

# The MLS and Job Performance

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In recent years a controversy has developed over the minimum qualifications for professional librarians. Since the 1951 *ALA Standards for Accreditation of Library Schools*,<sup>1</sup> the profession has said that the minimum qualification is a master's degree from an accredited library school.

Between 1933 and 1951 the profession accepted either one full academic year of library science within a four year Bachelor's program or a Bachelor's degree plus one full academic year of library science as the educational requirements for a professional librarian. Prior to 1933 professional librarians received their education in a variety of programs: summer courses, library training and apprentice classes in libraries, teacher training courses, undergraduate programs, and graduate programs.

Although the profession now considers the master's degree the minimum qualification for professional librarian, that is not to say that other programs do not exist. The latest *North America Library Education Directory*<sup>2</sup> lists 14 undergraduate programs, 54 Library Technical Assistant (LTA) programs, 64 non-accredited graduate programs, whose administrators responded to a questionnaire for information. There undoubtedly are more. These programs do exist, students enroll in them, graduate, and get jobs as librarians. Another variation is the requirement of subject specialization with no library degree. This is often the case in a specialized library.

Since the early 1970's, as the result of equal rights legislation, affirmative action, and job reclassification at state levels, some are saying that lower levels of education and/or library experience qualify persons to be employed in professional positions. On the other side of the coin are those who believe that the MLS is not adequate preparation, but that persons should have a MLS plus experience. The latter is particularly true in institutions where librarians have academic rank. It is difficult to appoint an individual with only the MLS degree and no experience and/or advanced education to the rank of assistant professor at some institutions.

It is clear from this brief historical overview of minimum qualifications for professional librarians that the profession itself was slow to define a minimum educational level. It was 66 years after the establishment of the first library school and 75 years after the establishment of the American Library Association that a minimum qualification was defined. However, this standard has been ignored by many who employ persons as librarians in libraries. Needless to say, librarianship has been faced with this problem throughout its history in this country.

## Research Relating to the MLS and Job Performance

One method of solving such a dilemma is to turn to the results of research studies to find the answers. However, even when research is defined broadly, there are few studies in the area of library education. Much of

has been done describes a local situation without using adequate sampling techniques to permit generalization to the entire population. Also the majority are isolated studies not building upon earlier research.

The results of these studies tend to refute the need for a MLS degree for a librarian. The results of one group of studies show that professional librarians regularly perform a large number of non-professional tasks each day. This was found to be true in public, academic, and special libraries. No studies were identified which explored this problem in school libraries. The authors of these studies concluded that much of the work in libraries could be done by para-professionals and clerks. Neill<sup>3</sup> in his 1973 study identified the professional activities performed by librarians which justify a MLS degree. These are: planning, administration, and innovation.

The studies of the performance of the various library functions by non-professionals show a similar pattern. Attempts have been made to measure the performance of professionals and non-professionals in providing reference service in public libraries. These studies found no significant difference between the two groups in the accuracy of answers to reference questions.<sup>4</sup> Non-professionals tended to take more time to answer questions than professionals, but this difference was slight. In-service training for non-professionals and the opportunity to select and handle reference materials led to increased familiarity with the collection and to increased efficiency. Not finding large differences between the performance of professionals and non-professionals in providing reference service prompted one investigator to conclude that "reference service is not as professional an activity as it has been assumed to be."<sup>5</sup>

Two studies have measured the book selection competence of professionals and non-professionals in public libraries. One study found no correlation between professional education and the quality of children's books selected.<sup>6</sup> The other, which dealt with book selection for adults, concluded that there are some real, but not large, differences between professionals and non-professionals in book selection competence?

Pannu in his dissertation on cataloging efficiencies found that intelligence was the single most important predictor of cataloging efficiency.<sup>8</sup> Based on his examination of cataloging students in MLS programs, he concluded that intelligence, life experience, and a broad personal reading background were essential.

There were only two studies which found results opposite to those already cited. One measured the performance of professionals and non-professionals in the reference interview.<sup>9</sup> The reference staffs of two university libraries were used for this study. The investigators concluded that professional performance was superior in detecting and eliciting additional information and in finding answers.

The other study explored the programs of public services developed by professionals and non-professionals in school libraries.<sup>10</sup> This investigator concluded that regardless of the number of years experience of the persons in the two groups, the professional librarians developed more extensive programs of public services than did the non-professionals. The difference seemed to be in the attitude of the librarians. The non-professionals were

keepers of books and the professionals were disseminators of information. Whether this attitude was acquired prior to or during their professional education is the subject for another study.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

It is obvious that the profession needs more research in the area of education of librarians and job performance. Studies are needed which are localized, which use sampling techniques that allow generalization to librarianship, and which build upon previous studies.

The results of the studies conducted in public libraries, where large differences were not found between the performance of professionals and non-professionals, and those conducted in other types of libraries, where differences were not found between the performance of professionals and non-professionals of different types of education. Can the profession continue to expect that the same background is essential for professionals in all types of libraries?

The results of the studies also suggest that there may be different levels of responsibilities in different types of libraries. Does the patron of a public library demand a lower level of performance than the patron of an academic library? so, how do we educate for these various levels?

While more research is needed, the profession itself needs to do some soul searching. Will the professional librarian continue to be defined as one who has attained a certain level of formal education, or one who has certain experience or passed a set of examinations? Will there be national standards or standards established by the different states and regions for persons employed in libraries? Recent events indicate that the movement in the latter direction is happening very rapidly.

The library schools must also do some soul searching. Can the schools continue to educate for only one position level in libraries? If so, what institutions will have the responsibility for educating for other levels? How will the programs be accredited? What provision will there be for upward movement from one level to the next higher for library employees? Are the present curricula of the schools truly graduate level work? Are they interdisciplinary? Are they relevant to a rapidly changing profession and the demands of a rapidly changing society?

These questions and the many others you may ask are serious questions and we do not have long to find the answers.

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