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# Diversity in Public Library Boards: Perspectives of Board Members

## La diversité des conseils d'administration des bibliothèques publiques : perspectives de membres de conseils d'administration

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## Diversity in Public Library Boards: Perspectives of Board Members

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### **Abstract**

The initial aim of this study was to learn if there was any diversity in ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or disability among public library board members. Through participant interviews, this study reports on member perceptions of diversity in the areas of member recruitment, qualifications, training, and length of term. Board members from four public libraries in Alberta and Saskatchewan were interviewed and the results were analyzed through the framework of critical race theory (CRT). Findings suggest that library boards lack diversity, particularly in finding, recruiting, and training members who are truly representative of their community. Cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural training are important for board members to connect with their communities.

### **Keywords**

Public libraries, library board, Canada, Alberta, Saskatchewan, diversity

### **Introduction**

Public libraries face many challenges, including massification, technology, economic fluctuations, budget cuts, and changing user demography (Smith, 2019).

Demographically, Statistics Canada (2015) shows steady growth in the immigrant

population, mainly from visible minority groups. In Saskatchewan, the majority of the visible minorities reside in the two major cities of Saskatoon (45.3%) and Regina (34.7%) with Filipino immigrants making up the majority followed by South Asian, Chinese, and Black immigrants (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2011). An additional 16.3% of the Saskatchewan population identified as Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada, 2019a). In Alberta, the visible minority population is up over 40% (Alberta Government, Office of Statistics and Information, 2017), with over 30% living in the province's two largest urban centers, Edmonton and Calgary. Filipino immigrants make up the majority, closely followed by Japanese, South Asians, and South East Asians. In the 2016 census, 6.5% of respondents identified as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2019a).

Public libraries are social organizations that store knowledge for their local communities promoting both political savvy and social value in their users. Public libraries practice intellectual freedom, a core principle that offers “free, equitable, and confidential access to information for all people” (American Library Association, n.d.). While a library board that is predominantly White might be capable of serving their diverse constituency, a more diverse and representative board will perform at a higher level in the areas of fundraising, innovation, and advocacy (Walker, 2018). To improve representation, current boards need to reach out to minority and marginalized populations, including Indigenous communities, LGBTQ2+ communities, religious groups, and newcomers to the country. Newcomers are often heavy users of public library services, collections, and spaces (Shepherd et al., 2018) and public libraries may benefit from building on the social capital built by such users by extending board membership to them. Including members from multiple communities may help implement critical multilogicality into board governance – a way to view library resources and services from multiple perspectives and away from “elitist, White-centered, colonial patriarchal histories” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, p. 146). A representative board can raise the profile of the library, encourage users from diverse communities, and “provide a mechanism for gathering information and feedback” (Pettis, 2006, p.247).

## ***Theoretical Framework***

Critical race theory (CRT) was the epistemological tool favoured by this study, as it provides the necessary framework to come to a better understanding of issues of race and diversity. Although CRT focuses on race, it is also a “structural approach to addressing the problems of a diverse society” (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p.176) and is used in this study to analyze the lack of diversity in public library boards. CRT stemmed from the critical legal studies movement during the seventies in the United States and was grounded in social justice for African-American equity (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). It later evolved to include other forms of diversity (Parker & Villalpando, 2007) such as Latino critical race theory (Bernal, 2002). Through critical consciousness, CRT provides the tools to understand the lack of diversity and helps examine racial ideologies and practices. CRT assumes that limitations exist in socially constructed systems where White privilege dominates (Crenshaw et al., 1995), challenges these dominant assumptions, and encourages the inclusion of minority narratives to challenge dominant norms.

Racism in libraries is present at various levels including collections, services, employees, library spaces, and librarian education (Alabi, 2015; Brook et al., 2015; Dudley, 2019; Engseth, 2017; Gibson & Hughes-Hassell, 2017 a & b; Griffin, 2013; Hudson, 2017a & 2017b; McKenzie, 2019; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017; VanScoy & Bright, 2017; Walker, 2015). However, race, as a concept, is undertheorized in librarianship and even less in public library board governance. Instead race is merely viewed through the lens of colonialist structures, neutrality, and colour-blindness rather than as a matter of social justice (Gibson et al., 2017). It is not understood that racism is endemic in the system, excluding minorities from assuming and staying in meaningful positions of leadership such as board membership. As an epistemological tool, CRT helps in the “way of knowing” or a “system of knowing” (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Most race-related epistemologies are from dominant perspectives. CRT helps with unique ways of knowing based on racial and ethnic experiences and knowledge.

## ***Literature Review***

### **Public Libraries**

Canada was the first British colony to establish libraries as early as 1779 (Bélanger, 2005). Some of these early libraries closed due to a lack of funds. Thanks to the formation of the Confederation of Canada in 1867, several provinces received grants to sustain their libraries. Missionary priests established the first Canadian libraries with their personal book collections. During the nineteenth century, when laissez-faire economic theories were dominant and the public awareness about the state’s role in the development of its citizens’ intellectual well-being grew, Canadians looked to their governments to support the development of their local and national public infrastructure. The fathers of the Canadian Confederation decided to confer the responsibility for education, hospitals, and charities to the provinces (Wallace, 1950). The Confederation did not foresee how quickly and vastly these establishments would grow. Education was the first of these to require increased provincial support due to rapid growth as women started to enter universities in the late 1800s (Wallace, 1950). As women’s education improved, significant interest in the development of public education followed. Wallace (1950) remarked that the “development of public education and public libraries went naturally together” (p.386) and that free public libraries came into existence during this time to offer parents “opportunities for informal education through free access to books” (p. 386).

Upholding the principal of intellectual freedom, public libraries today provide access to all types of materials on various topics. These come in different formats (print materials, audio and video files, and other electronic resources) and in multiple languages to engage and inform its citizens as they “feel safe to seek out and explore library resources without barriers” (Critchfield & Powell, 2012, p.13). Apart from supplying materials, public library spaces are also important in promoting democracy. As Giroux (2000) stated, public spaces such as libraries are necessary to sustain politically active communities where all citizens can “learn the power of and engage in the experience of democracy” (p.57) by virtue of access to information and developing literacy skills (Julien & Hoffman, 2008). Many newcomers value library facilities as safe places to

relax, meet friends, reflect, and build skills to engage in their new country (Shepherd et al., 2018). Lack of access to such spaces and information can lead to the end of civic values with no room “for negotiating the terms of democracy and critical citizenship through which to achieve equality and social justice” (Trifonas, 2001, p.28).

The provincial or territorial library *Acts* govern public libraries in Canada, granting them the autonomy necessary to plan, design, and budget services and resources to their communities. Ontario was the first province to have a *Free Libraries Act*, established in 1882, followed by the four western provinces (Harris, 1995). Saskatchewan libraries are governed by the *Public Libraries Act* (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018), and Alberta libraries by the *Libraries Act* (1998). In both provinces, the Department of Education is responsible for the administration of public libraries.

*The Public Libraries Act* (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018) exists to provide the basic equitable library services to provincial residents. The two municipal library systems in Regina and Saskatoon each have a board responsible for their regulation and general management. These boards usually consist of the mayor, city council, and representatives from the public. The city’s Committee on Committees determines and appoints board members (except the mayor who is ex-officio) and each member serves a two-year term. There is a chairperson, vice-chair, councillor, chief executive officer (CEO)/secretary (no vote), and the rest are volunteer members. The CEO is usually the director of the library.

Alberta public libraries come under the *Libraries Act* (1998) which governs the structure of the province’s public library boards. The *Public Library Services Branch* funds the municipal library boards established under the *Libraries Act* (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017) with additional support provided through the local and provincial tax base. The board system is similar to that of Saskatchewan, but the Alberta library board (Calgary and Edmonton) members can serve up to three years.

## **Board Membership and Governance**

After the proclamation of the *Free Libraries Act*, there was a desire for creating a volunteer board to represent the local community and oversee regulation (Bruce & Bruce, 1988). Four essential legal provisions were enacted under which a board was to be established by “direct expression of popular will” (Bruce & Bruce, 1988, p.7). In other words, members of the public were given a say in the establishment and composition of the board and could even serve as a member. Appointments were limited to terms which vary depending on the province.

Unlike corporate governance, public library board governance lacks research literature and theorization. Public library boards resemble municipal or non-profit boards where the governance model is less straightforward as it seeks to balance control and autonomy (Yeung, 2005, as cited in Vinnari & Nasi, 2013, p. 489). Non-profit boards are thought to be effective as a result of a social construction effort among members, which works best when they understand the need for change and act on it (Herman & Renz, 2008). Budget, social capital, and composition of board members are essential tools

toward achieving set governance goals and strategic actions. In non-profit sectors the responsibilities of board members are intensified due to strong ties to community interests, moral responsibilities, and budgetary concerns (Coombes et al., 2011). Non-profit organizations that do not have rigorous regulations may feel less accountable to their constituents. This lack of accountability is reflected in board recruitment when non-profit organizations fail to proactively engage in diversifying their membership in the areas of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and disability. Like many non-profit boards, member roles, the structure, and process are not clearly articulated or understood (SaskCulture, n.d.) in public library boards.

Public library boards lack bicameral or tricameral structures (MacDonald, 2018) that involve two or three levels of governance. By holding each level accountable to the other, such structures are designed to eliminate particularism. Not having a layered structure risks leaving a small group of people with excessive influence on decision-making, such as the ability to appoint a colleague, a practice that disadvantages minorities. The role of the CEO also adds to the challenge of governance. Canadian public library boards appoint a director or the CEO to manage the library system. The CEO is a representative of the *State* (province) and represents the library to the community and vice versa. This person also “serves as the official representative of the library in actions that legally bind or politically influence the library” (Hage, 2014). This CEO, often an ex-officio, has the most important relationship with the board and attends meetings to inform or update the board on finance, structural, and policy dealings and changes. However, there is also conflict between the Board and CEO, where the CEO is both accountable to the board but has voting privileges (Taylor, 2000).

Apart from the CEO, board members are made up of volunteers from the public as representatives of their communities. One of these volunteers acts as the chair of the Board and another as vice-chair or a similar position. Local and provincial newspapers advertise board vacancies and invite all interested members of the public to apply. These volunteer members may not know the history of public libraries or be well versed in their library’s governance structure, but hold skills and qualifications in relevant areas such as budgeting or policymaking. The length of their term on the board and other criteria for selection and service terms are dictated by provincial public library *Acts*.

There are other similarities between public library boards and non-profit or municipal boards. Non-profit organizations operate in “complex environments with multiple stakeholders” (Balsler & McClusky, 2005, p. 296), where responsiveness may be conflicting. Not all board members may be productive in their roles. Managing and maintaining stakeholder relationships is necessary for organizational effectiveness. Governing members are expected to concern themselves with ethical standards and model good citizenship responsibilities rather than profit. Public libraries, as public, tax-supported entities, depend on a favourable alignment with external stakeholders which includes the public. Public library board members have to act as advocates of the public interest, fighting battles over dedicated space for new library branches, opening hours of branches, or advocating for diversity in new hires, specifically where expertise is concerned. As Irwin (2012) asserted, board members have a significant role in directing governance and should advocate against neoliberal economic pressures.

Succession planning and training are also challenges for non-profit organizations. Failing to find the right successor and at the right time can create organizational chaos and destabilization. In a low power distance society such as Canada, power is distributed among many administrators and stakeholders. In such a society, it is important to identify and recruit high-performing and knowledgeable successors who can sustain the organization and its interests. Similar to non-profit organizations, public library boards, with their limited membership terms, may not have enough time to mentor and groom future leaders from within (Santora et al., 2015). Therefore, the library board may seek external candidates to fulfill the role of the chair. Under such conditions, the incoming chair may have limited leadership experience, particularly in the context of libraries. Therefore the board must spend considerable time and effort in finding and training a diverse group of members.

## **Method**

This study is a snapshot of the practices of four public library boards in Saskatchewan and Alberta at a specific time. The aim was to explore in-depth and across all areas of board members' responsibilities with specific attention to what extent diversity was the focus of their work. In total, ten interviews were conducted by two researchers in May and June 2016.

There are two major public libraries in each province serving the largest population groups. After approval from the University of Saskatchewan's Research Service and Ethics Office (April 2016), library boards were contacted to set up interviews with their members. In Saskatoon and Regina library deputies and executive office liaisons helped find board members for interviews. The authors contacted publicly-listed board representatives (administrative or executive assistants) in Calgary and Edmonton who forwarded the email request to interview their board members. Letters of Contact (Appendix A) were sent to all members. Willing board members were asked to sign a consent form before the interview (Appendix B). A semi-structured interview questionnaire (Appendix C) with 14 open-ended questions focused on board membership selection, their routine work as members, and their experience and engagement with their communities. Participants were also asked whether they had undergone any training related to cultural sensitivity and asked to share their thoughts on creating an inclusive and culturally sensitive board.

Due to some board members' location and availability, some interviews were conducted over the phone. In Saskatchewan, Author 1 conducted three in-person interviews and two by phone; and in Alberta, Author 2 conducted all interviews over the phone for a total of five interviews. All interviews were recorded (with permission) and later transcribed. Interview transcripts were sent to participants asking for confirmation, clarification, or a review. This "member checking" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.314) adds to the credibility and validity of the study when interviewees confirm the accuracy and completeness of the information they provided.

The initial aim of the study was to learn if there was diversity in ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or disability among board members. The results are discussed

collectively to maintain the privacy of small numbers of board members. As the results below show, one member self-identified as an Indigenous person. Other board members stated that they had representation on their boards from LGBTQ2+, Asian, and South Asian communities. This study reports on member perceptions of diversity through various aspects of board work such as the member recruitment process, qualifications, training, and length of term. Three tenets of CRT used to analyze the results are, the permanence of racism, experiential knowledge, and whiteness as property.

## **Results**

### **Diversity**

When asked what they wanted their future board to look like, many members admitted that they could do better to generate greater diversity among board members but also felt this was a challenge. They wanted many types of representation, such as youth, people with disabilities, newcomers to Canada, and Indigenous populations. The size of the city was not a factor in the levels of diversity among board members. One member affirmed the homogeneity of their board and admitted difficulties in mirroring the diversity of the community as “the number of board members of 6 – 9 is a limiting factor.” Another participant did not think there was a challenge with cultural diversity as they had “an Indo-Canadian, African-Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, and Euro-Canadians” on their board. One library had hired an expert to train board members on Indigenous peoples and history. At least 2 board members mentioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and their library’s alignment with its work. Another participant stated having attended a 1.5 hours training session on seeking diverse candidates for non-profit organizations. Most participants were confident that their board members were deeply connected to their communities and felt this was sufficient. This connection contradicted one participant who emphatically confirmed a lack of representation on their board, adding that their current members were not knowledgeable of all the diverse groups they serve, particularly Indigenous populations.

When asked how they as board members could influence board diversity, one participant stated “I don’t think there really is a way.” Another said it is important to have board members from different cultural backgrounds, so “you get a different perspective on the same issues that you are facing.” Without diverse representation and the knowledge and experience that might come with it, some libraries continued to deal with the same problem for over a decade. As one participant said, “For thirteen years we struggled with the same issues...I don’t know; I don’t really have a solution. I think that the only way this is [possible] by educating and awareness [of board members].” When speaking of what they would like to see on their board, another participant said “anything but White. I don’t know how to say that in a nicer way.”

Another participant identified what is lacking on their board by stating,

mixing up or putting some diversity at the board table; [and] understanding that diversity is not just limited to culture or race, or I don’t know however you want to



identify it. In this particular case, we are likely looking for some age diversity. Thinking of what is around the table and I think we have, like, one person under the age of 40, several people in their mid-40s and the rest of us are really old, so...”

One participant stated the importance of geographic diversity. Cities in North America are spread out, and the needs of different neighbourhoods vary. This participant was frustrated that board members or libraries do not ask their users whether they think of their libraries as diverse and serving the diverse needs of their communities. Another participant expressed a similar frustration by stating, “the board’s approach is that you hire diverse perspectives and you trust them to bring the diversity of these perspectives to the table. That is an incomplete approach.” This participant also emphasized the importance of going beyond recruiting diverse members or providing diversity training as this does not change anything. To make change happen, this participant proposes policy implementation, particularly policies on who is recruited for the board. If the importance of diversity is not articulated in policy, then it may provide the perception that the board does not value diversity – “how are we demonstrating that we value it” when we know this problem is not going to take care of itself or without taking “specific steps to entrench that value in the framework in order to create systemic change.” Another participant captured the importance of recognizing the facets of diversity by stating that it is imperative to know “what we are leaving out...or who we are leaving out.”

### **Qualifications**

Skills, knowledge, education, and experience of members varied. There were members with law degrees, administrative experience, professional director certification through a school of public policy, and chartered professional accountant designations. One member had multiple backgrounds and experiences. One of the members had served on the health region’s board, had extensive business knowledge and experience, and was also in an executive position with their city’s chamber of commerce. Others had very little board, governing, or community service experience. Regardless of background, the general opinion of participants was that all of their members were well-informed about their libraries and their immediate communities. For example, interview participants in Saskatchewan spoke of exploring and honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Report. Another board had compiled a matrix of their members’ skills to identify what skills they required from new applicants. Following this process, members asked the city to advertise for two candidates with project management and architectural backgrounds. One of the library boards recently changed their recruitment model where the board reviewed applications and created a shortlist based on the specific existing gaps in expertise among the current members. Another employed a search firm to identify current gaps in expertise and recommend applicants accordingly for the city to interview and appoint. Identifying gaps in skills and expertise among board members and focusing on hiring a candidate with those needed skills seems to be the norm. As one participant stated, “if there is a need for financial guys, then maybe they (nomination committee or city) will be focusing more on a financial candidate.”

## Hiring

The city publicizes board vacancies through newspapers and posters. One participant applied after seeing a newspaper advertisement. Existing board members reported spreading the word among their acquaintances, encouraging them to apply. Applications are submitted to the city, who send them to the current board members or the nomination committee (made of board members) who review applications and submit their recommendations to the city. Applicants are interviewed and appointed by the city, as one participant confirmed: “The city appoints. Fortunately for us, I believe that the city knows someone, and they know a bunch of smart people [to hire]. Having academics is important.” Another participant asserted their faith in the city’s ability to find a diverse applicant as “they ask a variety of questions such as are you a minority member and other questions that influence their decision-making.” However, another participant contradicted this by stating, “it was not super clearly articulated here is what we are looking for. It was a very open kind of advertisement.” In one situation, a Chinese-Canadian member was recruited for the board, and even after this member clearly stated that she self-identifies as a Canadian. The participant went on to say, “yeah ... people could look at the Board and say yeah they’re diverse, but are we?”

Knowing someone in the City appeared to be a significant determinant in being appointed to a library board. One participant stated, “historically it was that people applied to the city and quite frankly if you did not know someone you were not going to get appointed.” A second participant said they knew the city councilor, who encouraged the member to apply. The participant went through the application and interview process and was selected. In another situation, a third participant stated that they were hired through a recruiting firm which they believed was “part of our need for compliance with the city” but also mentioned, “I just had a friend of mine that was actually doing the search, and she was part of the team doing the search, and she contacted me.” This participant had board work experience in different sectors at the local and national levels over the last eight years. A fourth participant had applied after seeing a poster advertisement, and the fifth was already serving on an advisory group with the library when they applied for board membership. The last participant had extensive experience serving as a member in a school board and the provincial government and applied out of interest in public libraries and their services to “minority groups.”

In Saskatchewan, one participant was a neighbour of the City’s mayor who had asked them to serve on the board. The participant applied, but since another member was hired, this participant’s appointment was delayed by three months. Another board member had alerted a faculty member about a position opening. The faculty member applied and was accepted. In one situation, the participant applied after seeing an advertisement in the local newspaper. This member was new to the city, was already involved in many business boards or governance structures, and their interest in libraries drove them to apply to the position on the library board. One of the participants confirmed an observation stated earlier about advertisements not articulating specific needs.

## Length of Term

Provincial public library legislation determines length of term and the number of renewals. Terms lengths varied between libraries; some members' terms were renewed continuously for over ten years causing frustration among new members. In Alberta, members can be reappointed for only two additional consecutive terms unless the council as a whole passes a resolution to reappoint that member. One third of the members may be appointed for a term of one year, another one third may be for a term of two years, and the remaining members may be appointed for a term of three years. In Saskatchewan, members of the board may hold office for two years, and there is no mention of renewals of consecutive appointments in *The Public Libraries Act* (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018).

In one interview a participant mentioned that one of their members was on their third term on the board, where each term is two years, and members could serve up to a maximum of three terms. In another scenario, a member was on their sixth term, where each term was two years and there was "no limit for how long someone can be on the board." Another participant confirmed that "there are two that have been on for 12 or 13 years and the councillor for 11 or 12 years." In another case, a participant expressed frustration by stating, "it seems to be the same type of people apply" for board membership.

## Training

In Alberta, new board members receive an orientation plan and go through an orientation process. The orientation takes place over a day and critical points of the library operation, policies, and governance are highlighted. One participant stated that "City Hall actually has a civic engagement to link the new board members of all the organizations within the city. So, it is not necessarily confined to the Library, but it's confined to all the organizations that work under the City and the board members within those..."

In one of the libraries there was a board buddy system where new members are paired with more experienced members. New members have access to policy manuals, bylaws, previous minutes, and the summary of motions passed in the last couple of years. They are expected to sit in sub-committees through which they learn more about the position and the library. In one instance, a participant spoke to the general nature of their training by stating, "they [current board] do not really go deep into what the *Library Act* is and how it should be functioning or what mandate it carries."

In Saskatchewan, training mostly consisted of receiving a folder with all the past meeting minutes, various documents, and a mentor or buddy system when needed. Most of the training occurred on the job, by serving on sub-committees, by visiting library branches, and through broad participation. One participant said,

"When I started, you just went to the meeting, and it was trial by fire. Now we have binders, and a couple of half-day sessions [to] go over what the board

does, member duties, responsibilities, and obligations. My first meeting [as a board member] I was the deciding vote on whether to close several branches and services or not.”

Another participant mentioned receiving “a package of materials with background information...and there is a lot of back and forth with asking questions.” In another situation, the board members received their basic orientation by “sitting down on two occasions with the library director to receive an overview of the library, going through the financial details to help you understand, and getting an idea of the programs.” This member was also provided with several reading materials, including provincial library legislation, meeting minutes, and strategic plan documents. Each meeting with the director lasted an hour. One participant stated that it was challenging to get “any information around the library” as it is a big organization, and there is a lot to learn.

In both provinces there was no cultural sensitivity or diversity training to improve inter-cultural understanding of their stakeholders; they relied on their current members to bring in diverse perspectives. The responses on cultural training ranged from finding it unnecessary to not even considering it as an issue. One member explicitly stated that there was no ongoing or one-off training on cultural sensitivity for the board as a whole. Members find and attend training sessions on various topics such as “board culture and First Nations, Metis and Inuit perspectives and knowledge” outside of the board. One participant stated that the challenge was not with cultural diversity as their board includes members from different cultural groups. The participant elaborated stating, “we have a very well educated board, and we all have our sensitivity in other areas... Probably the least sensitive is me. I probably had the least amount of training [as] I have been self-employed for 15 years. But at the same time, I don’t particularly need any training.” The library in Saskatoon hired an expert to train board members on Indigenous peoples and history. A library in Alberta never had cultural sensitivity training being raised as an essential issue to be addressed. The participant in Alberta guessed that it might be because “it is something that people feel that we are already doing quite well.”

## ***Discussion***

Ladson-Billings (2013) posited that for CRT scholars “racism is the normal order of things” (p.37), where the norm is to do things as they have always been done and doing them in the name of equality and colour-blindness. Focusing on equality, neutrality, and colour-blindness, have helped hide racism in plain sight, which is why “the same type of people apply,” and boards are complacent with their representation.

Recruitment can be used as the fulcrum for targeted outreach towards diversity and inclusion. The board has to agree on what diversity means to them and focus on specific dimensions of diversity at various times (depending on the critical mass, or specific needs in their constitutions). The expertise required may vary at times and board members should realize the importance of including a variety of voices. As one participant stated, “at the end of the day it is about being open and accepting of what people say, but [also] understanding that your role on the board is representing the

community to the library. And that is critical to the job that you are doing.” Advertising is an effective place to articulate the need for representation from specific marginalized groups.

Another area to formalize the need for membership diversity is in the board’s mission statement through which diversity can be a factor in the assessment of board performance (Patel et al., 2015). Mission statements are the library and the board’s identity; equity and social justice cannot be fully realized without adding diversity building efforts into the mission and strategic actions. The tenet of experiential knowledge of CRT suggests asking “who gets to define” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 163) and emphasizes including the experiential knowledge of marginalized communities (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). An all-White member board may be capable of social responsibility to an ethnically diverse group, though, regardless of qualifications and experience, an exclusively White or majority White board making large decisions for the whole community ignores the full range of voices and perspectives in that community. If no effort is made to include different voices in membership, the board remains disconnected from those it serves.

For board members who lead libraries, their leadership should strive to “revolve around the powerful unifying concepts of social justice, [and] democratic community” (Murphy, 2002, p.177) and inclusivity. Hiring in their likeness, tapping friends, neighbours, and known acquaintances and having the “same type of people apply” undermines inclusion. Nor does it follow the *Free Libraries Act* and honour the “public will” in the formation of a board (Bruce & Bruce, 1988). Lack of diversity hinders boards’ understanding of how diverse users experience library spaces and resources, and as a result, may discourage minorities from becoming library users. Brown (2007) posited, “broadening the pool of potential applicants strengthens the likelihood that a successful candidate will be identified” (p.304). This broadening can be achieved through connections with various ethnic, cultural, and religious local leaders, and leads to a sustainable effort to meet the immediate needs of the board.

It was interesting to note that one member stated that the board knows of “smart people” to hire, and another said, the “same people” are hired. How does a majority White member board determine who the smart people are? Encouraging known individuals to apply is inequitable practice and mismanagement. It adds to a lack of diversity representation and constitutes structural racism (Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, 2004). This manner of recruitment risks reinforcing the racial-group inequity that creates a glass wall, or perhaps a brick wall, for minorities to enter boards. Boards who encourage applications from candidates they already know may exclude candidates with valuable perspectives and have a high probability of excluding minorities. While effective recruitment is a challenge, board members need to learn about diverse informal networks within their communities and advertise board positions to these networks. Long term members may provide continuity, but extended, repeated terms may also cause burn out (Epstein & McFarlan, 2011) or result in lack of drive among members to contribute. Time demands are one of the four primary reasons for volunteer burnout (Starnes & Wymer, 2001). Speaking of the shortage of recruitment in the third-sector, the non-profit sector (after public and private sectors), Phillips and

Smith (2011) used the term “dark matter” to denote that recruitment issues go mostly unnoticed in non-profit organizations.

Education levels of prospective board members are a useful consideration, but advanced education is not uniform in the communities they serve. The highest percentage of Saskatchewan’s population has a high school diploma or an equivalent certificate and in Alberta the numbers are higher for those with a university level education (Statistics Canada, 2019). None of the participants had apprenticeship or trade certificates. There were also no members from STEM backgrounds. Lack of diversity in education may lead to functional fixation where members are only comfortable working on familiar issues at the expense of social justice and equity (Mahadeo et al., 2012).

Board members were familiar with reconciliatory efforts with Indigenous peoples. One of the boards stated their efforts to explore and honour the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Report. Their library events, programs, conversations, and policy objectives are influenced by this historically rich and informative document. However, this is not common across the boards surveyed. One reason for this may be that members are not familiar with how the various libraries all over Canada are aligning their collections and services with the TRC report; another may be their lack of awareness of the TRC and its calls to action.

There is no consistency in training board members either within library systems or across libraries within each province. Current training involves a combination of a general introduction via text-based resources, needs-based training, “trial by fire” training, or the buddy system. While buddies can be great mentors and guides, if they are not themselves familiar with the history of public libraries and other governance matters, there is a possibility that they may mislead the new member. Although it was not specifically asked, only one member mentioned the *Library Act* and its lack of emphasis on training.

Orientation can be improved with training in the following areas: the *Library Acts*; how the *Acts* mandate board work; the history and role of public libraries in Canada, the rights of board members, and an up-to-date review of board activities and their outcomes. As Brown (2007) posited, new board member training should be comprehensive and ongoing. It is necessary in order to motivate and optimize organizational performance and improve individual board member performance. It also provides mentorship for long-term members' interested in future leadership positions within the board.

Merely hiring a handful of diverse board members without providing sufficient training and support does not address diversity. For instance, it can be overwhelming and stressful for new members to make decisions on library closures or budget cuts. Robust and ongoing training is necessary to their inclusion, performance, and ability to contribute toward a greater good. Board members who reflect diversity need to be well equipped with training to avoid being subsumed by the dominant norms of the board.

In addition to training in board activities, cross-cultural training facilitates an inclusive environment responsive to the sentiments and expectations of all members. Cultural sensitivity is not just about having members from different cultures; it is about learning, acknowledging, and accepting differences and integrating them into one's behaviour. Cultural sensitivity is described as understanding different perspectives through one's interpersonal actions and being non-judgmental regarding the practices of other cultures (Buchtel, 2014). Training in cultural sensitivity improves intercultural understanding and help board members work well together to serve different groups efficiently and equitably.

Identifying the expertise and skill gaps within the existing board and hiring to fill them was the norm among all board members interviewed. Focusing on skills gaps alone is a symptom of a library board more aligned with equality and neutrality than equity and social justice. As one participant stated, finding accurate representation in terms of age, ethnicity, education, experience, and economic diversity was a challenge. However, interview results also show that not enough effort is dedicated to finding diverse members. Recruiting potential members only for their skills encourages a very limited range of candidates to apply and serve on boards.

The sameness of board applicants shows the need to give the hiring process more scrutiny. The city may consider where and how prominently board positions are advertised. The city might also want to consider posting advertisements on its website, social media sites, and local radio and television programs. While expanded advertising risks a larger applicant pool and a higher number of unqualified applicants, the resulting increase in applications from representatives of diverse groups, including immigrants and Indigenous peoples who may otherwise not know of these vacancies, is worth it. The city might also want to avail themselves of connections with local cultural groups to recruit potential members. Not moving away from nepotism and long-term placement of members who do not reflect their clients defeats the purpose of the board's existence: the will of the people. In Alberta, boards have full management and control of the library and members "organize, promote, and maintain comprehensive and efficient library services" (*Libraries Act*, 1998). However, the lack of comprehensive and in-depth training has meant that some board members are ineffective at engaging with their communities in their role as the library's board member.

Although interviewers did not specifically ask this question, members mentioned the lack of performance evaluation process for existing board members. Others expressed frustrations about the long tenure of certain board members. Excessively long serving members resulted in the prolonged absence of new and fresh perspectives. This left issues unresolved, for example, existing members were not experienced or knowledgeable in Indigenous matters. In one library, there was a turnover with board members due to differences in priorities. Some members focused on governance, and others were more passionate about the library, its services, and its users. It is possible that the training or orientation received by board members did not highlight their roles and responsibilities. Ongoing self and team performance evaluations may also help members set goals as individuals and teams so they can focus on what is essential for their library and its users. The ALA document on board's self-evaluation (Spillios et al.,

2008) outlines different categories under which members should evaluate themselves and identify individual and board strengths and weaknesses as a whole. This evaluation can then be used to identify new board members with relevant skills.

### ***Limitations***

The study is a snapshot of the practices of four public library boards in two western provinces at a specific time. Limiting to four public libraries and having volunteer participants may have restricted the diversity and originality of experiences and perceptions of board members collected for this study. Board members who agreed to engage in this study may already have had an interest in diversity resulting in self-selection bias.

### ***Future Research***

This study could be expanded to all Canadian public library boards. Future researchers could consider a longitudinal study to determine and evaluate diversity efforts in all areas of board functions. Another future research possibility is to learn directly from marginalized communities about their perceptions of having representation from their community on the board and its subsequent impact. While this would extend the research beyond current members of public library boards, the views of marginalized communities concerning community representation on public library boards are essential.

### ***Conclusion***

Diversity representation is essential to meet the needs of diverse communities (Toró, 2018). This study reports on library board members' perceptions of diversity through various aspects of their work including the recruitment process, qualifications sought, training, and length of term. Findings from this study show a lack of diversity in current board membership and a lack of effort towards diversifying across the various aspects of board governance. Governance requires high-level critical thinking as well as listening to and liaising with various stakeholders to make informed decisions. In addition to governance, board members also need to have a passion for their library. As one participant posited, there is membership turnover when members focus on governance alone without understanding their library and the constituents they serve. Library users form a large majority of stakeholders. Finding diverse representation actively and training members in all aspects of the library governance so they understand their roles and responsibilities may help the library engage with all stakeholders and agencies.

Using the social capital built by library users from diverse communities such as religious groups, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ2+ communities, and newcomers who use the library regularly is one way to diversify the board. These diverse members, in turn, may invite other members from their communities and help with ongoing diversity recruitment that maintains the multilogicality of the board. Ongoing training in many aspects of board governance, in cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural training helps all board



members fully engage with each other and represent their communities while upholding the values of public libraries such as equity. Having a representative board may help provide a holistic perspective of all people, their knowledge, needs and priorities, during all board activities. If a lack of skills in a representative board is a significant concern, this can be addressed through proper and ongoing training. A representative and diverse board will also help with decision-making where multiple interests and concerns need to be weighed. A diverse representative board will further positive cultural embeddedness through engagement and improve the library board's handling of difficult decisions regarding complex problems.

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## **Appendix A – Letter of Contact**



**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN**  
**University Library**  
**LIBRARY.USASK.CA**

### **Letter of Contact**

Dear Board Member,

I am a researcher/librarian at \_\_\_\_\_ Library. My colleague \_\_\_\_\_ and I are interested in exploring whether public library boards are representative of their growing culturally diverse populations. We would also like to learn about the training board members receive with regards to cultural integrations and sensitivity, and how board members gather knowledge of the needs of their growing diverse user groups to be able to direct their libraries to meet the needs of this group.

Upon ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan we hope to set up interviews with two to three members of your board between the dates of June 20<sup>th</sup> – July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016. We expect the interviews to take anywhere between 40 – 90 minutes. The interviews will take place at a time and location convenient to you and the researcher. If you are not in the same city as the researcher, there is the option of being interviewed over the phone. We would like to digitally record the interview with your permission. If you do not want the interview recorded please indicate so before the interview.

We hope you will consider our request. We will also send you a consent form prior to the interview.

Please feel free to contact the researcher in your province:

Maha Kumaran  
Liaison Librarian  
University Library, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK  
Email: [maha.kumaran@mail.usask.ca](mailto:maha.kumaran@mail.usask.ca)  
Tel: (306) 966-7779; Fax: (306) 966-5918

Leanne Templeton  
Librarian  
Providence Centre Library, Edmonton, AB  
Email: [librarian@sistersofprovidence.ca](mailto:librarian@sistersofprovidence.ca)  
Phone: 1-780-436-7250

## **Appendix B – Consent Form**



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
**University Library**  
LIBRARY.USASK.CA

### **Participant Consent Form**

**You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Public Library Boards in a Growing Cultural Context - Is there Diversity?**

#### **Researcher(s):**

Leanne Templeton, Librarian, Providence Centre Library,  
[librarian@sistersofprovidence.ca](mailto:librarian@sistersofprovidence.ca) 1-780-436-7250

Maha Kumaran, Liaison Librarian, University Library, University of Saskatchewan.  
[maha.kumaran@usask.ca](mailto:maha.kumaran@usask.ca); 306-966-7779

#### **Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

The aim of this study is to evaluate whether boards are representative of their growing culturally diverse populations, trained to be culturally sensitive, knowledgeable about the needs of their growing diverse user groups and able to direct their libraries to meet the needs of their user groups. Library boards act as representatives of the community. Its members are responsible for meeting the needs of their communities and as such can have significant impact on their library's culture. While public libraries are efficient at evaluating their collections and services to ensure that they meet the needs of growing varied users, there is lack of study of library board structures, members, their activities, and the training they receive to serve as responsible members. Cultural sensitivity is about being sensitive to cultural elements of interpersonal actions, being aware of and non-judgmental about practices of other cultures, and addressing our biases. Improving cultural sensitivity will improve inter-cultural understanding and help serve the diverse user groups at a public library in an efficient, unprejudiced manner (Buchter, 2014). In case of library boards, a culturally sensitive board can provide the best directions for their libraries in terms of its programs, services and collections. Researchers hope to interview potential board members and information gathered from the interviews will be presented as a poster at the National Diversity in Libraries Conference (August 10 - 13).

Researchers hope that participants viewing the poster will come away with key information 1) on the knowledge of the importance of the library board membership structure; 2) creating an awareness of the need to engage their boards; 3) learning about opportunities to ignite library champions with a passion for diversity; 4) understanding of the gap between board representation and the community; and finally, 5) on ways to make 'cultural diversity' an important objective of the library boards.



### **Procedures:**

You are invited to participate in this interview. The interview will take place at a time and location convenient to you and the researcher. If you do not live in the same city as the researcher there is the option of a phone interview. We expect the interviews to take anywhere between 40 – 90 minutes. You will be asked for permission to record the interview using a digital recorder. If you do not consent to the interview being recorded, please indicate this to the researcher. You also have the option of having the recorder turned off at any time during the interview.

### **Funded by:**

This project is not funded.

### **Potential Risks:**

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research

### **Potential Benefits:**

Results from the interview will be presented as a poster at the National Diversity in Libraries Conference August 10 – 12, 2016. Researchers hope that attendees who view the poster will come away with

- knowledge of the importance of their library board membership structure
- an awareness of the need to engage their volunteer boards
- opportunities to ignite library champions with a passion for diversity
- an understanding of the gap between board representation and the community
- ways to make 'cultural diversity' an objective of library boards

### **Confidentiality:**

All data will be managed by the two researchers and stored in password protected computers at their institutions. Any personal information such as affiliation will be removed while summarizing the results. When data is no longer required to be stored (after 6 years), electronic files of the survey questionnaire and any data saved in other forms will be destroyed.

### **Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the research project for any reason. After the interview is complete, researchers will give you a deadline (about 2 weeks) within which date you must let them know if you wish to withdraw. Once all the

information is collated, analyzed and submitted, data may become anonymous, and withdrawal may not be possible.

**Follow up:**

Researchers will publish the results of the interview through a poster at the National Diversity in Libraries Conference. If you would like to look at a copy of the poster, please request the researchers and a PDF copy will be sent to you after the conference presentation.

**Questions or Concerns:**

Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

### **SIGNED CONSENT (For in person interviews)**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*                      *Signature*                      *Date*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Researcher's Signature*                      *Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

### **ORAL CONSENT (for phone interviews- Participants have to sign, scan and send the document to the researcher).**

I read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it. In addition, consent may be audio taped (if given permission by the interviewee).

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*                      *Researcher's Signature*                      *Date*

## **Appendix C – Interview Questionnaire**

1. Tell me how you became a board member?
2. How are members for the board elected – qualifications, experience, etc? (this will likely tell us they got on the board)
3. Describe a typical training routine when you become a member?
4. Can you tell us about your experiences with the board? How long have you been here, previous experience working on a board or a library, your greatest contribution/impact to the library board, etc.( eg: they may respond with things like: passion; fiduciary responsibility; I am always present at meetings; I write the agenda and make sure we stay on task; I am a provocateur – I ask provocative questions; I am really diligent with the budget, etc.)
5. Tell us about your community? (who are they, how is it changing, evolving,)
6. How do you engage with your community?
7. Have you and other members received any training related specifically to cultural sensitivity? (eg: In your opinion is your library board representative of the community? In your opinion are members currently knowledgeable of the diverse groups your library serves? Where are the gaps, what are the challenges, what needs to be done?)
8. Please talk more about this. (if they never received any training then this question will not be asked)
  - a. Cultural sensitivity is about being sensitive to different cultural issues. It is identified as a difficult concept to explain and there is no clear definition available. It addresses the bias each of us possess, is about sensitivity to the cultural elements of interpersonal actions, and about being non-judgemental about the practices of other cultures. Improving cultural sensitivity will improve intercultural understanding and help us serve the diverse groups in an efficient, unprejudiced manner (Buchtel, 2014).
9. If not, are there plans for this in the future?
10. How can a Board Member influence diversity on a Library Board?
11. What do you think needs to be done to create an inclusive, culturally sensitive library board?
12. What has challenged you as a Board Member?
13. If you have done well on cultural sensitivity and/or inclusivity, do you have any words of advice for other boards?
14. Anything else you would like to add?