Jefferson.

Sci-Tech News

Volume 52 | Issue 1 Article 4

1998

Preparation for Sci-Tech Librarianship: Results of a Survey

John Sandy

Mary Frances Lembo

James Manasco

PREPARATION FOR SCI-TECH LIBRARIANSHIP: RESULTS OF A SURVEY

By John H. Sandy, Mary Frances Lembo, and James E. Manasco, Student Relations Committee, Sci-Tech Division

How do library/information science students become aware of and develop an interest in sci-tech librarianship? The Student Relations Committee of the Sci-Tech Division of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) conducted a special survey of practitioners and current students in early 1997 to find the answer. The main purpose of the survey is to help the Student Relations Committee plan future activities.

The Student Relations Committee is charged with fostering communication between professional librarians and library/information science students. It also works to create an awareness among students about opportunities available to them in science and/or technology librarianship. Currently, the committee consists of three professional librarians and one library school student.

A survey instrument with ten (10) questions was sent out via e-mail in March of 1997 to two listservs: the SLA Sci-Tech Division listserv and the ALA, Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Sci-Tech Section listserv. Eighty-seven completed surveys were received: 85 by e-mail, one by FAX and one by U.S. Mail. Responses were received from 25 subscribers to the SLA Sci-Tech listserv and 61 of the subscribers to the ACRL Sci/Tech Section listserv.

Respondents to the survey were mainly practitioners. The survey apparently did not reach very many library/information science students. Either students were reluctant to reply, or very few subscribe to these listservs. A future survey may get a better level of response if sent to other listservs or by hardcopy through the mail. If indeed very few students subscribe to the Sci-Tech Division Listserv, a "campaign" to make them aware of this service may become a future goal for this Committee.

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a special survey of the Student Relations Committee, Science-Technology Division, Special Libraries Association.

Title: Preparation for Sci-Tech Librarianship -- A Survey of Practitioners and Current Students.

Purpose: To find out how, as students, sci-tech librarians gained awareness of and became interested in sci-tech librarianship. With this information, the SLA Student Relations Committee can better plan its activities.

Survey Questions

Are you a _____practitioner or a _____student?

1. Did you have the opportunity to work in a science or technology library prior to or during library school?
2. Do you have an undergraduate degree or extensive course work in a science or technology related field?
3. Did you take a course offered in sci-tech librarianship at your library school?
4. Do you feel your library school adequately prepared you for work in a sci-tech library?
5. Did you have a mentor who was a sci-tech librarian?
6. Did contact with professional organizations (like the Sci-Tech Division of SLA) influence your decision in becoming a sci-tech librarian?
7. Do you have any hobbies or special interests that led you to sci-tech librarianship?
8. Has your experience in sci-tech librarianship matched your expectations?
9. How did you become familiar with the SLA Sci-Tech Division?

Any additional comments would be welcome

RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 99% of respondents were practitioners, while only 1% were students
- 57% of respondents worked in a science or technology library prior to or while attending library school, 43% did not
- 67% of respondents had either an undergraduate degree or extensive course work in a field of science or technology, 33% had no such background
- 67% of respondents completed a course in

sci-tech librarianship in library school, 33% did not

- 62% of respondents felt that library school preparation was adequate for work in a sci-tech library, 33% did not, 6% were unsure
- 37% of respondents had a mentor who was a sci-tech librarian, 62% did not, 1% did not respond
- 9% of respondents had contact with a professional organization such as the Sci-Tech Division of SLA which influenced their decision to become a librarian, 91% did not
- 62% of respondents had hobbies or interests that led to sci-tech librarianship, 37% did not, 1% did not respond
- 91% of respondents agreed that their experience in sci-tech librarianship met expectations, 6% did not, 3% were unsure
- Respondents mainly learned about the Sci-Tech Division of SLA by joining SLA and seeing the options; through colleagues on the job; exposure to SLA while a student in library school; from reading STS-L and other listservs; through attendance at SLA conferences and Chapter meetings; by reading SLA membership and promotional materials; and from information from ALA

GENERALIZATIONS FROM COMMENTS MADE BY RESPONDENTS

The survey gave respondents an opportunity to comment on each item in the questionnaire and also to offer general comments. And comment they did; over nine (9) pages of comments were compiled during the data analysis phase of this research.

From these comments, it is possible to offer some important generalizations:

Valuable experience is gained while employed as student workers (some as library school interns) and as paraprofessionals before going on to library school.

A bachelors degree in the life sciences, earth sciences, and, to a lesser degree, the physical sciences, is commonly a springboard to a career in sci-tech librarianship.

Sci-tech courses in library schools are well liked and acknowledged as very valuable. It seems, however, that some schools do not offer this type of education.

Library school preparation is generally good, except maybe for too much theory. But what really counts is coupling library education with actual experience and subject background.

Encouragement and help to become a sci-tech librarian comes from all kinds of individuals, including supervisors, general librarians, and library school faculty. However, having a sci-tech librarian as a mentor is highly regarded. Professional organizations play a minor role in getting persons to become sci-tech librarians. More important, individuals often have a background in science and want to build on/use this background.

Having a solid interest in science or technology is almost an essential ingredient for becoming a sci-tech librarian. Sci-tech librarianship is for many a very rewarding career. It is challenging, exciting, and offers a great variety of things to do.

As a general observation, one person said: "A well-rounded education, high gpa, and an absolute commitment to service are the best qualifications for a science librarian," Another noted, "being active in SLA is very important to my job. Gives me peer relationships, professional growth, and leadership opportunities."

CONCLUSION

Preparation for a successful career in sci-tech librarianship involves many factors. Most individuals entering this field have considerable interest in science or technology. For many, the journey begins with non-professional work in a sci-tech library. Individuals often pursue an MLS degree upon receiving guidance and mentoring from practicing librarians and others. Learning more about sci-tech librarianship is a common goal while attending library school. The educational experience in library school is seen as being very helpful and important. Perhaps, unfortunately, professional organizations are not much of a factor in getting individuals into this field. However, after an individual becomes a sci-tech librarian, such organizations are seen as very important for professional development and nurturing professional relationships. Finally, expectations, as a student, about sci-tech librarianship match up well with actual work in a sci-tech library environment.

John H. Sandy is Head, Rodgers Library for Science and Engineering at The University of Alabama; Mary Frances Lembo is Science Reference Librarian at the University of New Orleans; and James E. Manasco is Natural Sciences Liaison at The Colorado College.