URLs provided earlier in the paper);
- The ITRL Facebook space (URL: http://www.facebook.com/social_graph.php?node_id=1023334784&filter=fanned&start=150#!/group.php?gid=157444301602);
- The ITRL and ITRL2 Blackboard spaces for internal communication, information exchange, planning and management.
- The criteria for student selection were represented in the application forms (URL: <http://www.sis.utk.edu/files/ITRLScholarshipProgramApplication.pdf> and

<http://www.sis.utk.edu/sites/default/files/docs/IURL2ScholarshipProgramApplication.pdf>).

In all these recruitment activities there was also significant involvement of other state librarians, regional library directors, county library directors, and others in the the SCA region who assisted in marketing and promotion efforts, identifying potential candidates from their staff and community populations, and helping them complete admission procedures and application materials in a timely manner.

3.3 Use of Electronic Communications

Electronic communications were established with a range of individuals, agencies, and organizations to help in marketing and recruiting for the IURL and IURL2. These included:

- Electronic recruitment messages that were distributed to state librarians of AL, KY, GA, MS, NC, SC, TN, V, WV during the IURL and select states for IURL2.
- Electronic recruitment messages that were distributed to regional library directors, county library directors, and others in the various states identified within the SCA region.
- Recruitment messages that were posted on various local and regional professional electronic mailing lists: JESSE (jesse@listserv.utk.edu); StanleyK (stanleyK@yahoogroups.com); Tennessee State Library and Archives (LISTSERV@LISTSERV.STATE.TN.US); The Tennessee Association of School Librarians list; Association of Rural and Small Libraries (arsl-l@bcr-lists.org, posted on ARSL webjunction); SIS/CCI lists (SIS-FACULTY-STAFF@LISTSERV.UTK.EDU, UTKSIS-L@listserv.utk.edu, UTSIS-Advisory-Board@listserv.utk.edu, ISALUMNI@LISTSERV.UTK.EDU); nine state library association lists (e.g., Tennessee Library Association list TLA-L@listserv.utk.edu, South Carolina Library Association list: scla-list@scla.org, etc.); Publib (publib@webjunction.org); Knox County Public Library list; National Council for Black Studies member discussion board; ALA Black Caucus list; etc.

3.4 Involvement of Key Players in the Larger Professional Community

In addition to the IURL and IURL2 partners and members of the Recruitment Boards, representatives from other regional and county library systems in the broader SCA region agreed to help in recruitment efforts. For example, James D. Waggoner, Executive Secretary, West Virginia Library Commission, offered to include IURL information in their electronic news bulletin in November 2009. Waggoner also communicated with the Association's Executive Board to post the recruitment information on the Association's website. Tiffani Connor, Extended Sites Librarian, Lincoln Memorial University forwarded recruitment messages to the Appalachian College Association and members offered to

contact their library directors who agreed to print recruitment materials in their newsletters.

3.5 Recruitment Presentations in Professional Venues

The ITRL and ITRL2 recruitment efforts and materials were presented at professional meetings and events. These included:

- Mehra (PI) organized and moderator a panel entitled “Rural Library Professionals as Change Agents in the 21st Century: Integrating Information Technology Competencies in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region (ITRL) Phase I Planning and Recruitment” during the Tennessee Library Association Annual Conference 2010: Marketing Matters, March 17-19, 2010, in Memphis, Tennessee. Panel participants included Black (co-PI), Singh (co-PI), Renfro (Project Partner), and Simmons (Project Partner).
- Mehra (PI), Black (co-PI), and Singh (co-PI) represented the ITRL program during the IMLS WebWise Conference on Libraries and Museums in the Digital World that was held March 3-5, 2010, in Denver, Colorado.
- Mehra (PI) led a formal presentation on ITRL entitled “Serving Diverse Clientele Through the Virtual Library” at the UT Virtual Library Steering Committee meeting on February 24, 2010.
- Mehra (PI) and Singh (co-PI) presented a juried paper entitled “Collaborations between LIS Education and Rural Libraries in East Tennessee: Improving Librarian Technology Literacy and Management Training” in the *Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) Annual Conference: Creating a Culture of Collaboration*, in Boston, MA, from January 12-15, 2010.
- Mehra (PI) made a formal ITRL presentation on November 12, 2009, for the East Tennessee Library Association, at their regular monthly meeting.
- Mehra (PI), Cortez (SIS Director), and Allard (then SIS Assistant Director) promoted the ITRL and distributed flyers during their visit (November 5-10, 2009) to the University of Puerto Rico for renewing the memorandum of understanding between UT and UPR.
- Black (co-PI) presented ITRL information and distributed flyers during the 19th Annual Conference of the Association for Black Culture Centers (ABCC), hosted by Cleveland State University in Cleveland, OH, from November 5-8, 2009. (Conference theme: Centers and Negotiations of Cultural Politics of a Black Presidency).
- SIS faculty member Welch promoted the ITRL program and distributed ITRL flyers at the American Association of School Librarians national conference in Charlotte, NC, during November 5-8, 2009.
- Cortez (SIS Director) distributed the ITRL promotion information and recruitment flyers during the Virginia Library Association 2009 Annual Conference in Williamsburg during October 29-30, 2009.

- Simmons (Project Partner) and Southern (SIS Staff) promoted the ITRL and distributed ITRL flyers during the Tennessee Library Association Staff Development Workshop that was conducted in Blount County on October 27, 2009.
- Mehra (PI) promoted the ITRL and distributed flyers at the SIS Student Mixer Social with the UT Hodges Library on October 1, 2009.
- Mehra (PI) and Black (co-PI) shared ITRL information during the SIS Advisory Board Meeting on September 18, 2009.
- Mehra (PI) and Black (co-PI) promoted ITRL and engaged in recruitment efforts at the 2009 Association of Rural and Small Libraries, Gatlinburg, TN, during September 10-13, 2009. Mehra distributed flyers and promoted ITRL during the pre-conference at the Anna Porter Public Library on September 10; Mehra and Black participated during conference sessions on September 11, 2009; Black presented ITRL information during the ideas fair on September 12, 2009; Mehra addressed the Board of Directors on September 13, 2009.
- Black (co-PI) and SIS Director (Cortez) distributed ITRL Recruitment flyers and engaged in ITRL publicity and promotion during the 2009 American Library Association Annual Conference held in Chicago, IL, July 9-15, 2009.

4. Social Justice Implications of the ITRL and ITRL2 Recruitment

Social justice elements and principles summarized earlier in this paper were actualized throughout the development of the ITRL and ITRL2. The recruitment methods in the two programs that were operationalized early along in their development got the ball rolling and set the spirit in motion through initiating social justice and social equity goals and outcomes. Significant efforts in recruitment involved implementing a multi-pronged marketing effort that involved releasing press releases that were distributed at various national, state, regional, and local levels through listservs, the school newsletter which has a national distribution, and other means (summarized above). The creation of an administrative body charged with recruitment responsibilities was important to insure that social justice principles would get enacted and implemented throughout the program activities.

A social justice ideology is valuable. However, if there is no designated entity to insure that the philosophy gets translated into action, then it remains just that without making any real difference on ground zero. Tapping into the professional networks of the administrative entities insured that the word got out to the far-flung and remote rural areas in the region, thereby, involving those in the areas of largest need and generating maximum impact.

Development of a recruitment plan and specific recruitment resources were important to lay out strategic directions and have appropriate mechanisms in place to follow through those directions to achieve identifiable goals, objectives, and results. Use of a varied range of electronic tools, in addition to print

materials, helped reach a wide variety of players. Getting important stakeholders on board and involved is key to provide political, administrative, economic, socio-cultural, and real clout behind actions and efforts that others would adopt on behalf of the projects. Tapping into professional networks with known and unknown players helped reach out to those who were directly involved with paraprofessional and volunteer staff and knew of possibilities of who might be interested and willing to pursue a master's degree to enhance their career development opportunities. Further, from recruitment to retention and success in the ITLR and ITRL2, a range of communication exchanges with students, practitioner-mentors, educators, administrators, and other community members via multiple channels were significant.

5. Conclusions

Recruitment methods have played a significant role in attracting the best of rural paraprofessionals working in the SCA libraries where there are strongest potentialities of making the greatest impact in local communities. Analysis of the intersections between the individual, library, and community characteristics based on applicant's submitted materials during admissions was important in the selection process to critically identify those who might be able to develop IT and rural management products in their coursework and bridge gaps in the SCA region to tackle lagging IT literacy in the rural SCA communities (Mehra, Black, & Lee, 2010; Scruggs, 2010; Shaw, Chen, Harris, and Huang, 2009). Social justice operationalization and implementation via recruitment in programs like the ITRL and ITRL2 are not based on an individual's efforts. For the success of such efforts in LIS education, collaborations and partnerships within the LIS professions and beyond with various community-based agencies, organizations, and institutions have been instrumental to translate such philosophies into real practices and positive results (Mehra, Black, Singh, & Nolt, 2011c). Recruitment was one step in this process; future publications will report on follow-up developments in the ITRL and ITRL2.

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