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## Academic Librarianship Without the Degree: Examining the Characteristics and Motivations of Academic Library Professionals

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### ABSTRACT

Studies exploring librarians' backgrounds and career motivations frequently focus on all types of librarians or on students seeking degrees in librarianship. Investigating particular subsets of librarians is a field ripe for study. Here, we employed a survey of 193 academic library professionals, who are defined as those employed in professional positions in academic libraries but not possessing a graduate degree in librarianship. We found prior work in an academic library is a substantial motivating factor for entry into the field, as is also the case for traditional academic librarians who choose to attain a graduate degree in library science prior to obtaining a position in the library. The data also suggests that there are two main streams of entry for academic library professionals: those who are hired into functional positions that do not require a graduate degree in librarianship and those who hold paraprofessional titles that have taken on professional-level work. Finally, we found a majority of academic library professionals have no intention of, and do not see the value in, pursuing a graduate degree in librarianship.

### Introduction

Academic libraries and the roles of library staff continuously transform to meet changing needs. As the requirements of users and the tools to meet them have progressed, the work performed in academic libraries has also evolved, diversified and specialized. As this has occurred, an increase in the number of academic library professionals not holding a master's degree in library and information science has been identified.

This article is the second of two pieces examining the motivations of those who engage in professional-level work in academic libraries. The first article, "Choosing Academic Librarianship: An Examination of Characteristics and Selection Criteria," published in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* in November 2017, examined the motivational factors of those entering the profession through traditional means, i.e. the attainment of a graduate degree in library science. This piece examines the motivations of those who perform professional-level work in academic libraries but do not possess the traditionally required graduate degree in librarianship.

Academic library professionals are defined here as those who perform job duties that are either equivalent to duties performed by an academic librarian or who perform professional duties in support of an academic library from within the library organization, such as information technology or systems support.

This article investigates why professionals outside the field of library science are coming to work in academic libraries and how they got there. The survey targets job holders to discover what they are

doing in academic libraries, how they were employed, why they chose to work in a professional position without obtaining the MLS or equivalent, and what their future intentions are regarding the degree. The survey also intends to ascertain whether trends regarding age and functional areas of work will match prior findings that these new professionals are young and have non-traditional roles.

### Literature review

Little literature exists directly examining the motivational factors and intentions of professionals who enter the field of academic librarianship without first having obtained a graduate degree in librarianship. The question put forth in an editorial by Wayne Bivens-Tatum (2013)—is it realistic to assume that a single skill set exists that can address all the variety of library jobs—is becoming moot in today's academic library environment. The steady and continued increase in the hiring of non-ALA-accredited professionals into libraries to meet a diverse set of needs has become an effective answer.

The library field has been aware for some time that the percentage of people holding professional positions in libraries, and not possessing the graduate degree in library science historically required for these positions, has been growing over time. There has been speculation as to the reasons for this. Simpson, in her 2014 research article examining the potential impact of hiring professionals from outside librarianship into libraries, states that "survey data indicate a significant level of acceptance among academic and public library directors [for hiring non-MLS holding candidates]. Primary reasons for not requiring the

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degree include the need to expand applicant pools and the nature of the work for academic libraries.”

Munde (2000) noted that academic library positions were being recreated to address new functions and services as a means to reinvent library work. Wilder, in a 2002 examination of demographic hiring trends in ARL member libraries and the type of positions filled, found that hiring priorities had changed substantially between 1985 and 2000. The most dramatic change was the number of functional specialists hired. In his survey, functional specialists were described as media specialists or experts in management fields such as personnel, fiscal matters, systems, preservation, etc. Specialists were not necessarily professional librarians, possessing an MLS. The Specialist category would not be used for someone with significant supervisory responsibilities; they would alternatively be listed as a department head or assistant director (Wilder, 2002). In 2000, 48% of those described as functional specialists did not have a degree in library science (Wilder, 2002).

In his 2007 ARL report, Wilder noted that “(t)he need for new kinds of expertise have driven ARL libraries to hire a substantial and growing number of individuals with no library education. In 2005, 20% of new hires in US ARL university libraries had no library education, compared to just 7% in 1986” (Wilder, 2007b). Wilder goes on to indicate that high levels of retirements through 2015 will create a significant youth movement in research libraries (Wilder, 2007b). In his *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece the same year, he proceeds to say that “The generation gap in research libraries begins with the large proportion of young people who work at jobs that either did not exist for their older colleagues, or weren't associated years ago with librarianship....39 percent of library professionals under 35 work in such nontraditional jobs, compared with only 21 percent of those 35 and older. Within the cohort of under-35, nontraditional employees, 58 percent work in information-technology positions” (Wilder, 2007a). Hardesty, in his 2002 article, references another projection made by Wilder - that between 2005 and 2020, more than half of ARL librarians will retire, creating an increased shortage of librarians. In light of this shortage of degreed librarians, Hardesty (2002) indicates that we can anticipate questions about the continued need for an ALA-accredited master's degree.

A well-known and often discussed hallmark of the integration of non-MLS degree holders into the academic librarian profession is the Council of Library and Information Resources' (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellowship for Humanists in Libraries program, which began in 2003. Deanna Marcum, architect of the fellowship, describes its evolution as one of connecting libraries and librarianship to scholarship, and of bringing in a new set of skills into research libraries (Rentfrow, 2006). In Marcum's view, the entrance of Ph.D.'s into academic libraries was an enhancement and an opportunity to “re-integrate libraries into scholarship and into the life of campuses” (Rentfrow, 2006). Oder (2003), in anticipation of the upcoming CLIR fellowship, agreed, “(t)here has always been a place for doctorate-holding academics to work in university libraries, with or without library degrees, but new demands on those libraries, as well as a shortage in applicants for more specialized positions, have spurred a movement to recruit such academics—many of whom see the traditional path to tenure as rocky.” Oder (2003) also refers to James Neal, university librarian at Columbia University, as declaring that it is appropriate to pursue non-degreed candidates with specialized skills when there are no viable candidates from regular library professional pools.

Daphnee Rentfrow (2006), a member of the first cohort of CLIR Fellowship recipients, describes the experience of her participation in the CLIR fellowship as an endeavor to “change the fate of academic libraries, urging change and innovation as a natural evolution of the profession's ideals.” In her article, she refers to a 2005 email communication from Paula Kaufman, University Librarian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who indicates

“we need to think creatively about how to encourage people who

wouldn't have thought about academic librarianship as a career to do so. For most of those folks, the traditional masters degree program will be the right path. But there is a group of highly educated and motivated people who want and need the opportunity to explore academic librarianship through hands-on experience under the watchful eyes of experienced librarians. Some of these people will also decide that our traditional educational model is appropriate for them. However, as a profession, I think we should be open to looking beyond credentialed degrees to other sets of skills and experiences for the people who will make our libraries work well in the coming decades” (Rentfrow, 2006).

Rentfrow (2006) goes on to elaborate that the library directors interviewed for her article “believe that the key to the future success of libraries is the ability and willingness to seek out and hire those individuals whose qualifications meet the job needs, regardless of the MLS.”

Neal, in his well-known 2006 *Library Journal* article, “Raised by Wolves,” states that academic libraries are creating a broad spectrum of new professional-level responsibilities in the areas of systems, human resources, fundraising, publishing, instructional technology, facilities management, and others that require diverse educational backgrounds. These professionals have been “raised” in different backgrounds and bring to the academic library a “feral” set of values, outlooks, styles, and expectations (Neal, 2006).

In 2007, the ALA executive Board approved establishing an ad hoc Task Force on Library Education, charged with creating “actionable recommendations to ensure that library and information science education programs produce librarians who understand the core values of our profession and possess the Core Competences of the profession needed to work in today's libraries” (American Library Association, 2009). Bishop, Cadle, and Grubescic (2015) explain that in January 2009, a set of Core Competences were approved and adopted by the ALA council, but have been subject to criticism for providing a list of attitudinal and belief directives instead of concrete competencies. They advocate the need for close examination of librarian jobs and performing multiple job analyses to validate what core competencies are needed in the profession (Bishop et al., 2015). They advocate performing this kind of analysis to inform the development of LIS curricula and fortify the future of library education programs; this allows us to understand not only what skills are needed in the profession but also whether all competencies need to be or can be possessed by those with a library and information science degree (Bishop et al., 2015).

In a 2009 article examining digital librarian positions in academic libraries, Choi and Rasmussen discovered a need to integrate specialists into libraries who were not educated as librarians, in order for the library to fulfill its mission and librarians to be effective in their work. Mullins (2012) references this work in his investigation of the opinions of nine heads of ARL member institutions on the adequacy of MLS graduate programs in preparing graduates for changing and emerging roles in research libraries. Mullins (2012) found that there was a general consensus among the group interviewed that the qualifications and preparation of the graduates of LIS programs were uneven and that there was an expectation of the need to mentor through programs within the library or through professional development opportunities once hired.

In 2012, Marcum, the creator of the CLIR fellowship, revisited her thoughts on the need for Ph.D.'s in libraries. She notes that her opinion has evolved, saying

“I once believed that librarians must understand research and scholarly processes at a deep level to meet the collection and service needs of research institutions. I felt that earning a PhD conferred that kind of understanding.... Now, technology has evolved to the point that scholars increasingly use new resources such as Google Scholar, with its broad ability to search scholarly literature. The role of the librarian consequently has become more ‘local.’... The most

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