

Summary Report on MiPA General Meeting—May 10, 2022
19 Participating on Zoom

**Diversifying and Retaining Talent in the
Publishing Industry**



Caroline Richmond and Chelsea Villareal provided an overview of We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), its Internship Grant Program, and how MIPA members can partner with WNDB to help diversify and retain talent in the publishing industry. Their goal is to create a world where everyone can find themselves on the pages of a book. They have a broad definition of diversity and work with libraries and industry publishers.

The intern program, eight years old, partners with publishers and literary agencies to help people with diverse backgrounds get started with a \$3,000 grant and with a support group of alumni for advice.

<https://diversebooks.org/programs/internship-grants/> This program is called Rise Up.



After the overview presentation, WNDB introduced a community panel to reflect on their own experiences within publishing and how MiPA members can facilitate stronger diversity retention within their houses.

Panel members were Stephanie Cohen-Perez—an editor, writer, and reviewer based in New York City who now works on acquisitions in academic publishing. She noted internal diversity training in the places she has worked and efforts to diversify their staff, but there wasn't much emphasis on creating diverse author pools or working with diverse external groups.

Talisa Ramos has worked on the Sales team at Penguin Random House for about three years. She was surprised that this large company just recently created an Employee Resource Group to help in employee development.

Chelsea talked about her experience drifting into publishing, starting with an internship position with an arts publisher. She was attracted to WNDB at first due to their emphasis on diverse children's books, perhaps because they were more visual. She now works at Penguin Young Readers and is proud of the work they do to support diverse writers.

What steps Could a publisher take to support diversity?

Talisa said there are many ways, depending on the situation. Be honest with yourself about the situation you are in. Be sure that people in the room are listened to, including yourself, to help them be taken seriously. Casual affinity groups can help people open up and share their experiences which could be quite different. Casual lunches and

mentorship can be helpful too. And try to make sure diverse voices are being looked for and published.

Stephanie said having support groups right from the beginning is important. A few years into the job, people can begin to feel isolated and again need positive support. Affinity groups were very helpful for her, from HR or other places. When she finally got into publishing, she did have a mentor who helped a lot, even in things like finding an apartment. She always felt free to bring in diverse authors. It takes many steps and can't happen by just one big move.

Chelsea said her first experiences were in a UK company. HR was far away and the culture was different. Discussions with your boss about trajectory are useful and it is great when your supervisor brings that up preemptively. The place should be a place where all opinions are heard and respected. She always waits for eight seconds so the ideas of others can be fully expressed.

How do you define and find diverse resources?

Chelsea said that she began in Oregon, and recommend searching the entire country for new people. Talisa added, that organized interviews are important to share both company info and the interests of the applicant. Encouragement is key. There are so many role opportunities in publishing. Stephanie added that If you can hire local talent, try to do that because there are so many who would like to be in the industry.

Since most MiPA members are authors or small publishers, what advice do you have for them?

Chelsea said the industry itself is very skewed toward the big players, but if we can, MiPA members should use mentorships when possible. Learning will go both ways. Stephanie added that learning from the WNDB intern groups was valuable for her. Look for the best beta readers. WNDB and others have boards that MiPA members might want to join. Such opportunities are mentioned in their newsletter. Talisa said lots of little steps add up to create a great culture.

MiPA Questions:

Q1: How do you attract diverse writers without seeming offensive?

A1: Use open calls to diverse communities. Be very transparent.

Q2: How can a very small press find diverse options?

A2: WNDB is very small, so we have a handbook to show where to go for help. It may be good to have a form where people can share their concerns anonymously. It may be as simple as putting a welcoming sentence on the website inviting diverse inputs or applicants.

Q3: If a publisher needs a sensitivity read, where should they go?

A3: WNDB posts sensitivity readers, one put out an open call who can be contacted.

Q4: We are often just trying to stay in business, how can diversity be a benefit to us?

A4: There are barriers of course. But when you are ready to hire, it can be beneficial as the population changes. People are really looking for layered stories. It is good to prepare for growth. Have a five-year plan that includes diversity. It's a good long-term investment. We all are trying to create a better future and small publishers are freer to put out books that match the current environment. The consumers are there.

After the meeting there was a long discussion about the value and attractiveness of stories where we learn about other types of lives. We also agreed it's not easy. We have an obligation to be historically accurate in such stories. The hard part is getting our stories to a larger public.

Miscellaneous comments (before the meeting started officially):

- Jennifer described our upcoming schedule. In particular she highlighted the Gala meeting for our Book Award presentations on June 25.
- Gretchen Eick mentioned an interesting new book just out from her publishing company—*We the House*.

- Ron Peterson mentioned that his latest book, *An African Son*, is just out.
- Emily Bell mentioned she has books coming out from all around the world.
- Khalid Elmasry mentioned a compelling memoir he's working on and asked about how to connect with an agent for a publisher deal. He should look at the MiPA website notes from 2021, by Katherine Pickett, "How to publish: which route to publication is right for you."