BRIEF ACCOUNT of the
PENN LIBRARIES’ DIVERSITY PROGRAM INITIATIVE
Submitted June 19, 2008 by V. Peña

In 2005, as a first step towards building a multi-staged program to promote diversity in academic research libraries— and most specifically at our University of Pennsylvania Libraries— charged by the Director & Vice-Provost of Libraries, H. Carton Rogers, a small group set about designing an internship program to bring minority high-school students into the Penn Libraries to introduce them to an academic library environment located in the midst of their neighborhood but never visited; and beyond simply broadening their personal horizons, this was an attempt to kindle an interest in the library/information science profession in these young people just at the time when they were contemplating their first step beyond graduation from high-school; i.e., students entering their Senior year.

The founding team of the “Group on Library Diversity Programs (“GOLD”), as we came to be called, consisted of four librarians: Val Pena (Chair), Ancil George, Rachelle Nelson, and Jeanne Shuttleworth joined by our University colleague, Ralph De Lucia, from the Office of Affirmative Action & Equal Opportunity Programs.

This enthusiastic but largely inexperienced group, (Ralph alone having previous involvement with similar initiatives), had responsibility for planning and implementing all aspects of the fledgling program. We had all of four months to accomplish this. The launch date was July, 2005— ready or not. The wonder is, with the irrepressible and boundless optimism of the innocent and naïve, we managed to pull it off. Indeed, Penn’s first Summer Internship Program in the Libraries was declared a resounding success by all involved. In addition the program received University recognition in April, 2006 when we were selected to receive the coveted “Models of Excellence” award.

Beyond awards and kudos, perhaps the most important aspect for us of our involvement with this unprecedented activity was the experience, itself— of working together and with the talented young students from West Philadelphia selected as the first Interns. A number of librarians who participated as mentors or in other capacities spoke of their experience as “transformative.” That is probably not an exaggeration. For some this was the first recognition that there was any “problem.”

Apparently it was not noticed that there were only six “minority” librarians (from underrepresented groups) among a professional staff of 140. Fortunately the demographics are better when we look at the support staff and student assistants. Nevertheless, such a dearth of “librarians of color” is not at all healthy or desirable. On a campus rich with international presence at all levels of students, faculty and staff, the Library stands out as an exception— a student from Sri Lanka, a researcher from Botswana or staff member from Chile who comes into the Library seeking assistance at a research service desk will not likely see a face reflective of his or her own. Additionally,
those of us who work in the Libraries are, ourselves, negatively affected by the lack of stimulation and richness of experience provided by ethnic diversity. Exposure to other cultures is not only enlightening, it is enjoyable and fun!

It is not through lack of institutional commitment or targeted individual efforts that we find ourselves in this situation at Penn—the unfortunate truth is that as a profession we are having very little success attracting underrepresented minorities to our ranks. For the health and vitality of the profession, we must address the fact that we are facing critical shortages— it gets harder and harder to fill the vacancies caused by the ongoing surge in anticipated retirements, as we have all noticed. Statistics suggest that in 2009 20% of the existing workforce will retire. Meanwhile, the fastest growing populations in the U.S. are the Latinos and African-Americans. Clearly we are headed for serious levels of dysfunction in our profession in the very near future, if we cannot successfully recruit from these emerging groups.

How can this critical imbalance be addressed? Certainly it will take small steps and big strides. It will take individuals and institutions of varying sizes and spheres of influence.

With the initiation of our Library Summer Internships in 2005, we took a small but rewarding step at Penn. At this point the Internship Program has been fully institutionalized and is not functioning in the improvisational, ad hoc mode that characterized our first efforts. Now in our fourth year, we have an impressive organization chart and a growing file of attractive documentation. We still don’t have a formal budget, which really does need to be determined and properly drawn up. Lacking that, we have been fortunate, from the beginning, to have the full support of our Director of Libraries— both in good will and dollars.

“Global initiatives” are “big” at our University. Diversity is highly valued on this campus. That, too, is in our favor and helps to support our mission.

In this broader context our little Library effort may seem almost inconsequential, but it would be a mistake to view it as such. At this point we have begun planning for residency programs, and we even have some funding in hand. This is very rewarding and very encouraging.

We are also pleased to learn that a number of Schools and the University police are modeling similar programs based on our success.

Back in 1903 Dr. W.E.B. DuBois observed that the problem of the twentieth century was “... the problem of the color line.” We are now into the twenty-first century, and we still have the “color line.” But, as reason for hope, let us rejoice that now, for the first time in our history as a nation, in the year 2008 the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party is an African-American. His chief competition was a formidable woman. “Change” is the word of the day. We aim for significant change in our world of academic libraries, as well.