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The Nature of Academic Librarianship

Librarians are an anomaly within the academic community. Neither pure research faculty nor professional staff, they form a hybrid model that incorporates aspects of both roles. An academic librarian ideally holds two master's degrees, one in a content area (for example, History, Education, or Biology) and another in library science. Consequently, the individual is certainly adept in both library science and another field, but he or she does not have the research expertise of someone with a doctorate and cannot be expected to perform doctoral level research.

Academic librarians must perform a variety of tasks in order to achieve tenure and promotion, including work in reference, collection development, acquisitions, and technical services. Foremost is their job performance: providing proper service at the reference desk, interacting with faculty to ascertain materials that need to be ordered to supplement classes and improve the learning environment, proper cataloging of materials, and, finally, providing bibliographic instruction, as needed, to ensure that faculty and students have an adequate understanding of how to use the library, especially in terms of conducting research in specific content areas (for librarians with a second content related master's degree). Academic librarians must perform a

research role as well, which includes writing scholarly works that detail innovations within the field, insights into proper collection development, and best practices within the field of library science. Included within the realm of scholarly activities for academic librarians are poster session presentations, roundtable discussions, and other professional conference-related activities. Rounding out the demands of an academic librarian is the service component of the tenure and promotion model. Service includes activities relating to the university, activities within professional organizations at the national and state level, and service within the surrounding community that relates to library science.

For the dean or director hiring new librarians, the conundrum is selecting a candidate who is capable of performing these various tasks collectively. When library school students graduate, their primary goal frequently is to find a job; they may have a preference for a position as a public librarian, academic librarian, or school media specialist, but most important is finding gainful employment in order to put food on the table. The person responsible for hiring academic librarians must attempt to discern, based on a résumé and a relatively brief personal interview whether a candidate is capable of performing the basic tasks of being a librarian, interacting with faculty, guiding

students, and performing their duties as a member of the academy. To make the process more difficult, it is remarkably common for nascent librarians to be good at one or two of these attributes. Far less common is to find an individual who is prepared to take on all of the aforementioned tasks. In the following literature review, best practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining academic librarians will be thoroughly examined.

Development of the Modern Librarian

The modern librarian's role was created to a large extent in 1951, when the American Library Association (ALA) adopted new standards for accrediting library schools. The master's degree in library science became the professional credential, as opposed to a bachelor's degree. Swigger (2010) wrote a remarkable history of library science since the adoption of this new standard, titled *The MLS Project.* A combination of low salaries, limited training, and the unique nature of librarianship led to the development of the master's of library science (MLS), later changed to master's in library and information science (MLIS) requirement (Swigger, p. 12). The need was further caused by the unique nature of librarians' work, which had routine mechanical components to it, but also required advanced knowledge when tackling the challenges faced at the reference desk. In particular, developing the MLS degree was intended to make it clear that "librarianship comprised mastery of intellectual concepts which professionals applied to intellectual problems, and to dispel notions that librarianship was merely a set of operational routines that were mostly clerical" (Swigger, p. 15). While the MLS over a period of 60 years has led to increases in pay and prestige, librarians continue to lag behind

their professional counterparts in terms of both public perception and salary (Swigger). Swigger further asserted that since 1969, library science schools have typically enrolled middle-aged women seeking a second career. He expressed his belief that a revised approach is needed for library education.

Librarians and Faculty Status

With the background of the history of the educational standard for library science in mind, it is now possible to delve into the issue of desired qualities for academic librarians, which is more of a grey area. While an MLS is generally considered an essential qualification, depending on the type of position, a second master's degree in a content field may also be highly desirable. The concept of faculty status for academic librarians developed as a natural outgrowth of the development of the MLS. Sherby pointed out that persons chosen to fill the role of an academic librarian be outgoing and not isolate themselves; "they must become active and visible members of the community in which they work if they are to continue to demand faculty status" (Sherby, 1978, p. 379). While faculty status is important in terms of creating parity among salaries with the rest of the professoriate at an institution, it also allows academic librarians to be eligible for tenure and to play a greater role within the institution. With such benefits also come the responsibilities of being a faculty member, including scholarly research and writing and being active in local, state, and national professional organizations. Only when librarians engage in these activities will the teaching faculty view academic librarians as true faculty members (Sherby, p. 380).

The automation of libraries did a great deal to assist academic librarians in becoming

more highly integrated into the university faculty. Modern technology freed librarians of many of the mundane rigors of the job and enabled them to focus on pursuits of a more instructional and scholarly nature. A further effect of automation was the culling of library staff. A 1997 study indicated that 80% of academic libraries slowed their pace of hiring following becoming automated (Kenerson, pp. 62-67). This statistic can be viewed as a positive reinforcement of the concept that academic librarians are now performing much more than clerical tasks and also that librarians no longer have the daily drudgery of routine tasks to fall back on as an excuse to not engage in their roles as full-fledged faculty members.

The academic librarian's role as a faculty member is also stressed at the community college level as indicated in a report to the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. The report indicated that the MLIS is required in order to hire librarians and that librarians are essential to the mission of the university because of their instruction and knowledge in the areas of research and technology (The Counseling and Library Faculty Issues Committee, p.6, 1995).

Current Realities in Academic Librarianship

Although the MLS degree (later changed to MLIS) has been stressed since 1951 as being a crucial element of any librarian's résumé, a study by the Association of Research Libraries discovered that of 111 academic libraries surveyed in 1999, only 66% of them required the degree for employment as a librarian. The study further found that only 53% of librarians at these institutions had faculty status (Blixrud, 2000, p. 7). This would seem to indicate a continued lack of unanimity concerning the ALA's perceived

significance of the MLS/MLIS degree and also calls into question whether librarians are perceived as genuine faculty members by the professoriate and university administration. However, in terms of the desirability of the MLIS, it is important to remember that the survey results only indicate that the universities would consider an individual without that degree, not that they actually were seeking someone without that credential, or with different credentials.

In a regional study on the educational background of academic librarians in the southeast, Palmer found that 92% of 111 universities studied had librarians with an MLIS degree. It further found that 34% of those same individuals had a second master's degree. Library deans and directors were more likely to have a second master's or a doctorate (Palmer, 1985, p. 70). Over 90% of the universities in place offered some form of encouragement for librarians with only an MLIS to return to the classroom in order to receive a second master's in a content area. Administrators also indicated they preferred to hire academic librarians with a second master's degree. Although the additional degree was preferred by administrators hiring new academic librarians, very few of the institutions required the additional degree in order to receive tenure and promotion (Palmer, pp. 83-88).

Hiring Practices for Academic Librarians

Upon recognition of what qualities are desired in an academic librarian, one can then endeavor to discover how to find someone with those qualities. Birdsall (2010) asserted that a national search by a committee is essential and that even if an internal candidate is selected, that individual will receive increased respect from colleagues for having to go through a

legitimate search (p. 276). Members of the search committee should be able to work together cooperatively, be representative of the library in terms of departments and classifications (faculty and staff), and be individuals who will operate in a manner of fairness. The committee should include a member of the teaching faculty.

Salary is a crucial point for any individual searching for a job. It must be remembered that a low advertised salary will shrink the applicant pool. Birdsall also suggested avoiding the statement "salary commensurate with experience," because a minimum salary range always exists, and failure to advertise a salary could reduce the applicant pool (pp. 277-278). Advertisements should be placed not only in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* but also in sources used by library professionals. Once applications are received, a weighted instrument should be used to screen applicants. The form should include a category for subjective impressions, such as the quality of the application letter and the impressiveness (or not) of references. From this point, the field of applicants may be reduced to those who are to be brought to the campus for an in-person interview. In this interview, it is important to remember to focus questions in such a way as to evaluate candidates' potential for adapting to their new environment, and not focus questions exclusively on their current job, since the goal of the interview is to learn how the individual being interviewed will fit in a new environment, rather than the old one (Birdsall, pp. 278-282). Birdsall laid out an exemplary step-by-step model that, if followed, will enable academic libraries to recruit excellent new faculty members.

Retention of Academic Librarians

Once a position has been filled, and assuming the person is a good fit for the organization, the issue of employee retention arises. Turnover can be damaging to both the productivity and morale of an organization. Employees begin to make decisions about whether they want to remain in a position as early as the orientation period of their tenure (Chapman, 2009, p. 124). Chapman stressed Kawasaki's (2006) recommendations for how to structure the orientation process. Those recommendations include providing meaningful work and appropriate tools to perform the work, and creating an environment that allows for connections to be made and questions to be asked. As a result of the high number of retirements on the horizon in the library science field, retention of faculty will become increasingly important. Baby Boomer age retirements by librarians will peak during the 2010 to 2015 period. It is crucial that academic libraries not create additional staffing problems by failing to retain the employees that remain within their organization as older ones depart (Chapman, 2009; Strothman and Ohler, 2011).

In order to retain librarians, it is important to learn why they want to leave an organization. There are a variety of reasons that individuals leave one position for a new one, including work environment, compensation, and duties and responsibilities of the position. Strothman and Ohler point out that leaders sometimes fail to realize the true reason for an academic librarian departing from a position. Although supervisors tend to believe salary is the essential motivator, employees tended to rank "interesting work" as the most important motivating factor in their job. Other factors that academic librarians view as important are maintaining

faculty status, funding for continuing education, schedule flexibility, and support for professional service (Strothman & Ohler, 2011).

The Academic Librarian Today

The progression of the academic librarian over the past 60 years has led to a change in terms of how a library is to be managed. No longer is a librarian a staff member with a bachelor's degree or less, as was the case before the advent of the MLS. In Strothman and Ohler's 2011 survey, 97.9% of academic librarians had an MLIS, while another 36.4% held a second master's degree. This has led to the development of academic library leaders as managers who empower their faculty through long range strategies, proper training, and a vision for the future of the organization. Through this empowerment, it will be possible for all academic librarians to be leaders (Roberts, 1985, p. 18).

Academic librarianship has changed considerably in the past 60 years and continues to do so. An analysis of job descriptions in the library and information science field allows the academic library leader to see how the profession is continuing to develop, what will be required of future employees, and how current faculty and staff will need to be trained to continue to be successful in their current roles. A review of current literature makes it clear that the "I" in MLIS is becoming increasingly crucial in terms of professional skills (Boyd, 2008; Kennan, Cole, Willard, & Wilson, 2006, and Swigger, 2010). Skills that did not exist when Sherby was contemplating the role of an academic librarian in 1978 are now becoming increasingly crucial. Included among these skills are knowledge of web design and maintenance, e-resources, computer programming languages, and generic IT skills (Kennan, Cole, Willard, & Marion, 2006, p. 192).

Library users who are driving the demand for academic librarians to develop these skill sets have led to a new "library" of sorts, the Information Commons. The Information Commons is not intended to supplant the academic library, but rather to be an additional resource for meeting the needs of modern students. A typical Information Commons includes a technical help desk, a reference desk, ADA-compliant adaptive technology, reference materials, printers, scanners, laptops available for loan, workstations, and group study space (Boyd, 2008, p. 234). Appropriate skills for an academic librarian working in an Information Commons include a solid grasp of current technology within a library setting, an understanding of how to retrieve information, and an ability to quickly grasp new concepts in the constantly changing environment caused by technology (Boyd, pp. 237-238).

The Future of Academic Libraries

The ever-changing environment of library science has led to a discussion of what changes need to be made to the current 60-year-old model of educating librarians. The MLS morphed into the MLIS decades ago in response to the ever-increasing importance of technology within the field. Swigger suggests taking this concept a step further and developing separate degrees: Information Science (IS) and Library Science (LS). These fields would have separate accreditations, because they are distinct academic pursuits (Swigger, 2010, p. 139).

A further consideration for those responsible for educating future librarians, as well as

those who will be hiring them, is effectively "Whither the MLIS?" There is considerable debate as to whether librarians could be effectively trained at the undergraduate level, which is what Swigger (2010) proposes at the end of his study of the 60-year history of the MLS/MLIS degree: "Why do we believe that entry-level librarianship is so complicated that a college graduate can't do it, but we do believe that college graduates can be software engineers, highway designers, editors, teachers, and accountants?" (Swigger, 2010, p. 141).

After 60 years there still seems to be considerable disagreement over what the true role of a librarian within the university ranks should be, and for what prospective employers should be searching. The ALA has consistently it made clear that to be a librarian, one must have the master's degree in the field. Those in charge of academic libraries consistently hire librarians who do have the MLIS, but are often willing to consider an individual who has a content area master's relevant to the field in which the librarian would be working. Finally, Blixrud (2000, p. 7) found that only 53% of the universities studied had bestowed faculty status upon the academic librarians at their university, bringing into strong relief the dichotomy between the opinions of the American Library Association and the actual reality of universities in the United States.

In order for a librarian to be a true member of the academy it is essential that further strides be made to encourage more universities and colleges to provide academic librarians faculty status. In situations where librarians are responsible for a specific content area, they should have a second master's degree in that specific field. These high standards will not only elevate the library science profession, but also the individuals working in the field who will perform on a higher level because of increased expectations.

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