

# The Practicalities of Cultural Competence

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## **Abstract**

The recently released ACRL Diversity Standards: Cultural Competence in Academic Libraries represent an important step towards cultural pluralism and social justice in academic libraries. However, diversity and cultural differences can be difficult subjects to talk about, and the lofty aims of the Diversity Standards may seem insurmountable to academic librarians to tackle in their day-to-day practice. This Research into Practice session presented data from a survey of academic librarians in California about their experience with the Standards and with cultural competence in general, aiming towards creating a simple, practical checklist of things that any academic librarian can do to cultivate their own cultural competence.

## **Introduction**

In October 2012, the Racial and Ethnic Diversity Committee of ACRL released the “Diversity Standards: Cultural Competence in Academic Libraries.” These standards represent a significant milestone towards making multiculturalism a priority for our academic library institutions. However, many of the discussions about the practical side of developing cultural competence in library and information science tend to focus on recruiting library staff from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. While this is an essential piece of the puzzle, it is by no means a complete answer to the question, “How can librarians develop cultural competence?” By focusing on recruiting, librarians who are currently working in the field are left out of the conversation. Omitting practicing librarians from the discussion could lead to the presumption that librarians will just figure something out on their own, or, even worse, feel that they should defer reference questions or library tasks requiring cultural competence to their colleagues of color.

Our goal with this Research into Practice session at CARL 2014 was to develop and communicate a simple, practical checklist which any academic librarian can use to further cultivate his or her own cultural competence. Looking to other service-oriented professions where social fluency is critical (counseling, healthcare, and more), we wanted to propose a straightforward series of tasks which librarians can undertake as part of their own personal professional development. The issue of diversity can be so complicated and overwhelming that we were most interested in making recommendations that are simple, practical, and manageable enough to implement in everyday practice.

## Background

Academic institutions, with their increasingly diverse student populations, are organizations where culturally competent staff and faculty are essential. By extension, academic libraries need to embrace cultural competence as an integral part of their organization. As Shorter-Gooden (2013) states, “If your school or library or organization doesn’t look like the community around it, if it doesn’t mirror the world, you’ve got some work to do” (p. 208). Although this is an important step in the process, the ‘problem’ of diversity and cultural competence will not be fixed only by bringing in librarians or faculty of color, since those people may not necessarily have strong connections to their own ethnic background or a strong interest in advocating for diversity (Mestre, 2010). These are just a couple of the challenges that our organizations face in making ourselves more culturally competent.

Developing cultural competence requires a great deal of understanding, a fine tuning knowledge of self, of beliefs, and of biases. Numerous models exist for the process by which cultural competence gets developed, and a wide range of social and interpersonal skills have been identified as being components of cultural competence (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). Most scholars agree that the process begins with self-reflection, and identifying the cultural lenses through which we see the world and those around us. Bennett (2009) states “by locating our own positions on cultural variables, we can identify similarities and differences with others and begin the process of cultural competence” (p. 126). Deardorff (2009) emphasizes that developing cultural competence is a lifelong process, stating that there is “no pinnacle at which someone becomes ‘interculturally competent’” (p. xi).

Including cultural competence training in the LIS profession is important as librarians and information professionals work with people from multiple cultures, teach with these cultures in mind, and must have a sensitivity to people and their heritage. The need for training in cultural competence in the LIS profession is critical, whether it is introduced in library school or at work in the library (Ryan & Quayyum, 2012). Mestre’s (2010) research focuses on diversity knowledge and training in library school and in library work. The communities that support and use libraries are increasingly becoming more diverse, and because of this librarians need to continue to learn to work with diverse communities. Mestre states:

In order to work with diverse populations, one needs to understand their cultures. Each culture has its own intricacies, nuances, expectations, and practices. These individuals may be at odds with the ‘library culture.’ Librarians need to find ways to incorporate the diverse characteristics of their users into some practical applications for them and for the library (2).

Oxley (2013), who brings cultural competence and diversity into student based groups at the University of Maryland iSchool, states that all LIS students should be educated in diversity -- it should not merely be an elective.

When students and staff are deprived of cultural competency training, not exposed to research that reflects implications on diverse populations, and not exposed to tenets of

inclusive and accessible design of information structures and services, they may be unaware of both the existing knowledge gap and the importance of diversity (Oxley, 2013, p. 237).

Librarians are good at identifying and acquiring knowledge and information, but cultural competence is much more than just simply knowing things about other cultures (Bennett, 2009). Librarians each need to develop a way of putting that knowledge into practice in the social and interpersonal domain. There is a deeper and more subtle way of relating to people from cultural backgrounds other than our own which comes from a place of empathy, and sensitivity to oppression and the symbols of power and privilege.

## **Methods**

Motivated by our interest in the issue of cultural competence, and wanting to get a sense of how the standards have made an impact in academic libraries since their release, we developed a twelve-question survey designed to inquire into both the reception of the standards and people's self-perception of their own cultural competence. Our goal in asking the questions we did was to tease out the aspects of librarians' backgrounds that they identified as the most fruitful in developing cultural competence.

We administered our online survey via the Survey Monkey platform, and solicited participation via email to several professional library association listservs in February 2014, asking for responses from academic librarians in California. Out of 107 partial survey submissions, we received 72 submissions that we considered to be complete (meaning that all of the 12 Y/N and multiple choice questions were answered). We decided to omit all of the partial responses. Of the two qualitative questions in the survey, we received 43 free-text responses for which we developed a thematic coding scheme to attempt to discern some commonalities amongst the responses (Spradley, 1979).

## **Results**

All in all, the respondents to our survey seemed to think that diversity is an important issue in academic libraries. The strong majority of academic librarians we surveyed indicated that serving diverse populations were a priority for their libraries, and many of those reporting so came from campuses with Diversity Statements or the like, as shown in the responses from Q2 and Q4 in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A note about our question numbering: Because the online nature of our survey did not allow us to administer an informed consent separately from the survey itself, Question 1 served as our informed consent. Therefore, the survey questions proper begin with Q2.

Figure 1. Institutional Approaches to Diversity

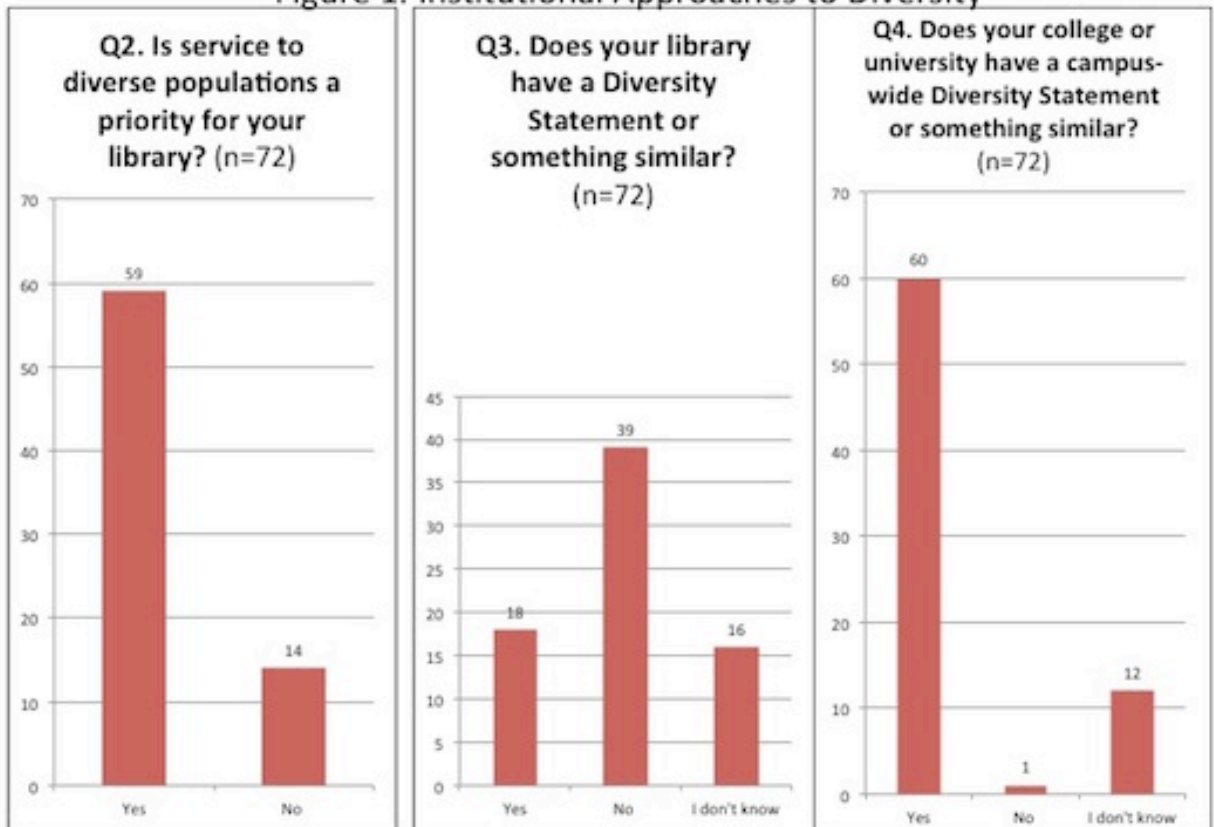
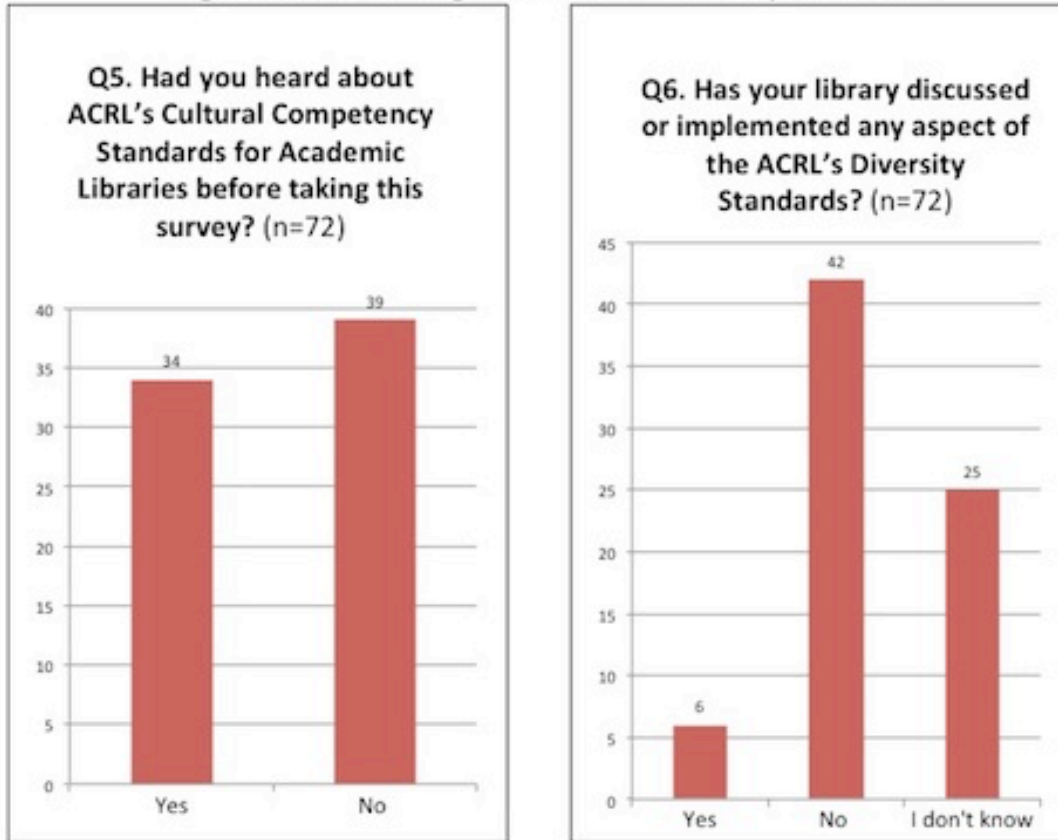
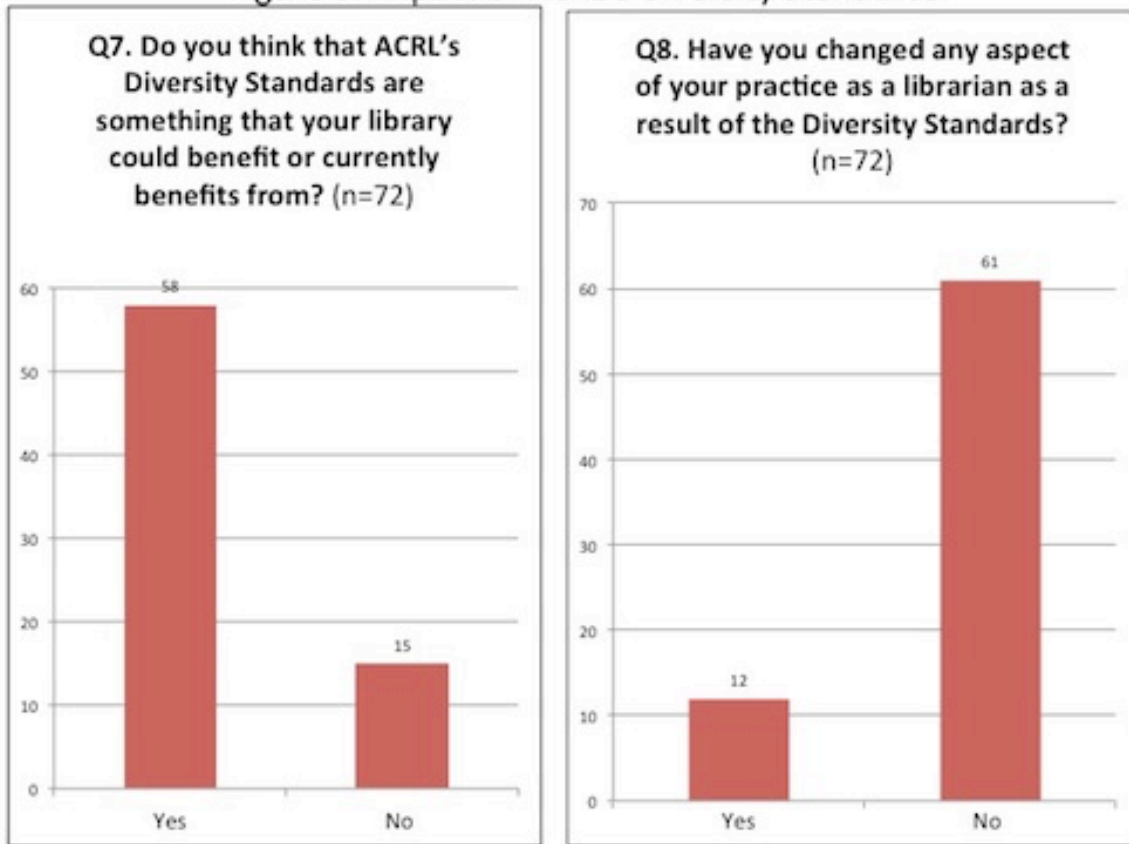


Figure 2. Knowledge of ACRL's Diversity Standards



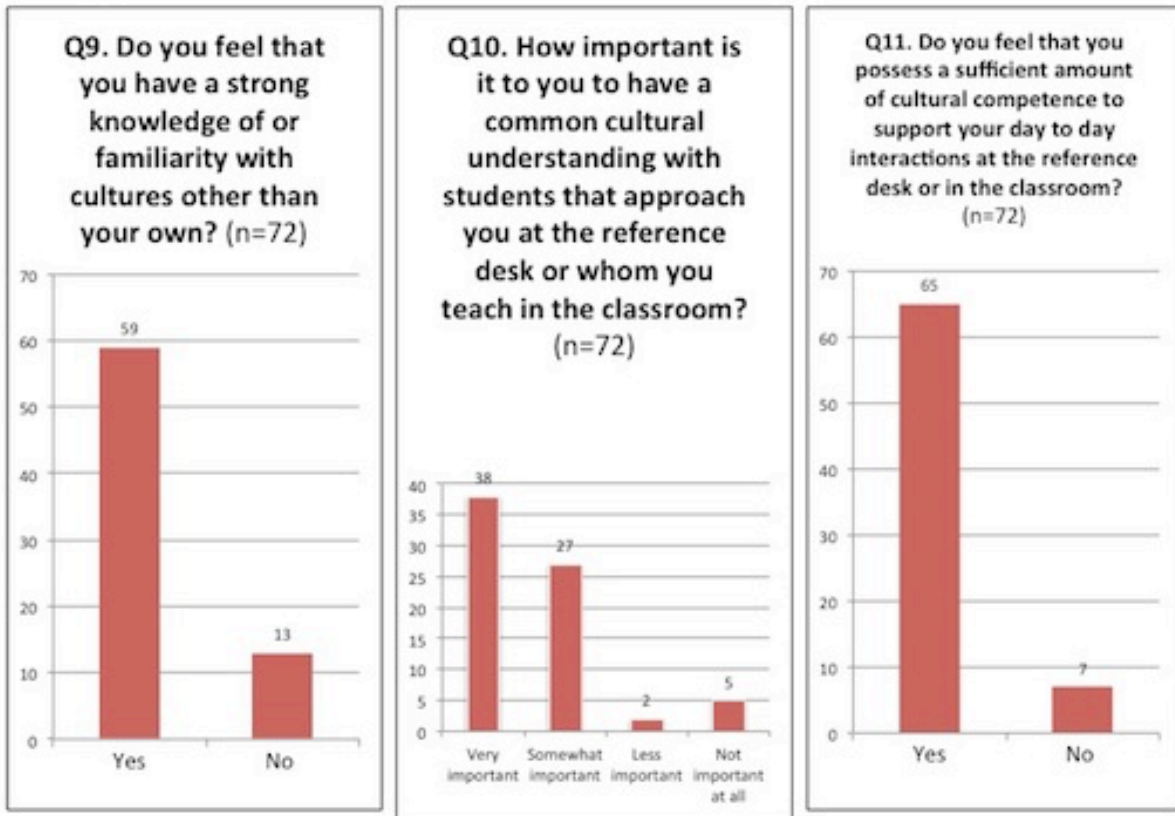
However, much to our disappointment, less than half of our respondents had not heard of the diversity standards, and the overwhelming majority of them had not discussed them at their libraries, shown by Q5 and Q6 in Figure 2. This makes it all the more interesting that so many (58 out of 73) of our participants indicated that they thought their library could benefit from the standards, as shown by Q7 in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Impact of ACRL's Diversity Standards



What is even more interesting is that so many respondents stated that they have not changed any aspect of their practice as a librarian as a result of the standards, as shown by Q8 in Figure 3. A picture begins to emerge of librarians who perhaps feel comfortable in their own level of cultural competence, yet they feel strongly that their institutions have some work to do in becoming more inclusive. Hypothesizing about why this might be the case, it is possible that either these librarians think that they are doing fine and have sufficient cultural competence to do their job (more on this later), or perhaps the issue is too overwhelming and they feel they can't do anything to change the current state of affairs, showing justification for practical, accessible methods for implementing the Diversity Standards within institutions, and beyond just the level of individual librarians.

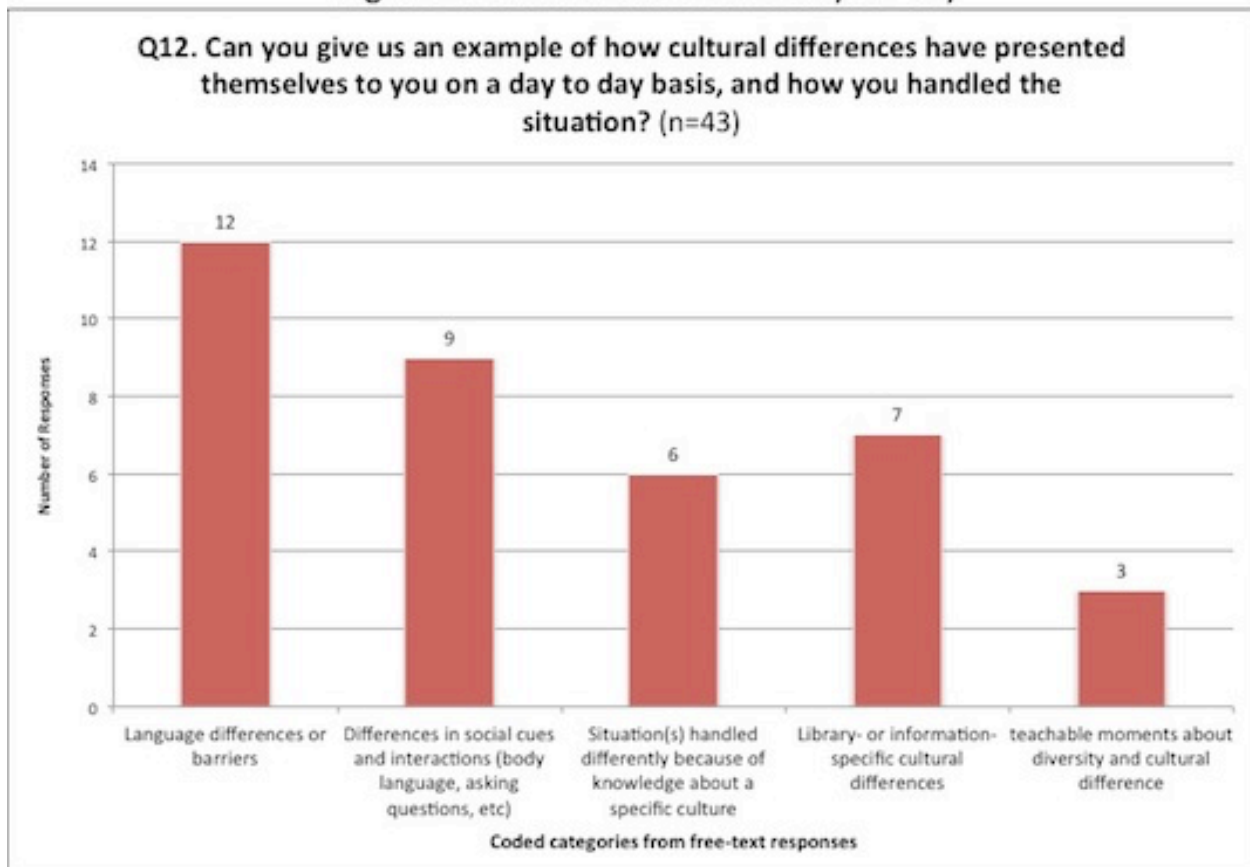
Figure 4. Personal Cultural Competence in Reference and Instruction



The responses shown in Figure 4 show an even more nuanced side to the issue as we attempt to explore librarian’s sense of their own cultural competence, and whether they feel cultural competence is an important tool in their librarian’s toolbox. Many of the librarians we surveyed felt that they had a strong knowledge about cultures other than their own (Q9 in Figure 4), which connects to Monteil-Overall’s (2009) framework indicating that knowledge of other cultures is a foundational step for developing cultural competence. Just over half of our respondents indicated that they thought it was “very important” to have a common cultural understanding with their student populations (shown by Q10 in Figure 4), and about a third of librarians felt that sharing a common cultural understanding was “somewhat important.” For the most part, the respondents who feel that they possess a sufficient amount of cultural competence for their everyday work (Q11 in Figure 4) overlap with those who said that they had not changed any aspect of their practice as a result of the standards in Q8. Most of our respondents feel comfortable with their own level of cultural competence; however, not everyone felt so, shown by the 7 who answered “no” to Q8 and also described feelings of inadequacy in response to the open-ended questions later in the survey.

We then asked our survey respondents an open-ended question to recount any example of how cultural barriers may have presented themselves on a day-to-day basis, and what the librarian did to handle the situation (Q12 in Fig 5).

Figure 5. Cultural differences day-to-day



The most frequently-cited examples of cultural differences centered on language barriers and difficulties with communication (12 out of 43 free-text responses). Although this is a fairly frequent situation in cross-cultural encounters, we feel that this kind of situation doesn't exactly speak the kind of nuanced cultural competence skills that are advocated for by the ACRL Standards. However, the other common themes from our participants responses to this question do start to unpack some of the nuances. First, 9 of our survey respondents recalled situations where their students had had differences in social cues or conversational patterns, such as in body language when listening or turn-taking when asking questions. Additionally, 6 of our respondents recounted some examples where they had handled a situation differently because of specific knowledge the librarian had about the ethnic background of the person they were working with. Also, 7 of those librarians we surveyed described encounters with library- or information-specific cultural differences, such as cultural differences in rigor of citations and open vs. closed stacks in libraries. And finally, a few of our respondents described situations

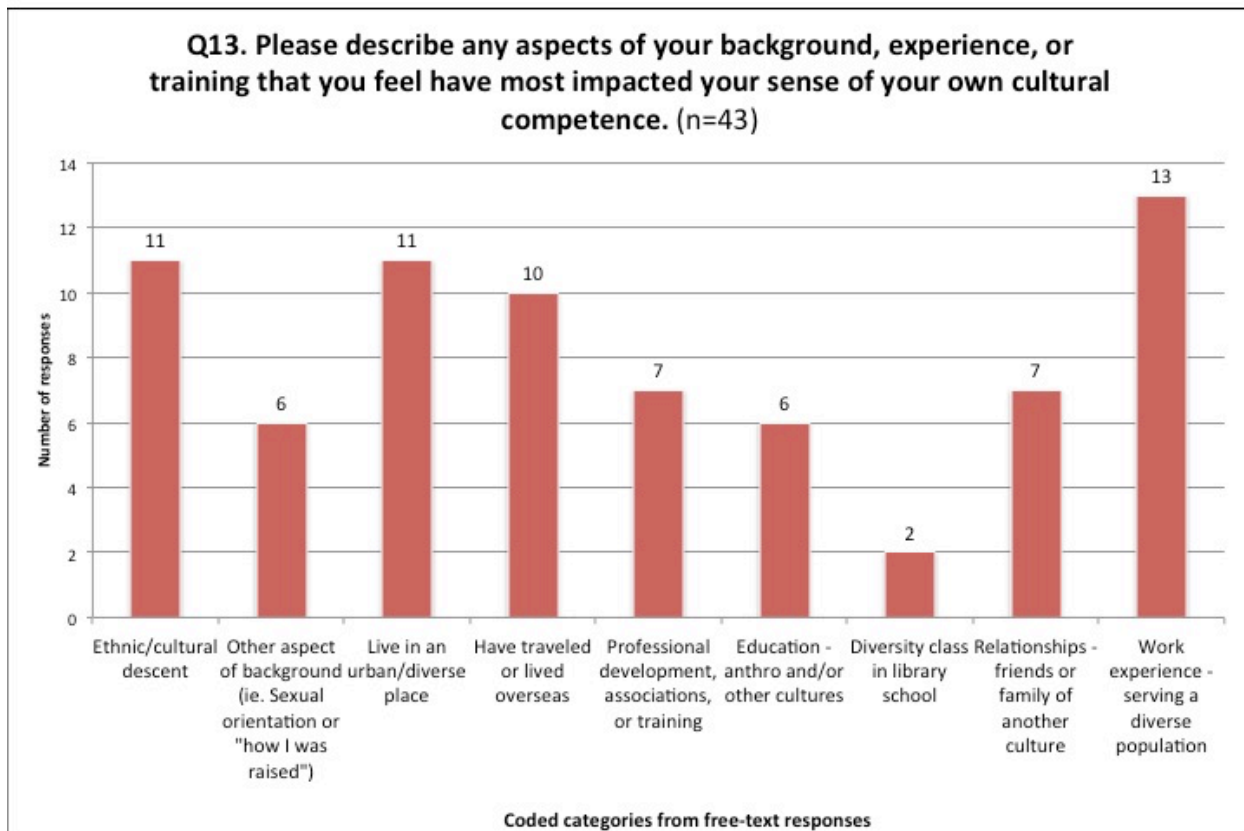


which could be considered ‘teachable moments’ about diversity, for either the librarian or the student. All in all, the responses to this question indicate the degree to which subtle social skills are often critical to doing the public service work that librarians do, and that cultural competence is a necessary component of those skills. Furthermore, many of the respondents are faced with cultural differences every day and see cultural fluency as a key part of their work, as described by one participant:

If you work at an academic reference desk in a community college in California, you are dealing with different cultural backgrounds daily. I cannot come up with one situation specifically because *I do not think of them as situations, but as reference* (emphasis added).

The final question in our survey asked participants to describe any aspects of their background that they felt had most impacted their sense of their own cultural competence (Q13 in Fig 6). In the opinion of the authors, this was perhaps the most important question in the survey, since our aim for this project was to find out if there were some concrete, practical methods that our colleagues had felt were beneficial for developing their own cultural competence which could be expanded into a guide for other librarians.

Figure 6. Aspects of Background



As with the previous question, we developed a way of coding the responses that targeted themes in the participants' responses. Many of our respondents identified aspects of background that are not surprising, given the diversity of California and many of our institutions of higher education - aspects of background like living and working in diverse, urban environments, having friends or family of diverse backgrounds, or having a diverse background themselves. Several participants recounted experiences of living or traveling extensively in another country as helping them to develop cultural competence. Some participants identified an educational background in anthropology or studies of a specific culture (eg. Asian studies) as being an important part of developing cultural competence in themselves, and other participants identified professional development opportunities provided by professional associations as helping them develop cultural competence. Somewhat surprisingly, only two out of 43 respondents cited having taken a diversity class in library school. This is more than likely reflective of both the low number of LIS programs that either offer or require a class about diversity, as well as the relative recency of such trainings being considered an important part of the education of new librarians.

Circling back to our original goal of creating an actionable and pragmatic checklist for things that any librarian can do to cultivate cultural competence, and looking at the responses to Q13 through that lens, it becomes necessary to divide our potential checklist items into groups of things that can and cannot be changed about one's own background as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. A Pragmatic Checklist

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| <p><b>Things we can't change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be ethnically or culturally diverse</li><li>• Have other kinds of diversity in your background (ie. sexual orientation)</li><li>• Serve a diverse population in your workplace</li></ul> <p><b>Things we can change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Live in an urban / diverse place</li><li>• Travel or live overseas</li><li>• Study anthropology and/or other cultures</li><li>• Take a diversity class (in library school)</li><li>• Cultivate diverse personal relationships (make friends with someone from another culture)</li><li>• Participate in diversity-related professional development, associations, or training</li></ul> |
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## Conclusion

One thing that has come to light through this research is that it is perhaps better to think of the process of attaining cultural competence not as a checklist, but as a practice. In other words, rather than thinking of cultural competence as an item to be crossed off of a “To-Do” list, librarians can think of cultural competence as a learning process to be continually practiced, perhaps more akin to practicing a musical instrument or yoga. No matter how much one has learned and experienced, there is always more room for improvement and conversation around cultural differences and what we can learn from each other.

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