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Stressors and Expectations of Academic, Public and School Librarians A Comparison

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Introduction

The common perception of librarians and library work is that it is an easy and stress-free job. However, Linhartova and Stejskal (2017) state that “libraries feel increasing pressure to demonstrate their value to their communities. These institutions face a greater competition, rising costs, lower budgets and greater pressure to demonstrate their success” (p. 98). Along with this pressure, Seminelli (2016) notes that “there is a lack of public knowledge about the work done by and educational requirements to become a librarian” (p. 67). Rubin (2010) points out that the establishment of the American Library Association led to an increasingly professional identity for librarianship (p. 80). Many people do not realize that being a librarian involves professional training as well as an actual graduate degree. Degrees offered include MLS – Masters in Library Science, MIS – Masters in Information Science, and MLIS – Masters in Library and Information Science. Librarians, according to Seminelli’s article, are considered a “semi-profession” (p. 66). Seminelli’s (2016) article further refers to the following:

The Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science (ODLIS) defines a librarian as a “**professionally trained**” person responsible for the care of a library and its contents, including the selection, processing, and organization of materials and the delivery of information, instructions, and loan services to meet the needs of its users (p. 66).

The emphasis is on “professionally trained.” This ties to perceptions that little to no training is needed for work as a librarian. It does not help that there is, according to Seminelli (2016), an “increasing use of employees without an MLIS degree to perform library work” (p. 66).

Though the public perceives librarianship as semi-professional and easy, specialized graduate study in library and information management develops a profession known as librarianship. There are three primary types of librarians: public librarians, school librarians, and academic librarians. Each type of librarian works with different patrons (or customers), but the challenges are similar. Seminelli (2016) states that “Even in a library specialty facing some of the greatest challenges, librarians place more emphasis on advancing the status of the library than the status of the librarian” (p. 68). Despite the perception that librarians have an easy and stress-free job, the reality is that stress affects library professionals, with some leaving due to burnout and/or psychological stresses. Instead of focusing on what leads librarians to leave, Jordan (2014) notes that

what is “missing from this discussion is an organized, concentrated effort at a high level of the profession to identify common stressors and to address the problem of stress experienced by librarians” (p. 295). As duties and expectations have changed for all types of librarians over the past 5-10 years, stressors arising from social and technological challenges have become common to the profession.

Public Librarians (Community as a whole)

For many, the local public library may be their introduction to libraries -- libraries as space for quiet and reading. Americans love public libraries, according to Wiegand (2015), for the “useful information” (p. 144), “library as place” (p. 165), and the “transformative potential of commonplace stories” (p. 165). Depending on the size of the community or the municipality’s library budget and goals, public libraries can be one sole location or can have multiple branches within a municipality. According to Hamlin (2018) as well as Nelson and Dwyer (2015), the collections support the citizens’ reading interests with a variety of formats (books, DVD’s, audiobooks, electronic resources) and literary genres (fiction, reference, non-fiction, literature). Nelson and Dwyer (2015) also note that public libraries “have free Wi-Fi and computers for students who may not have technology on their homes” and “provide stepping stones to career readiness” (p. 27). In addition to a variety of resources, Hamlin (2018) along with Nelson and Dwyer (2015) note that the operating hours of most public libraries throughout the year are business hours along with some evening and weekend hours. This variety of hours, resources, and locations leads to an important expectation. Public libraries are, according to Linhartova (2017), charged “to meet the cultural, educational, and social demands and requests of local society by providing information services to residents” (p. 90). Such raised expectations lead to a variety of duties.

Depending on the size of the library, Ford (2014) states public librarians’ responsibilities could range from managing one task to holding a variety of duties. As an administrator, Ford (2014) categorizes these tasks as “cataloging,” “reference,” “circulation” and “collection management” (p. 1). Parker (2014) notes that “public libraries manage huge numbers of people from many socio-economic conditions” and that the libraries are managed in ways that, as Parker (2014) additionally states, “assure all are welcome” (p. 320). To provide awareness of patrons’ expectations for the library’s welcoming environment, “adopted rules of behavior for public libraries are usually posted on Web sites” (p. 323). According to Jordan (2014),

"the stereotypes of public libraries as quiet, pleasant, and uneventful workplaces are almost entirely incorrect for many librarians" (p. 291).

Despite patrons' enthusiasm for public libraries, public librarians have a variety of stressors. While though they may be spaces for reading and quiet contemplation, libraries have their share of issues with users' personalities and preferences. These work conditions, while in the purview of the public librarian's job, are stressors for the profession. Jordan (2014) conducted a study of 25 stressors affecting public librarians in an attempt to identify some of the most common sources of stress experienced in the library workplace. The three most common stressors per Jordan's 2014 survey were: many interruptions while working at the public service desk; difficulties with co-workers; and many deadline responsibilities. A suggested solution to these stressors as indicated by Jordan (2014) is "communication across the organization" (p. 304) which includes changing scheduling and streamlining workflows to ease tension. Scheduling and workflow issues lead to another set of stressors, which relate to management. Jordan (2014) states that "when working at the public service desk, interruptions to the tasks are actually the more important part of the job, but not all work can be done in this setting" (p. 304). This means maintaining patrons' good impressions of public libraries while maintaining the library's materials and physical facilities. Factors relating to building upkeep and / or library budget were additional prominent stressors per Jordan's study. Public library budgets are primarily dependent on municipality budgets. According to Coffman (2013), when book buying budgets are reduced, hard choices in collection management are made. The results of these choices include the retention of older editions (travel guides, medical information) and purchasing of what best circulates (bestsellers, popular titles, and DVDs). Parker (2014) states that "everything about a building's design and décor affects how people will behave in that building" (p. 325). She further states that unattractive, uninviting spaces lead to unfavorable patron behavior, while attractive, inviting spaces reduces the level of patron behavior issues.

In response to these expectations, duties and stressors, the Public Library Association (PLA) in 2018, (<http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives>), inaugurated nine (now seven) initiatives that define and lead the profession: digital literacy; equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice; family engagement; fostering creative community connections; Global Libraries legacy partnership (Bill and Melinda Gates' Global Libraries Initiative); health literacy programming and community health information; and performance measurement. These initiatives speak to the broader concepts that librarians target in their programming and community education. With their broad language, the initiatives speak to the changing expectations of public libraries. These expectations present challenges for public libraries as the organizational communication adjusts to implement changes in staff duties and workflows. All nine initiatives speak to community engagement as a means to provide better services and resources. However,

implementation can vary according to each public library, making it a challenge to define standards and workflows to maintain patrons' expectations within their individual communities.

Public librarians work with all members of the community. Regarding children, public librarians can find cooperation with school librarians. Saia (2015) notes that both librarians possess "commonalities that unite us in our work. Among them are the love of books and kids, a strong service ethic, and a desire to help kids grow and achieve" (p. 28). Communication between the two allows for the librarians to, according to Saia (2015), share assignments and prepare for perceived student information needs. Rubin (2004) points out another added benefit is that this allows the "joint participation of public and school librarians in education related committees" (p. 390-91). Nelson and Dwyer (2015) respond that "collaboration involves commitment for engagement at all levels of school districts and the public libraries, from administrators to classroom staff and librarians" (p. 26).

School (Kindergarten-12)

School librarians, as indicated above, have closer interactions with public librarians than with academic librarians. Nevertheless, as Hamlin (2018), while contrasting with public libraries, explains that:

School libraries, on the other hand -- especially at the upper grade levels and universities, have an academic focus. While they may carry some fiction, and the occasional popular title, the vast majority of the collection is geared towards nonfiction, scholarly books that students can use for research and learning. The exception is elementary school libraries, which may have a wider variety of fiction titles to encourage children to read" (p. 2).

This encouragement is one reason school and public libraries work together. Their hours of operation are seen as the shortest among the three groups as stated by Hamlin (2018); "School libraries located inside of school buildings usually only open during school hours and closed on weekends" (p. 2). Unlike public librarians, school librarians' patrons are primarily children and adolescents. Parents play an indirect role because while they are less likely to view the materials in the library, they see them when the children bring them home. The chief influence would be the school system (especially the principal) as Saia (2015) notes, "Nothing happens without the approval of the building principal" (p. 28). Parental organizations and municipal governments play indirect roles. There are, in summary, two stressors school libraries currently face: budget limits and revised standards.

The first concern for school librarians is new expectations. Saia (2015) states that "school librarians are participants in the larger world of education reform," placing "[them] under the microscope to improve the quality of education"

(p. 29). School libraries grew in the twentieth century due to, as noted by Rubin (2004), the increase of “regional accrediting agencies which promoted the need for trained librarians” (p. 393). The revised standards are the *National School Library Standards*, an American Library Association (ALA) document (<https://standards.aasl.org/>) published in November 2017. “Focus on competency-based assessment and evaluation” (p. 55) is the main point of the new standards according to Burns (2018). Burns (2018) continues, “Ideally, school librarians are self-reflective” (p. 55) where “reflective practice begins with a curious disposition regarding one’s own practice and the success of learners” (p. 55). “The new AASL Standards were developed with the intent that school librarians at all stages of their careers will be guided by best practice and a strong research base” (p. 56). Burns felt this was important because “when acting as reflective practitioners, school librarians gain a sense of what is successful in their school libraries and build sharable evidence to support what does and does not work” (p. 56). To evaluate these best practices, Burns (2018) recommends that “school librarians must be aware of classroom pedagogy and possess a thoughtful disposition about their practice. Professional competence challenges school librarians to continuously monitor and self-assess while being receptive to professional growth” (p. 55). Burns (2018) continues to state that “the new AASL Standards challenge school librarians to refresh their practice” (p. 56) by means of “low-level assignments with robust, authentic tasks that ask students to think critically” (p. 56). The overall goal of the AASL Standards, according to Burns (2018), is that professional growth of school librarians occurs after objective reflection of the librarian’s skills and performance (p. 57).

The second concern is budget limits. When there is a school librarian, Saia (2015) observed that “many school libraries are one-person operations because schools have suffered from cutbacks just like public libraries. In schools, the library is one of the first places cuts are made because it is often viewed as ‘non-essential’ ” (p. 28). This is because, as Hamlin (2018) notes, school libraries are “funded through the annual school budget, determined by the state and local governments” (p. 2), and they “may have fundraisers to help add materials to the library” (p. 2). Given this unstable funding, there are limits on staff and collection. According to Seminelli (2016), “school librarians are a group whose expertise is increasingly lost as their positions are cut in school districts across the country. A 2011 report stated that only 60% of K-12 public schools employed a state certified librarian” (p. 68). Since they are the only person running the library, they have to do every library-related task, including facility maintenance, circulation management, cataloging, and, as quoted by Saia (2015), their “own collection development” (p. 29).

In addition to library-related tasks, the American Association of School Librarians (n.d.) describes school librarians’ duties as follows:

“Today’s school librarian works with both students and teachers to facilitate access to information in a

wide variety of formats, instruct students and teachers how to acquire, evaluate and use information and the technology needed in this process, and introduces children and young adults to literature and other resources to broaden their horizons” (p. 1).

Therefore, school librarians teach flexibility in using various formats, development of information-evaluation behaviors, and knowledge of different types of literature. These concepts need to match the curriculum assignments, making cooperation with teachers and awareness of students’ learning needs essential. The cooperation and awareness levels change over time. To find individuals that can adjust with change, Staino and Berkowicz (2011) conclude in their article that “school library professionals must be aware that potential employers are looking for curriculum leaders, innovators, and forward thinking people who are ready to take literacy forward” (p. 51).

As mentioned earlier, revised standards and budget limits form two major stressors for school librarians, but there are two other stressors. Staino and Berkowicz (2011)’s qualifications and duties exist in an environment where there is regular change. Saia (2015) asserts that school librarians’ work within the sphere of the school, with the school principal’s permission needed to promote programs and curriculum development. Working with teachers, sometimes on short notice of curriculum changes can create the dilemma of an immediate need for new resources. As a consequence of working with principals and teachers on short-notice items, patrons who want to make contact with school library staff may experience, as Saia (2015) states, “School librarians who appear to be non-responsive or hard to reach” (p. 28). Collaboration, on one hand, can be an additional stressor as school librarians rely on others who provide limited time and funds. On the other hand, collaboration for school librarians, especially with public librarians, can be beneficial. Examples of beneficial collaboration were presented at the “Stronger Together: Building Literacy-Rich Communities” summit held in Omaha, Nebraska in 2018 as noted by Peet (2018). At the summit, examples of creative collaborations confronted the challenges of budgets and standards. The summit’s theme, per Peet (2018), was that partnerships and collaboration among school, public, and academic librarians requires clear lines of communication and raising awareness of each system’s value (p. 20).

While school librarians and public librarians have greater opportunities for collaboration, the school librarian’s clients who are pupils may become the students who are clients of academic librarians.

Academic (beyond Grade 12)

When people go to a college or university, they will enter a different type of library, an academic library. Academic libraries can be viewed as an extension of school libraries with academic libraries covering the post-high school information and research experience. The organization system is different; most academic libraries use the Library

of Congress system, (an alpha-numeric pattern that begins with letters) whereas most school and public libraries tend to use the Dewey Decimal System (a pattern of long numbers). With the focus and mission of each academic institution in mind, Guion (2014) states, “academic libraries offer a wide variety of fiction, popular movies, and other entertainment, [however] the collection primarily exists to serve the educational objectives of the various departments on campus” (p. 1).

Guion (2014) indicates the chief expectation of academic libraries is to “serve the educational objectives of a college or university” (p. 1) and “therefore they exist to serve the needs of students and faculty” (p. 1). Guion (2014) also describes academic libraries as “research libraries, meaning that they must supply their faculty and doctoral students with the information to support research projects that advance human knowledge” (p. 2). Rubin (2004) states this is an outgrowth of the nineteenth century seminar method of teaching where “a library with current and deep collections” (p. 280) was necessary to support this type of classroom learning. The primary focus on research differentiates academic libraries from public and school libraries. Nevertheless, as Seal (2011) notes, academic librarians have some of the same duties as the other librarians, “innovative outreach...distance education, evolving user expectations, and changing technologies” (p. 256). In addition, there is an increasing expectation for that outreach in the form of information literacy, which Association of College and Research Librarians (2016) describes as “abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information is creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (p. 8).

According to Guion (2014), though no longer the physical “heart of the university” due to the growing abundance of electronic access to information, academic libraries are positioned to be available to the university community anytime and from anywhere. Unlike public and school libraries, operating hours for academic libraries may be seven days a week with some services offering 24 hour access. Extended hours are not always possible with every academic library due to budget issues which lead to Seal’s 2011 list of “forced cutbacks in resources, hours, and staffing” (p. 255). Managing the tools, the access, and the pace at which the information can be provided *falls* within the academic librarian’s purview. This access leads to three chief concerns of academic librarians: budget limits, technological challenges and outreach.

Academic library budgets have had difficulty keeping pace with the costs of providing information resources and materials. Aside from appropriating library purchases to support teaching and research, librarians discern the best formats for use and which best fits the budget. According to the American Library Collection Development Survey 2017, Enis (2018) noted that on average “more than one-third of materials budgets go to database subscriptions and electronic reference materials” (p. 16). The balance of

selecting the appropriate materials in the best format is determined by librarians with input from the academic community. According to the survey, Enis (2018) states that the decision to purchase materials in either format is driven by these factors in this order, “faculty preference, availability of content by format, student preference and pricing” (p. 18).

To support the additional core activity of collection management, Jensen (2017) suggests that budget cutbacks reduce hiring and staff replacement thereby leading to more patron-driven acquisition. Accomplishing this goal, according to Fu and Fitzgerald (2013), would require utilization of robust integrated library systems (ILS) that “should provide prospects for cooperative collection development, and should facilitate collaborative approaches to technical services and resource sharing” (p. 48). Jensen (2017) examines how a library can meet collection management expectations with a reduced budget and cutbacks in librarians’ roles as liaisons. Jensen (2017) illustrates that book selection can encompass an e-book patron driven acquisition (PDA) program that allows library users to participate in selecting materials, lightening the load for librarians (p. 8-9). Jensen (2017) also acknowledges that “some librarians might view the changes to monograph selection as job threats” (p. 9) -- however, librarian knowledge and intervention is still needed.

Technological advances have changed workflow patterns in academic libraries. One major workflow change is that the library reference desk, once the core of the academic library’s reference and research services, has been reexamined. Seal (2011) states that “today’s academic library reference desk, if it still exists, has fewer professional librarians and is less busy as users more often prefer to find information on their own” (p. 255). In addition, the librarian’s shifting role, as noted by Blalock and Ryan (2017), mentions “information storage and retrieval, scholarly publishing, open access, and information literacy” (p. 312) as having been elevated by technological advances. Keeping pace with our university users, who sometimes outdistance the library capabilities, is part excitement and part challenge. Librarians are finding new uses for technology which Seal (2011) describes as “reaching out to unserved populations, embedding themselves in academic departments,” (p. 256) and partnering with other entities to create different services. The challenge is met with professional development, long range budgets that anticipate change, cooperation within library networks / resource sharing, as well as professional discernment about what works for the library.

The chief method of outreach for academic libraries is information literacy by librarians designated as liaisons to various academic departments. In academic libraries, Jensen (2017) states that librarians with the defined role as liaison provide “...personal communication with faculty about library services, information literacy and instruction, and collections” (p. 6). According to Saunders (2012), information literacy is also “a way for college and university libraries to directly support the educational

mission of their institutions” (p. 226). The Association of College and Research Libraries (2016) notes that librarians are challenged with the tasks of “identifying core ideas within their own knowledge domain that can extend learning for students” (p. 2). Academic librarians traditionally have not had the same power positions as teaching faculty. They have stood at the edges of traditional teaching and have been pushed to fulfill what Wheeler & McKinney (2015) call the “teacher-librarian” concept. (p. 115). Recognizing this expectation to teach, the 2016 Association for College & Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>) provides key concepts and activities that academic librarians use to direct their teaching: authority, information creation, information value, research, scholarship, and searching.

The changes in services, budgets, collection management, and workflow patterns can be condensed into the three fore-mentioned concerns of academic librarians: budget limits, technological challenges and relevant outreach methods.

Conclusion

The expectations, duties, and stressors of public, school, and academic librarians are similar. They all deal with concerns related to budget, technology, and patron satisfaction. However, the information needs of the communities these librarians serve leads to their differences. The tasks and expectations vary with the library’s patron community from a small number of students and faculty to a whole municipality. The perceptions of the duties have changed, but librarians continue to be needed for the core duties and decision making. The expectations may be greater as the librarians continue to serve their communities with electronic resources and more defined learning, research, and reading needs. All three branches have revised sets of standards. As these standards are implemented, hopefully the tasks of all librarians become more manageable and less causative to burn-out or psychological stresses. Also, a continuing analysis of stressors for librarians and their solutions will also assist in the professional development and service of all types of librarians.

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