

# Bridging the Gap: Employer, Librarian, and Educator Perspectives on Instructional Librarianship

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## ABSTRACT

This study compares the perspectives of academic library administrators, library school educators, and academic librarians with respect to academic instructional librarianship. A 9-item questionnaire was administered to N=14 educators, N=10 library administrators, and N=13 instructional librarians. The survey asked about the character of instructional librarians, their job preparation, library school training, job duties, and assessment. Responses indicate a general agreement among the 3 populations regarding desirable skills and traits, but some disagreement exists between administrators and others regarding assessment. Results suggest that further consideration is needed about the nature and necessity of instructional librarian training in graduate library schools.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information literacy; pedagogy; curriculum; education; reference transactions; academic libraries; teaching faculty

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

library instruction; pedagogy; academic libraries; teacher training

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, instruction has assumed an increasingly prominent role in the job duties of many academic librarians. While the extant published literature on the topic dates back well over a century (Adams, Ames, Rathbone, & Little, 1898; Shaw, 1928; Harris, 1934), in the past few decades, the instructional role has evolved from offering a generic orientation to the library for new students to developing full-fledged courses designed to match the curriculum of academic programs (Griffin & Clarke, 1958; Julien & Leckie, 1997; Mardis, 2017; Rubin, 2017). Consequently, just as instructional ability and experience have become highly-valued, sought-after traits among library administrators (Eckard, Rosener, & Scripps-Hoekstra, 2014; Johannsen, 2015; Rubin, 2017) so too has training for instructional librarians emerged as one of the most significant topics in academic librarianship (Julien, 2000; Walter, 2008; Hall, 2013).

Historically, some authors have identified a disconnect between the training students receive in Master of Library and Information Science programs and the actual duties and responsibilities they encounter in the profession. In response, professional organizations such as

the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) acknowledged the absence of satisfactory training for instruction librarians and established proficiencies and standards for the field over the course of the 1980s (Wittkopf, 1990; Patterson & Howell, 1990; Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017). More recently, several studies have examined those teaching traits that are most highly valued by instructional librarians and library administrators. Instructional design (Egbedokun, Oteyola, Akinlabi, Adejumo, & Ayodele, 2017), presentation skills (Johnson, Jent, & Reynolds, 2007; Johnson, Sproles, & Detmering, 2011), online instruction/distance teaching (Julien, Gross, & Latham, 2018), and planning and leadership (Sproles, Johnson, & Farison, 2008) have all been viewed as desirable competencies in instructional librarianship. There remains disagreement, however, where the instructional librarian may best acquire these skills. As suggested by the work of Brundin (1985) and Click & Walker (2010), the best preparation for teaching roles may be in other academic programs or through on-the-job experience; however, many authors believe that the role of instructional librarian training should fall squarely upon LIS programs (Hogan, 1980; Larson & Meltzer, 1987; Meulemans & Brown, 2001; Sproles, Johnson, & Farison, 2008; Westbrook & Fabian, 2010).

At the same time, among those who believe that LIS programs are responsible for teacher training, there is disagreement about how effectively these programs currently prepare students. Kilcullen (1998) identified several areas in LIS curricula that needed attention in order to prepare aspiring instructional librarians for their future roles, from a broader engagement with instructional design and theory, to a greater emphasis on public speaking, and collaboration. Julien (Julien & Boon, 2002; Julien, 2005; Julien, Gross, & Latham, 2018) has played a significant role in identifying the foci of LIS teacher training courses and potential gaps in this training.

One of the most comprehensive assessments of instructional librarian proficiencies to date is offered in Shonrock and Mulder (1993). In this study, the authors identified the 25 most important proficiencies for instructional librarians and had survey respondents (who were themselves instructional librarians) indicate where they acquired the proficiency and whether it should continue to be emphasized. For most of the teaching-related proficiencies, the majority of respondents acquired the proficiency outside of library school and suggested that others do so through a combination of formal education, continuing education/workshops, mentorship, and on-the-job experience. Additionally, the about one-third to one-half of respondents reported that other formal education (such as a bachelor's degree in teaching) contributed to their acquisition of skills necessary to be an instructional librarian. These findings suggest that LIS programs may not have been the ideal place for instructional librarians to acquire teaching skills, based on these individuals' self-responses. However, the Shonrock and Mulder study is now nearly 3 decades old. With sweeping changes to the library and information science landscape over the past 3 decades, a reassessment of these topics is warranted.

## **RESEARCH PROBLEMS**

There are four research problems for this study:

- RP1: It is not well known what skills or traits make instructional librarians successful in their positions in academic libraries and whether these qualities are innate, temperamental, or acquirable.
- RP2: It is not well known where academic instructional librarians are prepared to perform their job duties, whether on the job, through previous work experience, professional training, library school, or somewhere else.
- RP3: It is not well known what the essential job duties of academic instructional librarians are today—what they do in their positions.
- RP4: The perspectives of practicing instructional librarians, academic library administrators, and library school educators have yet to be compared.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are four research questions for this study:

- RQ1: What skills or traits are necessary for academic instructional librarians to perform well in their job?
- RQ2: Where do they instructional librarians acquire these skills or traits?
- RQ3: What are the job duties of academic instructional librarians?
- RQ4: How do the perspectives of librarians, administrators, and educators compare with respect to academic instructional librarianship?

## RESEARCH PURPOSE

This study surveys academic instructional librarians, academic library administrators, and library school educators in the United States and Canada in order to: 1) identify what skills or traits make academic instructional librarians successful, 2) describe how these skills or traits are acquired, 3) describe the job duties of academic instructional librarians, and 4) compare the perspectives of library school educators, practicing librarians, and administrators. The results of this study are significant for practicing and prospective academic instructional librarians, academic library administrators, and library school educators.

## METHODS

This study adopted a survey approach. The three populations examined in this study were academic instructional librarians, academic library administrators, and library school educators in the United States and Canada. The study proceeded in three stages: 1) source collection, 2) data collection, and 3) data analysis. In the source collection stage, an interview protocol was developed and piloted, a survey sample was created, and surveying was conducted using structured interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Data collection used qualitative content analysis to develop a coding frame, pilot it, and code the interview transcripts using NVivo (Schreier, 2013). Data analysis used Excel to interpret and visualize the results. During interviewing, a protocol of 9 questions was administered to a total of N=37 participants. To ensure geographical representation, samples included participants from institutions across 7 regions in the United States and Canada. To ensure institutional representation, participants were included from four institution types: research universities, public teaching universities, community colleges, and

liberal arts colleges. Samples of librarians and administrators were selected at random from institutions of each type in each region.

## RESULTS

### Question 1: What skills/traits of instructional librarians do you believe are most important for them to perform well at their job duties?

Overall, the skills and traits that participants indicated were most important for instructional librarians were: communication, core skills (i.e., “soft skills,” customer service), and instructional design. Less commonly noted skills/traits included knowledge of information literacy, emotional intelligence, reflection, cultural humility, and professional curiosity. There was some disagreement among the study populations in response to this question. Adjunct educators, for example, noted communication as an important skill at a greater rate than the other three populations. Instructional librarians and adjunct educators (many of whom were themselves also instructional librarians) indicated that core skills were important at a much higher rate than full-time educators and administrators, while educators (both full-time and adjunct) and administrators identified instructional design skills as more important than practicing instructional librarians. The traits that received the most consistent responses across all populations were knowledge of information literacy and reflection, though each of these skills were indicated by less than 40% of the total respondents for each population.

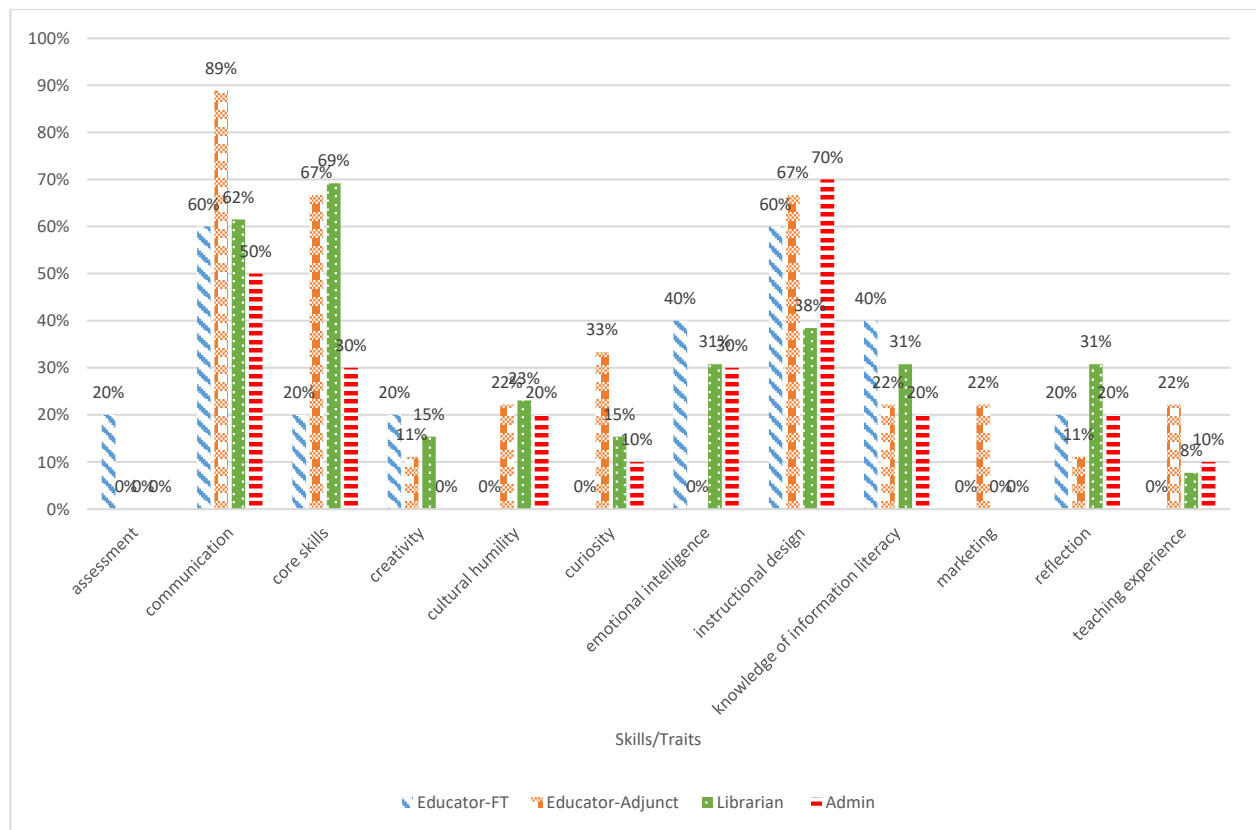


Figure 1. Most Important Skills/Traits for Instructional Librarians

**Question 2: Where do you believe instructional librarians acquire the skills/traits necessary to perform their job duties?**

Respondents most frequently mentioned “on-the-job” as the place where instructional librarians acquire the skills/traits necessary to perform their job duties among all interview populations. Observation, previous work experience, library school, professional development, and temperament (or “born with it”) all received similar amounts of responses (8-15%). However, the breakdown by population indicates stark differences between educators, practicing librarians, and administrators. Practicing instructional librarians and administrators named on-the-job as a place of skill/trait acquisition at a rate of 90%+, while only 1/3 of full-time educators indicated the same. Full-time educators, in fact, appear to be unsure *where* the skills/traits are required, with a response rate to this question below 100% (88%) and no response option receiving a larger percentage than any of the other three populations. Administrators more frequently cited library school and professional development as significant places of skill/trait acquisition compared to educators or practicing instructional librarians. Many instructional librarians, for their part, felt that their library school and professional development experiences were unsatisfactory when they first became an instructor. As noted by one respondent, “A lot of older librarians learn from the job because there were no instruction courses provided at that time.” It is possible that the response to this question varies between more experienced versus newly minted librarians, however this was not a question investigated in this study.

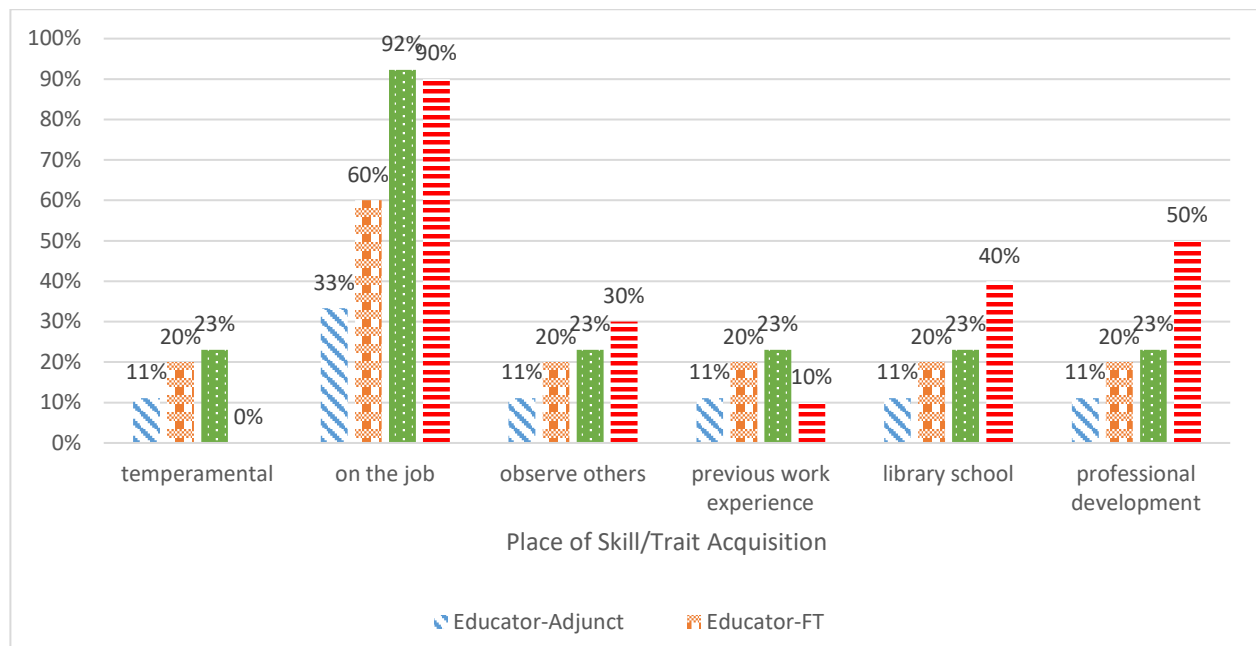


Figure 2. Where Important Skills/Traits for Instructional Librarians are Acquired

**Question 3: What prior education/work experiences that individuals may have before becoming an instructional librarian do you believe would be most beneficial to their success in the position?**

All populations indicated that prior teaching experience was invaluable for success in the university setting. For many respondents, this teaching experience can take many forms outside of formal library instruction, from “teaching swimming lessons,” and “giving directions to visitors in the library,” to “teaching high school.” Full-time educators named experiences related to library work and education in libraries and content areas, rather than more *generic* experiences like public speaking and engagement in a community of practice, as beneficial for aspiring instructional librarians. Librarians and administrators suggested a comparatively wider range of experiences that may be beneficial for preparation for instructional librarianship. While administrators were significantly more positive about the role of formal library training in preparing instructional librarianship than instructional librarians, they were less favourably disposed toward content area knowledge. Overall, however, administrator responses mirrored those of instructional librarians.

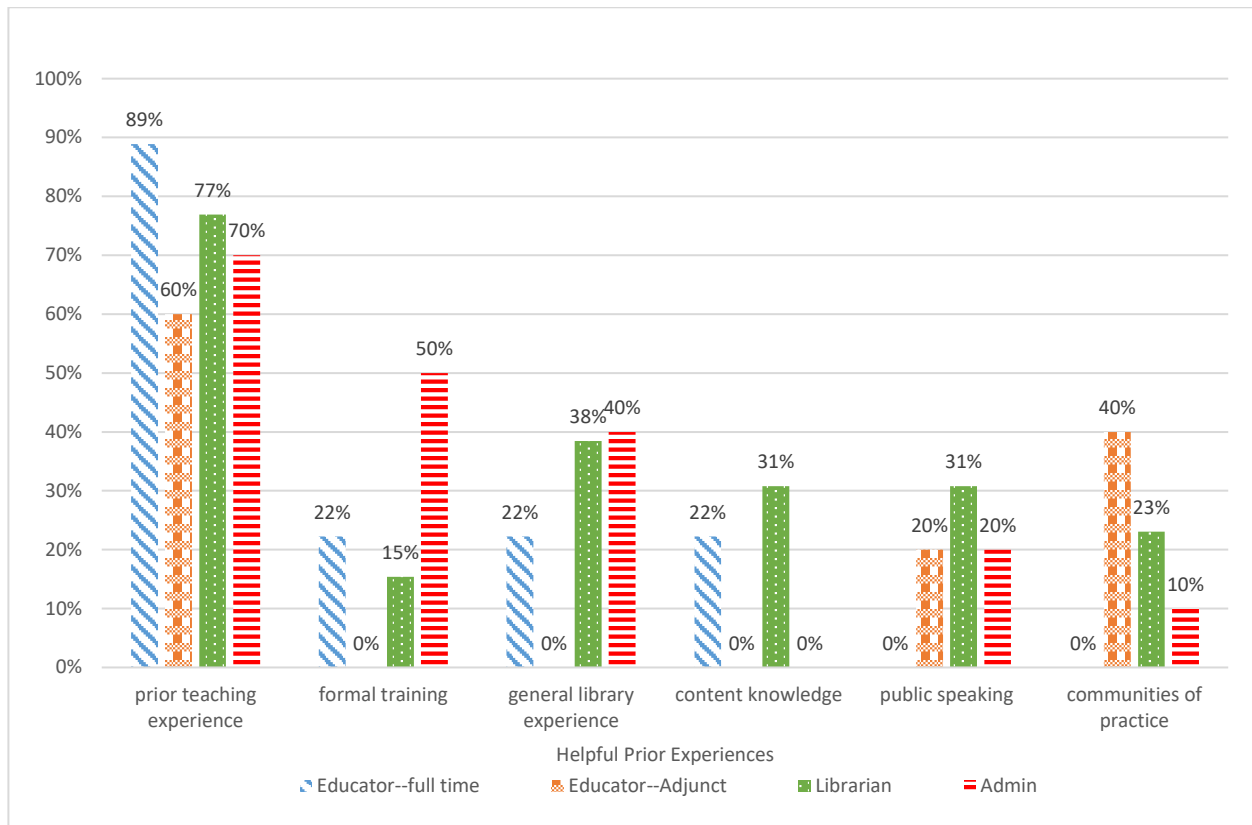


Figure 3. Prior Work Experiences that Would Be Helpful for Instructional Librarians

**Question 4: Do you think taking a practicum in instructional librarianship/teaching in library school can significantly help students prepare for instructional roles?**

Participants agreed that a practicum in instructional librarianship could be a useful experience, with only one participant in the study indicating “no.” There was, however, a bit of disagreement about whether these practicums should be integrated into library school curricula and the extent to which the nature of the work within practicums mattered. Three respondents indicated that a practicum could be helpful but should not be required of students while nine respondents indicated that a practicum would only be valuable if conducted with a high-level of engagement between the student and an experienced library instructor, rather than consisting simply of “busy-work.” Little disagreement existed among the four populations in response to this question.

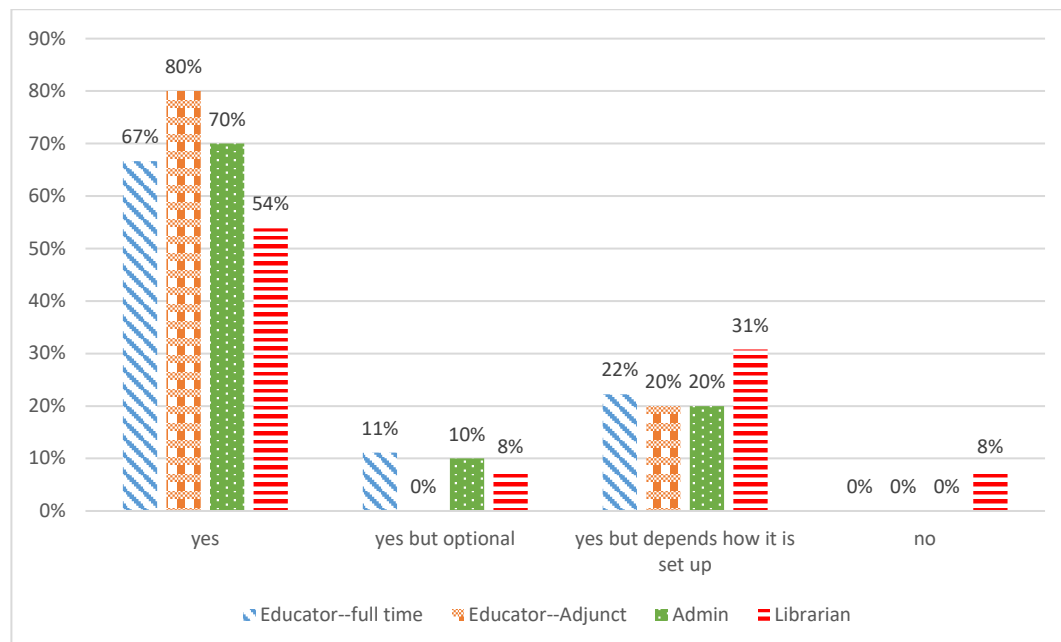


Figure 4. Can Practicums Help Prepare for Instructional Roles?

**Question 5: Do you believe that library schools do an adequate job of preparing library school students for instructional librarian roles?**

Practicing instructional librarians expressed negative attitudes about the quality of instructional preparation in library schools, with nearly 80% indicating that library schools do not do an adequate job in this regard. Other populations held similarly unfavourable views toward library school training, though they were also more likely to indicate “it depends.” Generally, “it depends” referred to a particular shortcoming of the library school, such as the recent shift of many programs toward information science rather than traditional librarianship. Respondents generally did not indicate hostility towards “information science,” but suggested a greater balance should be struck between the theory of information science and the practice more

emblematic of the everyday work of librarians (including library instruction). Several adjunct instructors evinced a positive outlook on the adequacy of library school preparation for instructional librarianship and pointed to the efforts of specific schools to improve preparation for instructional librarians. For example, one interviewee cited the University of Arizona which is in the process of developing an instructional librarianship concentration/certificate program.

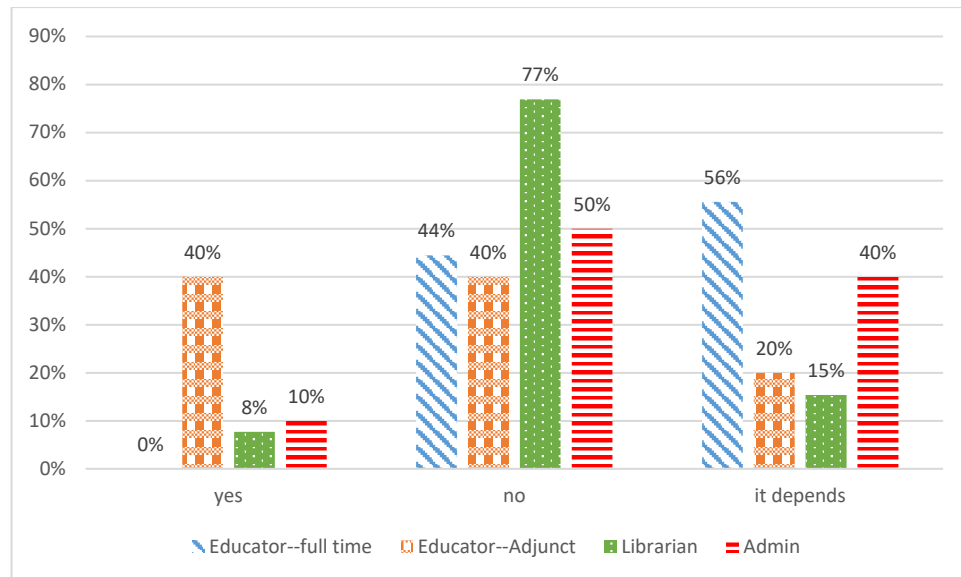


Figure 5. Do Library Schools Do An Adequate Job Preparing Students for Instructional Roles?

### Question 6: What do you believe are the job duties of instructional librarians?

The four most commonly named job duties of instructional librarians (greater than 10% of all responses) were: classroom instruction, collaboration (such as with administrators, other librarians, and subject faculty), planning for courses, and reference duties. There was some disagreement among respondents in terms of which job duties were cited most frequently. Administrators named classroom instruction with greater frequency than the other populations but named planning courses at a much lower rate. Full-time educators were on-par with instructional librarians in naming classroom instruction, course planning, and reference services as job duties, but were less likely to name service work, collaboration, and professional development as duties. One point of disagreement, noted by several full-time educators whose frame of reference is different from those of instructional librarians, was that a true picture of job duties was highly conditioned by the specific library in which one is employed. Educators tended to base their responses on a generalized sense of the profession, while practicing instructional librarians may have spoken more from their personal experience.



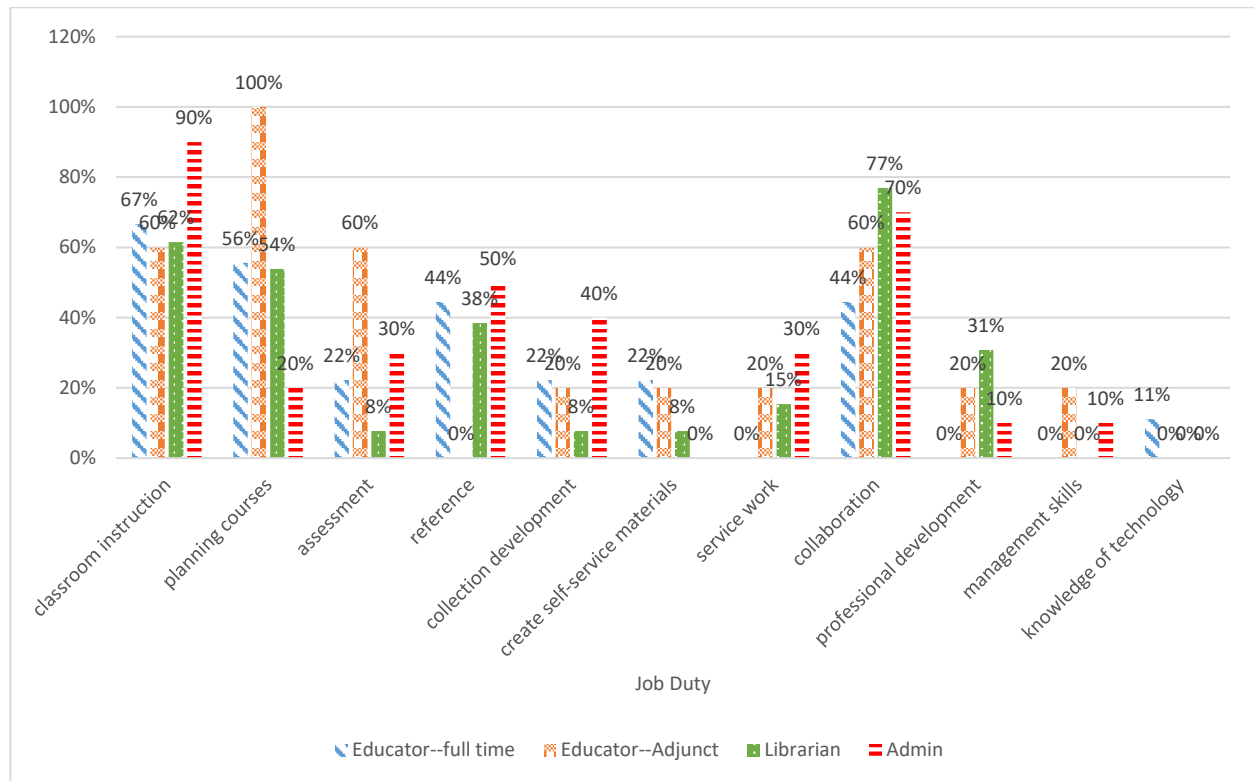


Figure 6. Job Duties of Instructional Librarians

### Question 7: How do instructional librarians assess the quality of their instruction?

Significant disagreement existed between respondents as surrounding the question of assessment. Full-time educators and administrators were likely to cite student evaluations as the most common method of assessment. Librarians likewise identified student evaluations as an integral part of assessment but pointed to several other types of assessment as equally important, such as self-assessment/reflection, faculty feedback, and observation of self and class. Administrators and adjunct instructors indicated faculty feedback as an important type of assessment alongside the practicing instructional librarians, while full-time educators emphasized observation together with instructional librarians, but neither group's responses aligned well overall with the librarian group. Adjunct instructors were the least likely to indicate student evaluations for assessment, indicating peer-review and student success rate at a greater frequency than the other three populations.

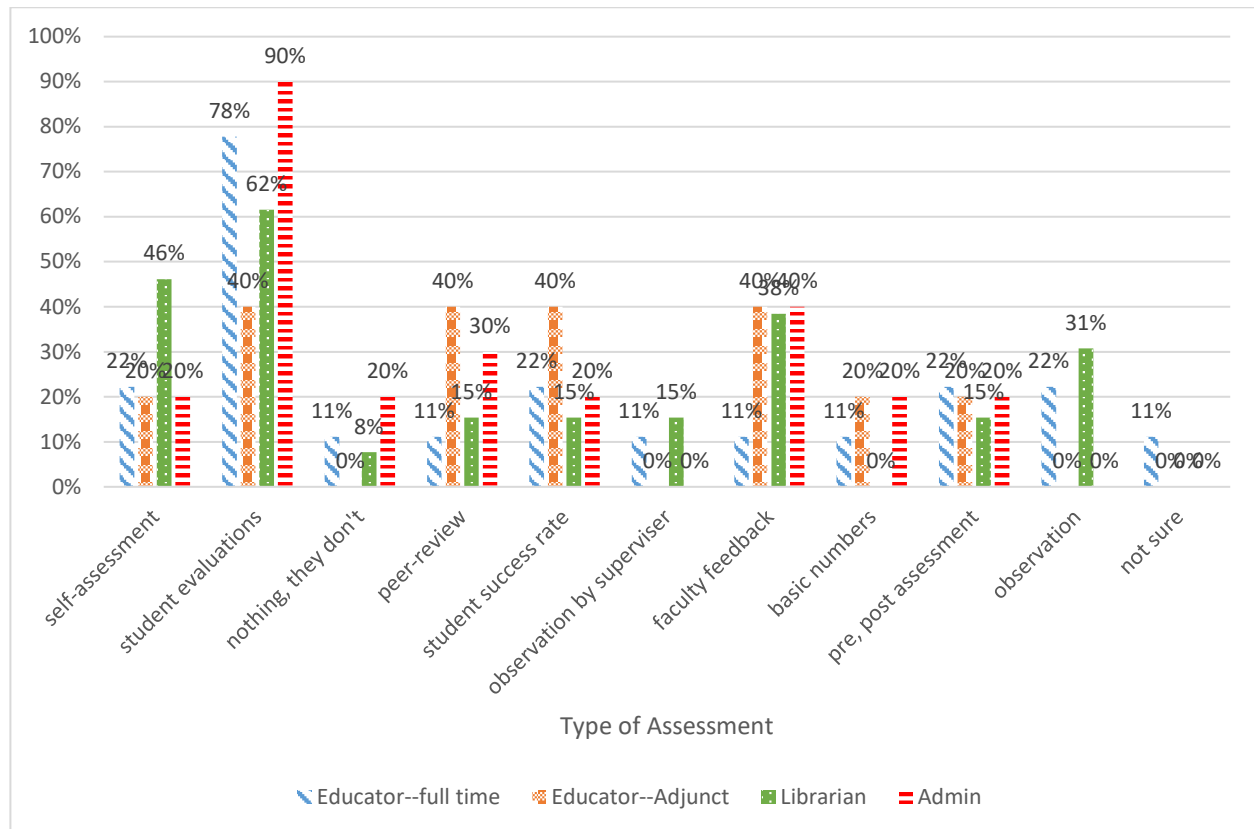


Figure 7. How Do Instructional Librarians Assess Their Instruction?

### Question 8: How should instructional librarians be assessed by administrators?

Administrators rated peer review as the most appropriate approach to assess instructional librarians by administrators, followed by faculty feedback and student assessment. Librarians differed from administrators in their preference for observations by supervisors, student assessment, and faculty feedback as more meaningful measures. Educators (both full-time and adjunct) and librarians both cited observation by supervisor as an appropriate form of assessment. When viewing the participants in general, most respondents indicated observations by supervisor as the best assessment approach, followed by (in order of importance) peer review, faculty feedback and student assessment.

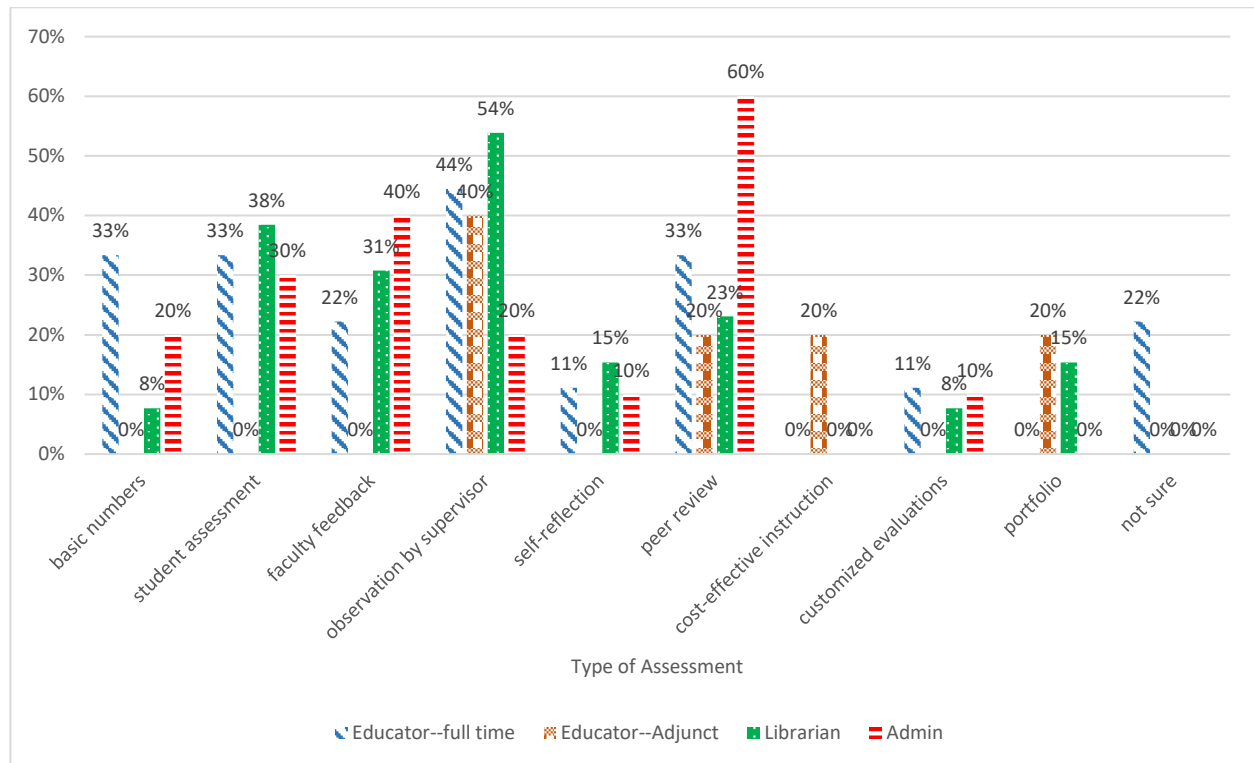


Figure 8. How Should Instructional Librarians Be Assessed by Administrators?

### Question 9: What are the greatest challenges of the instructional role?

There are significant disagreements in the response as to the greatest challenges of the instructional role. Half of the administrators held efficient time management to be the greatest challenge, while most full-time educators and librarians believed changing perceptions of faculty toward librarians and their role within the university as the most challenging. Educators cited marketing and meeting the needs of diverse population as among the greatest challenges. However, full-time educators were least likely to cite efficient time management among the most pressing challenges for instructional librarians. Overall, participants expressed that changing faculty perceptions toward instructional librarians' job duties was the greatest challenge, followed by marketing and efficient time management.

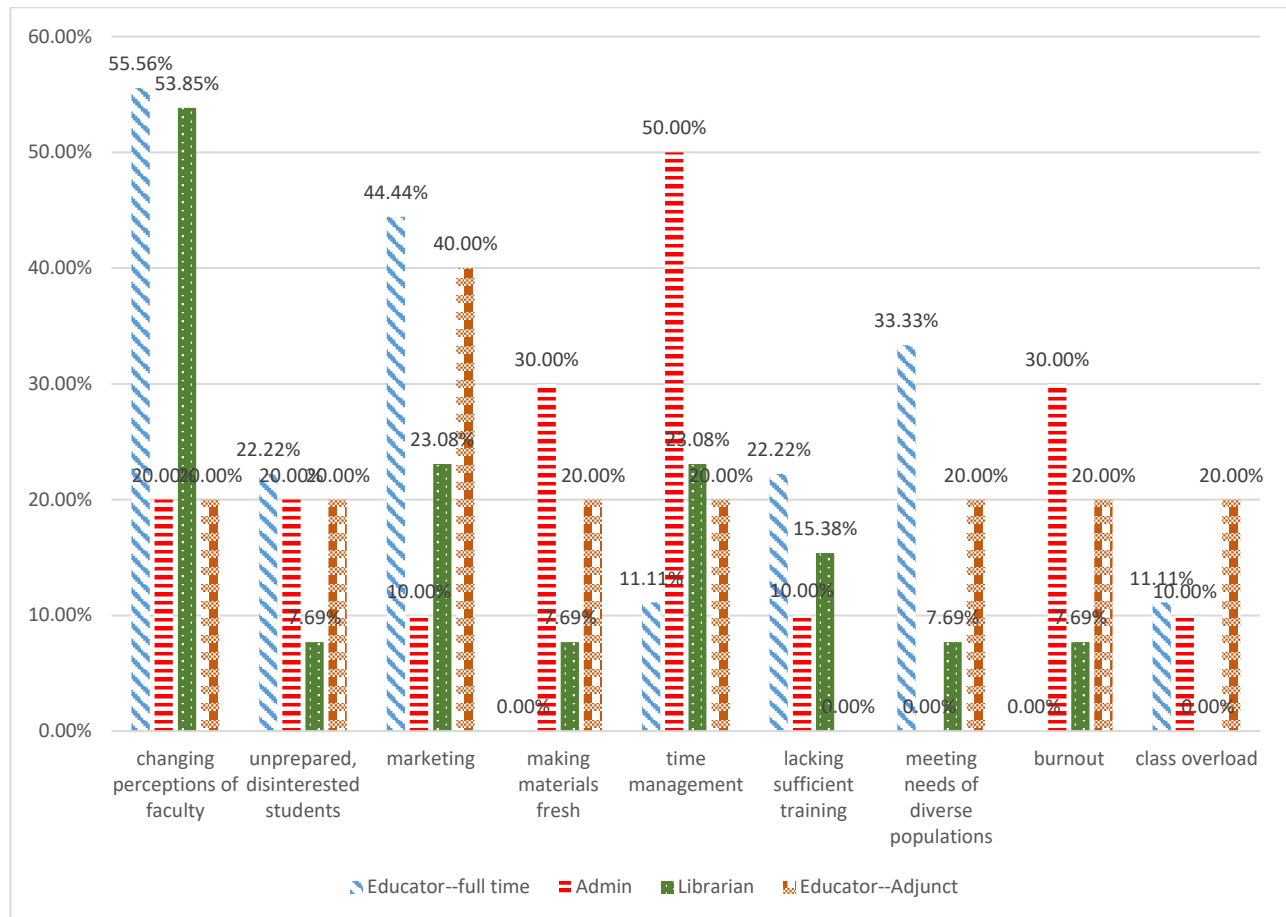


Figure 9. Top Concerns for the Instructional Role

## DISCUSSION

Results reveal that administrators, educators, and librarians have similar understandings of the roles of instructional librarians. Discrepancies arose regarding the most important skills/traits for instructional librarians, where these skills/traits were acquired, and the greatest perceived challenges of the instructional role. Library school educators and librarians agreed that practicums could support instructional librarian preparation if they are well structured, and that library schools only sometimes prepare students well for instructional roles. This finding aligns these groups with the opinions of students examined by Brundin (1985), where practicum experience was seen as highly valuable for preparing students for careers in library instruction. Overall, the data suggests general agreement about instructional librarian preparation, with greater disagreement on the minutiae of what an instructional librarian is and what the job entails. Nonetheless, divergences in opinion between these populations on major issues in instructional librarianship suggests the existence of a divide that library schools can help bridge going forward.

## CONCLUSION

Findings from this study indicate that library schools better prepare students for instructional roles compared to past decades. Expectations for preparation have also increased. While practicing instructional librarians, academic library administrators, and library school educators seem to agree that library schools could prepare students better, it is not clear what form preparation should take. Similarly, while the disconnect between instructional librarians, administrators, and educators on what constitutes effective library instruction appears to have decreased, it is not eliminated. Future work will administer the survey to expanded sample sizes in order to test the external validity of the findings.

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