

Minimum Qualifications for Librarians—The Prospects

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The three previous papers have approached minimum qualifications for librarians by dealing with a series of "micro" aspects of the topic. They represent a small part of the detailed knowledge we must have if any of us is going to be able to deal intelligently with the complex issues involved. Otherwise, we will be acting merely on the basis of our feelings, our intuition, and our ignorance. However, once we begin to have sufficient information to understand some of the component parts of the problem, it becomes increasingly important that we not become so engrossed in the individual parts of the problem that we forget our original purpose in examining this subject. I hope all of us can agree on one thing. I hope each of us shares a deep and overriding commitment to deliver to our clients the highest level of library service possible. If this is not our primary concern, we have no right to consider ourselves professionals. If we can agree on this goal, all that is left for us to discuss is the tactics we should employ to achieve our common objective. The task is a life long undertaking.

The purpose of affirmative action is *not* to remove barriers in employment opportunities for certain legally protected groups. The purpose of affirmative action is to remove *artificial* barriers that would limit the full utilization of the talents of these groups. This distinction is of crucial importance. We must examine every procedure in our employment processes to determine whether the barriers they individually and collectively create are artificial or legitimate (i.e., do these barriers demonstratively result in improved library services?). If we are committed to delivering the best possible library services, we must employ the person best suited for the job in each position in our organizations. It should not take a legal requirement to persuade us to remove artificial barriers that impede the achievement of this objective. It makes good sense from a hard-headed management perspective. At the same time there are limits.

Few of us have access to professional resources that are being tapped in the project reported by Mr. Zimmerman. Few libraries have a large enough concentration of employees performing essentially similar work that they would constitute the minimum sample size required for a proper validation study. Does the enormity of the task so overwhelm us that we can excuse ourselves from responsibility? The task is certainly a large one.

The only pragmatic solution that I see for us as an association is for us to concentrate on minimum qualifications for *librarians*—*not* library workers, *not* descriptive catalogers, and *not* research specialists. All of these kinds of staff members are needed, in one form or another, in any library system. But if we are to have any realistic hope of validating minimum qualifications for *librarians*, we will be required to concentrate on a rather narrow definition

what a librarian is. In so doing, we must approach this definition from the point of view of what a librarian realistically should be expected to contribute to library services. This is quite a different approach than what was employed in the two case studies just reported to you. In those studies employees were accepted as being librarians if the institutions which employed them called them librarians. No obvious attempt was made to validate whether the responsibilities of these individuals really qualified them for the generic title "librarian." Therefore, minimum qualifications developed for these positions may be perfectly valid for the employees surveyed but still might not say anything about the valid minimum requirements of the generic librarian.

ALA has already defined the generic librarian as a part of its policy statement on "Library Education and Personnel Utilization:" (LEPU)¹

Article 8: The title "Librarian" carries with it the connotation of "professional" in the sense that professional tasks are those which require a special background and education on the basis of which library needs are identified, problems are analyzed, goals are set, and original and creative solutions are formulated for them, integrating theory into practice, and planning, organizing, communicating, and (carrying out) successful programs of service to users, the professional person recognizes potential users as well as current ones, and designs services which will reach all who could benefit from them.

Article 9: The title "librarian" therefore should be used only to designate positions in libraries which utilize the qualifications and impose the responsibilities suggested above. Positions which are primarily devoted to the routine application of established rules and techniques, however useful and essential to the effective operation of a library's ongoing services, should not carry the word "Librarian" in the job title.

Article 28: The objective of the master's programs in librarianship should be to prepare librarians capable of anticipating and engineering the change and improvement required to move the profession constantly forward. The curriculum and teaching methods should be designed to serve this kind of education for the future rather than to train for the practice of the present.

If we as an association are to involve our collective time and energy on validating minimum qualifications for librarians, I believe this effort should be expended on validating the minimum qualifications for the librarian defined above. This can be done by studying a cross section of librarians currently performing at this level.

If ALA were to validate such minimum qualifications, individual libraries would have two options: (1) they could analyze the work currently being performed by the staff members they call librarians and develop valid requirements in relationship to the tasks performed; (This would be similar to the procedures followed in two studies just described to you.) or (2) Libraries

could demonstrate, in the words of the EEOC *Guidelines*, that their jobs when compared with the ALA generic librarian, "are comparable (i.e., have basically the same task elements), and there are no major differences in contextual variables or sample composition which are likely to significantly affect validity."²

In theory these alternatives are very workable. In practice many problems are obvious. In practice few libraries have either the expertise or the staff time available to conduct the necessary analysis and validation required in option one above. However, it can be done. The methodology now exists. Option two would somewhat minimize these difficulties as much of the expertise for task analysis and validation could be carried on at the national level. This can be done. The methodology now exists. Research completed by Susan Mahmoodi at the University of Minnesota seems to demonstrate that there is a remarkable consensus in the field about the competencies needed by librarians.³ These competencies are amazingly consistent with the kind of librarian described in "Library Education and Personnel Utilization," the statement quoted above. However, this transfer of responsibility from the local to the national level, if fully carried out, could drastically disrupt current staffing patterns and work assignments in the libraries that chose to participate.

On an operational level very few of our libraries expect all their librarians to perform up to the standards envisioned by the "Library Education and Personnel Utilization" statement. Library administrators too often do not want their librarians to make waves, but prefer for them to concentrate almost exclusively on the practice of the present. It may become uncomfortable to often for all concerned when the librarians try to concentrate on "anticipating and engineering the change and improvement required to move the profession constantly forward."⁴ However, if libraries wish to adopt this standard with all its implications, I believe the level of library service would be improved. A side effect might be that fewer librarians and more supporting staff would be required. This would be traumatic for individuals whose positions were not found to qualify for the title librarian. Such potential for short term disruption must be dealt with humanely and, at the same time, must not be allowed to impede the improvement of service.

Much of our current difficulty results from the polarization over the best way of learning about librarianship—whether it should be through library education or through experience. Of course, neither way by itself is likely to result in the kind of librarians envisioned by the LPU statement. The Medical Library Association has recognized this in delaying eligibility for full certification until a person has completed an MLS and has at least two years of post masters practice. This is consistent with the LPU statement: "Certain practical skills and procedures . . . are best learned on the job. These relate typically to details of operation which may vary from institution, or to routines which require repetition and practice for their mastery."⁵

In other words it seems to call for an appropriate period that serves much the same function as the internship does for MDs. Any validation of requirements for librarians should be for the level of responsibility expected after the completion of the apprentice period. This kind of approach has been accepted

by EEOC and the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice Stewart, writing for the majority in *Albemarle Paper Co. v. Moody* (1975), stated:

In *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, . . . the Court left open the question whether testing requirements that take into account capability for the next succeeding position or related future promotion might be utilized upon a showing that such long-range requirements fulfill a genuine business need. The (E.E.O.C.) *Guidelines* take a sensible approach to this issue, and we now endorse it:

'If job progression structures and seniority provisions are so established that new employees will probably, withing (sic) a reasonable period of time and in a great majority of cases, progress to a higher level, it may be considered that candidates are being evaluated for jobs at that higher level. However, where job progression is not so nearly automatic, or employees' potential may be expected to change in significant ways, it shall be considered that candidates are being evaluated for a job at or near the entry level.'⁶

In summary, I believe improved library services are most likely to result if we fill each opening with the best qualified candidate. We must accept greater responsibility for demonstrating which positions in our libraries can best be filled by librarians and which should be filled by those with other kinds of preparation. I believe ALA should take the lead in identifying the competencies required to perform at the level envisioned by the association's current policy statement. ALA should then validate either a library education program, an examination, a certain kind of library experience or specific combinations of one or more of the above as reasonably accurate predictors of this kind of performance. Individual libraries can accept the standards. In either case this will be a long and often traumatic task, but I am convinced that the resulting improvement in staff utilization will ultimately lead to better service to our clients.

REFERENCES

1. "Library Education and Personnel Utilization," A Statement of Policy Adopted by the Council of the American Library Association, June 30, 1970, 8p. (copies are available from the Office for Library Personnel Resources, ALA, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, Ill. 60611.)
2. *Federal Register*, Section 1607.7, Document 70-9962, July 31, 1970.
3. Mahmoodi, Suzanne H., *Identification of Competencies for Librarians Serving Public Services Functions in Public Libraries*, unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1978.
4. "LEPU," Article 28.
5. "Library Education and Personnel Utilization." *op cit.*, Article 27.
6. *Albemarle Paper Company v. Moody*. (1975) in *Fair Employment Practices Cases*. vol. 10, #1181.