

Statement of Opinion

To "Degree" or not to "Degree": Academic Librarians and Subject Expertise

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Library literature is replete with discussion of issues of professionalism, the M.L.S. degree as professional qualification, and the professional image of the practicing librarian. These sometimes heated discussions are all for the better and probably attest to the vitality, if not strength and resiliency, of the profession. Just what criteria constitute the possible definitional parameters of the professional librarian are often debated and vigorously defended or criticized.¹ If the professional value of the M.L.S. degree is generally upheld as the *sine que non* of the library profession for academic, public, and special libraries, the value of additional "paper" qualification is not.

Formal educational attainment in the world of academia is a given; where terminal degrees are often research-oriented, their acquisition and inclusion in professional portfolios is vitally important, if not a necessary, minimal requirement. Being members of the lower species in the academic pond, academic

librarians are exposed to the pressures of faculty status as defined by the higher Darwinian orders, and by their own professional duties and roles. Where faculty status does not exist, academic librarians, are still prey to the subservient roles assigned to them in the minds of higher orders, i.e. teaching and research faculty. For the academic librarian, the state of mutual respect can indeed be wanting.

One major measure of academic respectability is the attainment of intellectual pedigree *via* trial by fire. This normally takes the form of having taken holy orders in the life of the mind, through the exposure to substantive and research elements in graduate work in a subject discipline. Disciplines by their nature are highly refined fields of investigation and professional acculturation. Even in professional programs such as the M.S.W., M.B.A., M. Arch., or M.L.S. certain psychological and sociological habits of mind are cultivated, nurtured, and projected as sustainable and viable professional

traits to hone and maintain as part of one's professional repertoire. Indeed, in some professions (law, medicine, nursing), codes of proper professional conduct guarantee the formal training and education first experienced in a given disciplinary or professional program.

Given the condition of the academic librarian, various roles and expectations must be met, often with little institutional support. This is not unusual, for even teaching faculty decry the state of inadequate facilities or financial support—an accepted state of higher education as it exists today. The problem confronting the academic librarian is a difficult and peculiar one. One salient but crucial aspect governing the academic librarian's professional cachet as viewed by others in the academic community is the real factor of formal academic credentials. According to some, the lack of formal credentials in subject disciplines allows one to trade in the academic economy with less currency.² Of course, an effective librarian need not have a subject masters, let alone the doctorate, to be a major contributing member in the academic community, but it may help in enhancing professional currency with others and certainly provides a profound sense of the scholarly mission *vis-a-vis* pedagogy and research. A subject background may very well provide that exposure which the practicing academic librarian could meld with his/her own professional mission in academic librarianship.

The case of the subject bibliographer is a good if not striking example of the desirability or even necessity of an additional subject background. Although a subject bibliographer's role is substantially different from teaching faculty in the same discipline, their mutual support is conducive to solid collection development. Knowledgeable appreciation of the nuances and parameters of a discipline's mission and growth is very crucial to the collection development efforts in support of an institution or department's research and instructional vision. Balance in approach and a sense of identification with the discipline's substantive and methodological life is indicative of a commitment to a form of academic librarianship and to the discipline it supports.

Disciplinary expertise for subject bibliographers and for academic librarians is the underlying assumption motivating the argument for additional education, whether it culminates in degree or not. Pragmatic factors, pecuniary and political, make additional degree attainment preferable. Questions of credentialism as a negative force in society at large, and in academic libraries in particular, should be addressed critically. Paper qualification alone without attendant qualities of service and scholarly librarianship should not subsume the efforts and talents of those academic librarians lacking the additional pedigree. Additional subject backgrounds can only enhance the efficacy and services provided by a librarian,

subject bibliographer or not. Dual masters degrees are a case in point and have been an option for some time in library schools.³ Moreover, in-depth acquaintance with the intellectual agenda of a given discipline sensitizes the academic librarian to the myriad world of disciplines, fields of research, and their sociology of knowledge.

Given that a majority of academic librarians do not possess additional graduate backgrounds, several reasons come to mind: institutional support may be lacking; financial or academic constraints prove insurmountable; and insufficient desire or "opportunity costs" are greater than the effort put forth. These very real factors need further explanation. Some colleges and universities do not permit faculty or professional ranks to pursue "in-house" degrees and the logistics of attending another institution may hinder attendance. Rising costs of graduate education have and will present a financial constraint upon librarians' motivations. Finally, the time, effort, and acculturative requirements attendant to graduate programs demand serious attention. For the librarian, bifurcation of roles as librarian and as embryonic scholar is delineated and sometimes exacerbated by the demands of disciplinary acculturation which the librarian must balance with the professional acculturation of librarianship. Most important, this process is perhaps the most difficult to reconcile, especially if the latter degree is a doctorate.⁴ These are but some of the major factors impacting

upon the academic librarian's pursuit of graduate subject studies.

Unlike many other disciplines, in librarianship, the doctorate is not the terminal degree; the M.L.S. qualifies as such. Certainly, other professional programs culminate in masters degrees (social work, urban planning, engineering, public administration, etc.), but the inter-active intellectually rich world of higher education demands disinterested knowledge of and pursuit of rarified agendas which push back the bounds of human knowledge, not just information, which is rudimentary and forms the basis of knowledge. Subject expertise cultivates that necessary quality of mind and controlled reflection inherent in a discipline. When such expertise is combined with a background of practice in librarianship, the academic librarian becomes a translator in the "no-man's" land between scholar, student, and the collections. Public services and bibliographic consulting can then become even more enriching in the library as educative process.

It must be emphasized that there are costs attached to additional graduate subject degrees. What subject to pursue, if it does not support collection development of public services, may depend upon individual interests as well as abilities. The difference between a masters and a doctorate in any discipline is not only a difference of time and effort but in kind; different qualities of expertise and intellectual expectations are involved (especially

since the masters reflects a very broad definition of accomplishments while the doctorate is uniformly defined)⁵ Timing is another factor which affects an academic librarian's career. Whether subject degree attainment precedes or follows the M.L.S. is crucial for several reasons.

Graduate training is difficult at best—while pursuing a career full-time it becomes even more so. Prior graduate experience is easier to manage, but most academic librarians do not embark upon librarianship with prior graduate degrees in hand. Former graduate socialization must be “un-learned” or successfully integrated into library school and later as a professional, making for cognitive dissonance.⁶ Perhaps the most telling factor is the problem of remuneration—the fact is, an academic librarian will never recoup the effort in time or the emotional and financial investment. Intrinsic interest and career enrichment are not always as satisfying when confronted with the prevailing condition of financial and professional compensation or remuneration in librarianship. These factors militate against earning additional formal graduate degree credentials.

If the desirability of possessing a two-year M.L.S. is problematical, the added significance of a subject qualification appears less so.⁷ As the nature of academic work is qualitatively different from the concerns of society, so is academic librarianship. Again, although it is debatable what formal qualifications an academic librarian should ideally

possess, certain knowledge bases tempered by sound appreciation for higher education should be accepted and maintained.

Subject graduate experience provides useful tools, i.e. languages, statistics, and methodologies, and instills a research and scholarly ethos. The latter is difficult to define, but is evident in its relationship to knowledge. Lacking in the M.L.S., a pronounced and extended socialization in a discipline is vitally important for the academic librarian, since it reinforces the ethos of intellectual commitment to the goals of scholarship. A period of guided intellectual effort indelibly affects those who undergo an educative process in a subject discipline. The benefits translate into social and intellectual cachet in a community which is enriched but impolitically maintains that to be even equal and different, academic librarians should perform this rite of passage.

ENDNOTES

1. Holley, Edward G. “Defining the Academic Librarian” *College and Research Libraries*, 4(November 1985): 465-466.
2. Ibid: 468.
3. Marchant, Maurice P., and Carolyn F. Wilson. “Developing Joint Graduate Programs for Librarians.” *Journal of Education for Librarianship*, 24(Summer 1983): 31.

4. Clark, B. M. and T. M. Gaughan. "Socialization of Library School Students: A Framework for Analysis of a Current Problem." *Journal of Education for Librarianship*, 19(Spring 1979): 283-293.
5. Glazer, Judith S. *The Masters Degree: Tradition, University, Innovation ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 6*. Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1986.
6. Cooper, Jeffrey, Gertz, Janet, and Mark Sandler. "From Ph.D. to M.L.S.: Retraining in Librarianship." *Library Journal* 112 (1 May 1987): 41-42.
7. Holley, Edward G. "Defining the Academic ...", 468.