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A Mixed-Method Study of Undergraduate and First Year Librarian Positions in Academic Libraries in the United States

Lily Todorinova

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Mabel Smith Douglass Library, 8 Chapel Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8527, USA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to better understand the prevalence, scope, and unique challenges of undergraduate and first year librarians over the last decade, through the use of quantitative and qualitative data from job listings, online surveys, and phone interviews. The findings indicate that there is very little consensus about what the undergraduate librarian does, how the work is structured on a daily basis, and how its goals are negotiated and assessed. Further, undergraduate librarians face a number of issues, including navigating vaguely defined responsibilities, establishing their professional credibility, and communicating their role within the library and to the university. Survey participants reported experiencing tension between the traditional (reference, instruction, collection development) and undergraduate-specific aspects of their duties, indicating that it is difficult for them to prioritize engagement and outreach. While the literature on blended librarianship anticipates some of these issues, undergraduate librarians are unique because they provide an intersection between broader higher education priorities and the academic library. The author stipulates that the lack of definition, strain, and the perception of undergraduate librarianship as an entry-level position is incongruent with the importance colleges and universities place on undergraduate student success.

“How can one person impact all of the undergraduate experience? This is not just a problem for libraries. Higher education needs to have more conversations about what it means to be an undergraduate.”

—Survey Respondent

Introduction

Notable among current trends in academic librarianship is the emergence of positions with a focus on a specific demographic, as opposed to disciplines and departments. This is concurrent with the fact that traditional subject liaison roles are increasingly being supplemented by functional ones, such as “Digital Initiatives Librarian,” “Data Assets Manager,” or “Community Outreach Librarian,” among others. These new roles fit into what [Shank and Bell \(2001\)](#) describe as “blended librarianship.” The term highlights the complexity of these new team-oriented, technology-focused roles, in which, as the saying goes, “old meets new.” Blended library positions are both based on cutting-edge educational research and grounded in traditional public or technical services librarianship ([Maatta, 2014](#)).

Over the last few years, many institutions have been creating new

positions or reshaping existing vacancy lines in order to focus on one population in particular—undergraduate students. These efforts mirror the fact that undergraduates are also at the heart of many university-wide retention and student success initiatives. The Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) *Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students*, adopted in 2005 and revised in 2013, outlines a framework of services specific to undergraduate student needs. The guidelines also call for the need for the “undergraduate voice” to be adequately communicated to library administration ([Association of College and Research Libraries, 2014](#), p. 100). However, for the librarians involved with serving undergraduates, traditional duties are retained alongside their new roles, which may create pressure on these professionals to find a way to blend essential services such as reference, instruction, and collection development, with less-defined programs and partnerships that are aimed at enhancing the undergraduate experience ([Nielsen, 2013](#)). Further complicating this issue is the fact that traditional public services duties are more easily assessed and communicated to library and university administration, whereas engagement, information literacy, and outreach remain difficult to quantify through conventional means.

The aim of this study is to determine the prevalence, scope, and unique challenges of undergraduate librarian (UL) and first year

E-mail address: lily.todorinova@rutgers.edu.

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librarian (FYL) positions in academic libraries in the United States, over the last decade. The data collected provides general information regarding the hiring practices for these positions, as well as a glimpse of the characteristics of the individuals that are attracted to them, the diversity of their skillsets, and the challenges they face.

Literature review

The literature that looks at the increase of a particular type of academic library position over time generally attributes this increase to technology, as being the main driving force for change. In the case of UL and FYL positions, however, it may be suggested that additional factors are also at play, such as the effects of wider higher education initiatives, which are being mirrored by the library. The following selection of literature highlights the influence of higher education trends on librarianship's increased focus on undergraduates; the problems with defining the scope and nature of UL and FYL positions; and challenges that blended library positions face between emerging needs and established responsibilities and priorities.

Higher education, the undergraduate experience, and libraries

According to aggregate statistics available from the U.S Department of Education's National Center for Education, in fall 2013, 17.5 million undergraduate students and 2.9 million post baccalaureate (graduate) students attended degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (p. 194) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The number of bachelor's degrees awarded has increased by 36% or 491,000 degrees from 2002 to 03 to 2012–13 (p. 202). The educational literature also describes a trend of greater focus on undergraduate students by educators and administrators. A basic search through the educational database *ERIC* for the terms “millennial” and “generation y” reveals over 600 articles in the last twenty years (since 1997). From July 15 to October 13, 2015, Hart Research Associates conducted an online survey among 325 Chief Academic Officers or designated representatives at the Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) member institutions to explore how higher education institutions today are defining common learning outcomes and to document priorities and trends related to undergraduate learning and teaching (Hart Research Associates, 2016). They found that general education redesign is a growing priority, and administrators now are more likely than in 2008 to report an emphasis on the integration of knowledge, skills, and applications in the program (p. 2). In fact, more than half (55%) of AAC&U member institutions indicate that general education has become more of a priority over the past five years (p. 10). Undergraduate research and first year seminars are among the top 10 high impact practices designated by AAC&U. In 2015, 96% of institutions offered undergraduate research and 91% offered first year seminars (p. 5).

VanderPol, Brown, and Iannuzzi (2008) write that librarians are uniquely positioned to contribute to educational reform, especially in terms of restructuring their services to better serve undergraduates. Similarly, Knapp, Rowland, and Charles (2014) focus on the need for librarians to embed in undergraduate research experiences, which are credited with enhancing academic success and retention. They argue that by tapping into these initiatives, the library can contribute to the mission of the university broadly and strengthen its own reputation at the core of the research experience on campus. Hensley, Shreeves, and Davis-Kahl (2015) also show that undergraduate research administrators and coordinators recognize the value the library brings to their operations and that the possibilities for coordinating with these units are vast. Similarly, Menchaca (2014) stresses the fact that “undergraduate success is library success” and writes that:

In my conception of the future, academic libraries' strongest measure of value will be how much they support the intellectual

development of undergraduates. While they have retained their traditional roles serving researchers and faculty, libraries' funding will be directly linked to young people's demonstrable improvement in analyzing information and in synthesizing that information into ideas, in writing. (p. 354).

The question remains, however, who within the libraries is offering these services to undergraduates and how their work is structured. It is also unclear whether it is typical for institutions have a dedicated UL or FYL position. Hensley, Shreeves, & Davis-Kahl (2014) survey over 700 libraries to find out the range of library services for undergraduate research programs, finding that in more than half of the cases (59.9%) no single librarian had been assigned to provide support to campus undergraduate research programs. Respondents in that study noted that, “while one librarian may have a responsibility to liaison directly with the Undergraduate Research Office or to manage a research showcase, in general these responsibilities are spread among subject liaisons and instructional librarians” (p. 431).

Evolution of Library Liaison Positions

Influencing the ascension of UL and FYL positions is the fact that traditional library public services roles are going through a transformation, which results in repurposing vacancy lines for blended librarianship positions. Gwyer (2015) analyzes the literature to extract trends likely to affect academic librarianship and applies these trends to the skillsets needed by future professionals. The author shows that there are a number of external and internal factors that affect these skillsets, including wider changes in higher education, emerging technologies, changing nature of scholarly communication, user behavior, physical spaces, and need for more collaborative ways of doing library work. Maatta (2014) examines the trends that are at work in shaping liaison roles, finding that librarians are rarely specializing anymore, but rather, have had to rearrange their expertise and diversify their skillsets based on the needs of the organization. According to Maatta (2014), professionals are no longer “simply” reference librarians, for instance, but may also cover multiple service areas and academic departments. This does not mean that traditional responsibilities are disappearing, however: “In an era of redefining and evolving job titles and responsibilities, there is a noticeable change in the types of positions being identified by new graduates. While on the surface it appears that many traditional jobs are disappearing, in reality many roles are being subsumed into other positions” (Maatta, n.p.). Further, Maatta (2014) finds an increased focus on information literacy instruction, suggesting that digital literacy and education have become a component of the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession in a variety of contexts.

It is common to view changes in hiring trends in the academic libraries as a response to specific and urgent technological pressures. Lynch and Smith (2001), for example, consider how technology changes the nature of library work and, in turn, how these changes affect organizational structures. The authors look at over 25 years of job posting data, in order to understand the nature and content of emerging library positions. Lynch and Smith (2001) also discuss the broader issue that, while job positions may be new and innovative, the organizational design may continue along traditional routes. Job titles often reveal changes in the content of the work, but are not necessarily mirrored by an evolution of administrative processes and structures. The authors also note changes in expectations for these new positions: “Technical skills continued to be important, but jobs now specifically required the ability to communicate well with people inside and outside the library. Requirements for ‘flexibility,’ ‘creativity,’ and ‘leadership’ also suggest that jobs were changing and that libraries were paying closer attention to interactions between librarians and library users” (p. 418).

Another interesting insight from Lynch and Smith's (2001) research is that job content is created more organically than might be expected. This is somewhat at odds with the rational design of academic libraries

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