Specialists as Professionals in Research Libraries: An Overview of Trends and an Analysis of Job Announcements

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ABSTRACT

A TREND TOWARD THE CREATION of specialist professional positions, and particularly positions that attract professionals without a master's degree in librarianship, has resulted in new titles and new responsibilities for specialists in research institutions and libraries. These individuals are hired by the research library because they bring a specific set of skills or expertise to the job. An analysis of recent job announcements from research libraries makes apparent the variety of professional specialists being sought, the positions in which these professionals will serve, and the criteria set by the institutions for the job seekers whom they will hire. The implications of the use of non-M.L.S.-degreed professional specialists and managers, or M.L.S.-degreed professionals with additional professional degrees or certifications, are seen as a challenge for both the research library and for library education.

INTRODUCTION

Professional association and federal government figures indicate that libraries employ thousands of persons as "librarians" and thousands more as "other professionals" (Lynch, 1990, p. 42). Increasing attention has been paid to the use, and growing numbers, of professional positions in research libraries, particularly to the use of non-M.L.S.-degreed professionals to staff some positions. Many research libraries employ specialized individuals with advanced training and graduate degrees for a variety of tasks. These individuals

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are often classed as a group of professional employees within the institution who work together in furthering the mission of the organization (White, 1991, p. 74). Although seen primarily in the research and special library communities, these individuals can be found throughout all sectors of library practice (Greiner, 1990). New titles and responsibilities have also emerged as these specialists rise through the ranks of research institutions and libraries (Drake, 1991, pp. 137-38).

Studies of the professions and their role in the work force have seldom focused on the information professions, and much of the understanding of the professional labor force comes from the work of sociologists rather than that of librarians or library researchers (Abbott, 1988). In legal terms, the National Labor Relations Act (1988) does define *professional employee* quite precisely, and specifically notes the character of the work and the education required for such a position:

> The term professional employee means (a) any employee engaged in work (i) predominately intellectual and varied in character as opposed to routine mental, manual, or physical work...[and] (iv) requiring knowledge of an advanced type in a field of science or learning customarily acquired by a prolonged course of specialized intellectual instruction in an institution of higher learning.... (p. 12)

These individuals are typically hired by the research library—be it in academia or the special library environment—because they bring a specific set of skills or expertise to a position. While few library administrators will admit outright or go on record publicly to state that traditional M.L.S.-degreed professionals specifically *lack* these skills or this expertise, the practice appears increasingly widespread.

Analysis of Current Practices

An analysis of recent (i.e., the last six months of 1991) job listings for library and information professionals in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* the *College & Research Libraries News,* the *New York Times, Science,* and postings to library school placement offices and on several computer lists by research libraries reveals the variety of professional specialists being sought, the positions in which these professionals will serve, and the criteria set by the institutions for the individuals whom they will hire.

As these announcements clearly show, specialists fall into three categories: (1) subject-specialized positions; (2) technical positions; and (3) administrative positions. The desire of research libraries to hire subject-specialized individuals is clearly a well established practice. Interest in technically trained individuals arising from the recent advent of widespread library automation is a new development.

Seeking and hiring administrators with specialized management training and experience is the most current development.

Subject Specialists

The qualifications stated in many advertisements for subject-specialized positions often include phrases such as "ALA-accredited M.L.S. or equivalent experience, with an advanced degree in a subject area." This clearly implies that subject knowledge is more important to the institution than is graduate education in librarianship. For example, a major mid-Atlantic university[1] soliciting a reference specialist for its special collections department placed an ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* in late spring of 1991, asking for candidates with an "M.L.S. from an ALA-accredited library school *or* M.A. *or* Ph.D. [italics mine], preferably in American history or literature." Similarly, a well-known midwestern historical society, in its Fall 1991 *SLA SpeciaList* ad for a "librarian/archivist for position as Head of Reference Department" asked for a "graduate degree in library science, history, or related field." Even a well-known North American national library, advertising in *Science* in late spring of 1991, specified that its positions requiring "subject matter knowledge" could be filled by candidates with "a Bachelor's degree in the appropriate subject area, a Master's degree in library science or comparable library experience, *or* [again, italics mine] a Master's degree in the appropriate subject area."

At the same time, another well-known North American national library looking for a "research librarian," stated in the fall of 1991 in a generic recruitment letter directed to deans of accredited programs leading to the first professional degree in library science, that:

> In addition to possessing professional education in library science (or equivalent experience), candidates must have completed graduate study in a subject matter or language area appropriate to the position as follows: (1) all requirements for a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or equivalent); OR (2) 3 full academic years of graduate education.

Perhaps the most widespread and long-term insistence upon subject-specific credentials for employment in research libraries comes from law libraries and archives. Advertisements from these organizations typically are straightforward and very clear about the primacy of subject knowledge. In a spring 1991 ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* a midwestern university law library invited "applications for a new position of Reference/Computer Services Librarian" whose qualifications were an "accredited JD and either an M.L.S. or M.S. in computer/information science." At the same time, a large West Coast academic law library posted a description of the library and the open Reference Librarian position on the *law-lib-request*[2] computer conference:

> Ours is a very service-oriented, highly automated library, serving a distinguished faculty and a diverse clientele. Duties include direct faculty service, reference desk assignments, and bibliographic instruction, all shared with friendly colleagues. J.D. and M.L.S. preferred, although substantial academic law library experience may substitute for *one* [italics mine] of the degrees.

Similarly, it is clear that archival jobs in research libraries, historical societies, and similar scholarly institutions are available to professionals who may or may not have graduate level training in library science. In advertising in the summer of 1991 for two professional positions in a public policy library at a southern university, the qualifications needed were bluntly stated as a "Master's degree and ACA certification [ACA = Academy of Certified Archivists]." There was no mention of professional credentials in librarianship. In the early fall of 1991, a large health sciences university advertised an archival opening on the *AAHSLD* computer conference,[3] seeking a professional for a grant-funded position involving the management of information and records about AIDS services organizations. Their requirements included "a broad knowledge of the subject, including basic medical knowledge of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [and] a Master's Degree in archival administration, library science, or history with course work in archival administration and records management."

Examples can also readily be found illustrating other positions for information professionals in research libraries which do not specify graduate education in librarianship at all. These subject-specialized jobs are being advertised in traditional library media, however. For instance, a national museum library sought a specialist book conservator. Its midsummer 1991 ad in *College & Research Libraries News* asked for the following qualifications:

> knowledge of historical and current binding techniques, paper chemistry, production and quality of book-binding materials, and impact of environment on library materials...specialized experience in book conservation or graduate education or a combination of both required.

At the same time, a mid-Atlantic historical society sought, via an advertisement in a summer 1991 issue of the *SLA SpeciaList,* a specialist

> curator/historian to administer its research library, lead an active collecting program, participate in planning exhibitions using the research collections...successful candidates should have an MA in American history or American studies with special interest in local and social history...two years professional experience in an historical institution or research library...graduate courses in archival management or manuscripts processing preferred.

A New England university, with a specialized research library in physics, advertised for a librarian in the same issue of *SLA SpeciaList*

and asked only for a "knowledge of the field of librarianship, substantial knowledge of research methods and techniques, [and] familiarity with information science."

In a similar vein, the following notice was posted by a major Pacific Northwest university to the biomedical research community in an early spring issue of the *Health InfoCom Network News*[4]:

> Position Available: Research Literature Analyst
> Index scientific literature on nonhuman primates; produce topical bibliographies; perform custom subject searches. Expertise in [neuroscience subject field] is especially relevant. This position requires a bachelor's degree in a biomedical or zoological field, experience using computers, and 2 years professional experience in literature analysis. A graduate degree and experience reading scientific literature and doing subject indexing are preferred.

These sample advertisements for positions seem to indicate that the research library has recognized that the traditional graduate degree M.L.S. programs, even those full-service programs that offer specialized coursework in archives or preservation/conservation or biomedical and legal librarianship, do not include sufficient preparation for subject specialists and that someone with graduate education in library science will not or may not have the requisite skills to perform the specialist's job. The need to recruit talented professionals with a subject-specific background is greater than the need to have that person show evidence of formal credentials in librarianship.

Practicing professionals with the M.L.S. degree are also quick to acknowledge that an additional subject-specialized degree or certificate is important. In a recent follow-up study of M.L.S. graduates from the University of Pittsburgh, investigators found that the explicit need for a second degree was obvious both in the numbers of individuals who had obtained or were in the process of earning a second subject degree, or in the written comments about their career paths (Detlefsen & Olson, 1990, p. 303). As one of the special librarians put it:

> My library degree has enabled me to work for two very large, successful companies. I earn a great deal of money which makes me very happy. However, upward mobility is very limited without another degree such as [one in] business...I am ready for a career change. (Detlefsen et al., 1991, p. 39)

The fact that degreed individuals with subject specialties are available and willing to work in research libraries, as opposed to their perhaps more typical environments of academe and professional practice, also increases their attractiveness to the library. It is well known that there is more of a paucity of professorial jobs for the Ph.D. in some disciplinary fields. Inability to achieve tenure, even

with excellent performance, because of no-growth mandates in higher education, has forced greater numbers of doctorally trained specialists to seek alternative employment. Research libraries have been quick to take advantage of the availability of such scholars. As lawyers face a similar phenomenon, the attractiveness of hiring or requiring (for purposes of accreditation, for example) JD-degreed individuals for more and more law library openings is also becoming apparent.

There may seem to be some salary advantages to being a subject-specialized professional working in a research library environment, but aside from the specific cases of the lawyer-librarians who seem to be paid more highly than librarians (but less than lawyers), subject specialists are being offered salaries comparable to those of M.L.S. graduates. In other words, subject specialists are treated as professional employees on a par with those professionals whose specialization is in the professional field of library science.

Technology Specialists

A second major area in which research libraries seek specialists, or non-M.L.S.-degreed professionals, is for technology centered activities, largely because of the need for individuals who can handle the technical aspects of library automation, electronic resources, and management information systems responsibilities. These positions tend to be offered at two ends of the employment spectrum. On the one hand, libraries seek entry or lower-level hires who can handle day-to-day tasks of computer maintenance, programming, systems analysis, and the like. Or they seek individuals for department head or higher level positions who can deal hands-on with information technologies along with management responsibilities in implementation and strategic planning.

In the former group, a recent posting to the *PACS-L*[5] computer conference is illustrative. A large urban public library was advertising in the early spring of 1991 for a "microcomputer specialist" and asked that the candidates demonstrate "experience with library information technologies and mainframe computer operations [and] education/training in microcomputer architecture, applications and repair." No degrees, nor any minimum experience requirements, were specified, and the salary range of $30,000 to $37,000 was well above that of the average public librarian with an M.L.S. degree.

A specialized science library, heavily supported by government research contracts, posted a position notice to the *PACS-L* conference in the last months of 1990. It announced a "Job Opening for Library Automation Systems Analyst," which required two years of software specific technical experience and a "four-year degree in a technical field with significant library experience and/or ALA accredited MLS

degree (or equivalent) with significant computer experience." The stated salary range was $35,000 to $50,000, well above the salary range for librarians in the same organization.

A position of "Library Technologist" was advertised on the *MEDLIB-L*[6] computer conference early in 1992. The job description entailed working with library staff on "library-related applications of computing and networks." The job required a "bachelor's degree with 12 hours of computer-related courses or equivalent experience," with a "computing-related degree or graduate degree in library science preferred." With a salary starting at $30,000, this position clearly offered greater reward than that earned by other library professionals in the institution.

The ambivalence about which kind of training best suits an individual for a technology driven position is exemplified in the vacancy announcement posted to the *MEDLIB-L* computer conference by a large and highly automated academic health sciences library in the spring of 1991. The announcement for a "Technical Systems Coordinator" required "either an MLS from an ALA accredited school with 1-2 years experience with automation of library operations; or an advanced degree in Computer Science with 1-2 years experience with library systems."

In a completely idiosyncratic move at the end of the summer of 1991, a major government agency, in a Request for Proposal to operate regional information centers, listed two job descriptions for technical personnel. One was for a "Senior Management Information Specialist," a position which required a "Bachelor's degree with subsequent professional training in computer science or management/information systems." The other was for several "Information Search and Retrieval Specialists," who needed to present a "high school diploma with subsequent college-level education and professional training in computer operations involving management/information systems." These jobs both involved library-like activities and could have been performed by individuals with credentials in library science.

At the other end of the technology-related job spectrum are professional positions in research library settings where the expertise is both technological and managerial. Judging from the carefully crafted position announcements, these individuals seem equally difficult to recruit.

In 1991 postings to the PACS-L list, a national consortium sought a "Systems Coordinator" to be paid about $30,000 a year to "manage a rich and varied technological environment" and simply noted that "applications from candidates with backgrounds in librarianship, academic computing, or both will be particularly welcomed." A

$50,000 position for an "Assistant Director of Automated Systems" at a major midwestern university required an "ALA-accredited Master's Degree in Library Science or an advanced degree in Computer Science or some other relevant field." A West Coast university library, in describing the qualifications for a $55,000 opening for an Assistant University Librarian for Systems, coyly noted, "MLS from an ALA-accredited school *normally* [italics mine] required."

Management Specialists

These technological positions at a middle-management level herald the increasing flexibility in requirements, qualifications, and educational credentials that are also characteristic of the third group of library positions for which other specialists are sought—those of chief management officers of one kind or another. Whether described as a manager, director, chief, or university librarian, it is increasingly clear that these individuals need not always present the traditional credentials in library education and training.

A PACS-L posting that sought a "Project Director" for a large multiuniversity resource-sharing consortium/network in the mid-Atlantic region, required qualifications for the position that would provide "leadership and vision." It asked for a "college degree and five years of experience in programming and applications analysis" with desirable qualifications such as "graduate degree in information science or a related field." An advertisement in the *New York Times* by a well-known and very large national law firm with offices in five major cities asked for a "Library Manager...a professionally trained and experienced individual [who] will have an MLS from an ALA accredited program *or* [italics mine] a business degree."

In the summer of 1991, a large federal-level agency seeking a "Chief" for its Library Branch took out a large box advertisement in *Science* to detail its criteria for the $60,000-80,000 position. It asked only for "an ALA-accredited advanced library degree or equivalent professional experience." Even the Fall 1991 position description (circulated to deans of library education programs) for the executive director of a large professional association in librarianship asked only for "an ALA-accredited MLS (or equivalent) degree."

Two 1991 position descriptions for directors of major university research libraries were even more telling in their descriptions of the appropriate credentials for a senior academic manager. A $75,000 position in the Northeast (advertised in the *SLA SpeciaList*) asked only for a "relevant advanced degree" and the "ability to interact with faculty as an information scientist as well as an administrator." A position as university librarian was available at a major West Coast institution and asked that successful candidates need only present

"an appropriate higher degree (either an M.L.S. from an ALA-accredited library school *or* [italics mine] a Ph.D or equivalent experience."

As in the earlier cases of subject specialists and computer specialists, there were also in this managerial domain positions in which the specialist qualifications completely overwhelmed the need for any education or certification in librarianship. For example, a very large nonacademic research library looking for a "Manager of Major Gifts," took out an ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to ask for a "seasoned professional with creative ideas, a commitment to education and culture, and a proven track record of working with donors and volunteers on major gifts." No library education or experience was mentioned.

Similarly, another large West Coast university, in a boxed ad in *Science,* sought candidates for the director of its Academic Information Systems, a division of the university library. It specified that the qualified candidate must have a Ph.D. in information or computer science or equivalent and an additional subject degree in the biological sciences for the $66,000-80,000 position. And, at an extremely large federal agency with a "newly-created position of Director of Information Strategies to serve as 'Chief Information Officer,'" the full-page advertisement specified no credentials whatsoever in terms of either experience or education. The ad stated:

> candidates must have substantial knowledge of information technology trends/uses, including hardware/software/communication/multimedia publishing technologies; visionary ability to analyze the informational needs of a large, highly complex organization, and to develop/implement responsive informational systems....Highly desirable is the ability to negotiate successfully innovative synergistic relationships with information technology providers/users.

These positions emphasize fewer and fewer professional characteristics as they rise higher and higher in the organization. They also seem to point to a willingness on the part of library search committees and institutional chief executive officers to seek and hire candidates with specializations built upon experience rather than degrees, and with professional expertise based on education and credentials in nonlibrary fields and disciplines.

The implications of this trend toward the use of non-M.L.S.-degreed professional specialists and managers, or at least the preference shown for M.L.S.-degreed professionals with additional professional degrees or certifications, are troubling not only for those who aspire to such positions. New recruits to the field, newly admitted M.L.S. students who seek a career in research libraries, and those who would use the pursuit of additional academic work as a means to enhance their experience in order to change jobs, should be advised

of the trend and the apparent positive impact that the acquisition of an additional professional degree will have on employability.

Similarly, professionals in other fields such as business, computer science, law, and some specific subject disciplines such as the biological sciences and history, ought to be told that rewarding and successful careers are available in research and special libraries. Strategies need to be developed for informing the career planning offices in graduate programs and professional schools about such opportunties, probably at the level of research library director to university deans.

A strong case can also be made for the non-M.L.S.-degreed professional to take coursework in ALA-accredited graduate programs as an adjunct to their professional responsibilities, particularly if the LIS coursework is focused on the issues of the role, structure, and function of the research library; on information-seeking behaviors of scholarly and research communities; and/or on the specifics of research library practices. Such individuals need not necessarily take the full master's level program, but perhaps an "Executive M.L.S." (styled after the successful executive MBA programs offered by many schools of business administration) might be mounted by several of the larger and research-focused LIS programs as a service to these professionals and to the research libraries that have hired them. Another model for providing LIS training to non-M.L.S.-degreed professionals might be the business school programs specifically designed to take humanities and social sciences Ph.D.s and outfit them for employment in the nonacademic, corporate, or public sectors.

There are those who argue that employment of these non-M.L.S.-degreed or double degreed individuals is an affront to M.L.S. degree holders. These attitudes are best seen as overly protective and/or as defensive tactics. The power to be gained from the interdisciplinary perspective brought to the research library by those with another professional perspective far outweighs the potential loss of M.L.S. positions within research libraries.

NOTES

[1] For reasons of confidentiality, all libraries whose advertising is quoted in this article have been described generically. Copies of the full texts of the ads and postings are available, for research purposes only, from the author.

[2] For information about this computer conference, subscribed to largely by academic law librarians, send e-mail to <*jcjanes@ucdavis.ucdavis.edu*> or <JCJANES@UCDAVIS.BITNET>.

[3] For information about this computer conference, largely subscribed to by academic health science center library directors, send e-mail to <*peaywj@cc.utah.edu*> or <PEAYWJ@UTAHCCA.BITNET>.

[4] For information about this electronic newsletter, largely subscribed to by health sciences professionals, send e-mail to <*ddodell@stjhmc.fidonet.org*> or <ATW1H@ ASUACAD.BITNET>.

[5] For information about this computer conference, mostly used by academic, public, and special librarians interested in computer applications in libraries, send e-mail to <LIBS@UHUPVM1.BITNET>.

[6] For information about this computer conference, largely for medical librarians from various institutions, send e-mail to <HSLSTART@UBVM.BITNET> or <*hslstart@ ubvm.cc.buffalo.edu*>.

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