Academic BRASS

Janna Korzenko
Kent State University

Recruiting Future Business Librarians

Robert S. Martin, Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) stated that as many as 58% of current librarians will reach retirement age between 2005 and 2019. This doesn't mean that all of these professionals will be leaving the workforce, but in a profession that struggles to find applicants to fill all available positions, it does point to increased hiring problems in the near future.

"We need to retain and retrain the librarians we have," Martin said, "and we need to recruit a whole new generation of librarians to work in our nation's public and private libraries, colleges and universities, and schools (G.F. 2002)." This is no short order when librarians in all types of libraries look at relatively low wages for the level of education they have achieved and the duties they perform.

As librarians take on more work to fill the gaps where positions remain unfilled, they must also fulfill these extended job duties and serve customers with unparalleled zeal. This enthusiasm is what is needed in order to help recruit and convince a new generation of professionals to take the baton and lead the libraries in the 21st Century.

In the case of special librarians like business librarians, who work in a corporate environment, recruiting will involve looking for people who not only know the fundamentals of librarianship, but who will continue to keep up with technology and find a way to organize and deliver the information to their in-house clients in a way that illuminates the value of that information to that specific organization. Many such organizations look for professionals who also have some business background. How does the profession hope to recruit people with the kind of background that can earn them top dollar in a non-library setting? How can library schools train such people?

This paper will examine the issues surrounding the current librarian shortage, especially in business librarianship, and show how the various strategies lead to a good foundation for recruiting in order to fill the need.

In their study on the shortage of business librarians, O'Connor and Marien (2002), found, although through a small pool of 30 respondents, that employers are not generally satisfied with the quality or quantity of the pool of applicants. They note that only 27% of the respondents to their survey indicated that their recruiting problems were centered on salary. Those responding cited high competition from public and private sectors and the low supply of applicants as the primary factors in recruiting.

O'Connor and Marien (2002) suggest that recruiting internally may be a cost-effective method in finding new business librarians because the majority of current business librarians have come from within the ranks. Many began in other specialties or as generalists. Current business specialists, especially those close to retirement, can help to develop training and recruiting strategies for their academic libraries. They can also help with training the other specialists and generalists in basic business reference practices, so that when these positions remain unfilled for a time, the quality of business reference does not diminish greatly.

This solution may be effective for academic libraries that have pools of employees to draw from, but what can be done about the dearth in the pool to fill the available positions in corporate libraries? Should schools of library and information science change their curricula just to specially train the new crop of business librarians, recruiting from within their student body as academic libraries pull from their current employees?

In his presentation on the future of library education at the Ohio Library Council at the Annual Conference, Dr. Richard Rubin spoke of the problem with developing strategies for the future of librarianship with the lack of quality employment statistics. It is difficult to know how large the problems truly are unless a comprehensive survey of the profession is made. He managed to piece together a rough picture based on old data from the United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, but this picture was the profession at large, not specific types of librarians.

Following suit, this researcher found no reliable data on the number of business librarians in the United States. According to the Special Libraries Association (SLA), 65% of its members worked for corporate libraries in 1996 (SLA 2002). With the 2002 projection on membership at 13,000 members, we are looking at 8,450 corporate librarians in the United States who are members of SLA. Not all of these librarians could be considered business librarians. Some of these professionals could be working for corporations with different focuses, such as specialty manufacturing or chemical engineering. In this case we can only make assumptions on what percentage of librarians are working as business specialists.

In a recent survey of alumni of the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at Kent State University, 7.3% of respondents indicated they work in special libraries. That is a small percentage of students. We can certainly assume that just a portion of these librarians are business specialists. Even if 5% of respondents were business librarians, would it be good practice to change the curriculum of the SLIS program at Kent State? Regardless, other

problems exist within this university environment that would prevent immediate action to remedy this situation, including lack of funding which leads to strains on faculty and staff.

Students in a current course in business sources and services at Kent State expressed their anxiety in an informal class survey on how overwhelming the business material can be to those without formal business training or education. Revamping current courses is an option. Adding prerequisite coursework in business practices is another. Many MLIS programs require around 36 credit hours for coursework. However, requiring two courses for an elective may discourage those with a minor interest in business sources or those wishing to learn this area as a supplement to their background for general librarian work. This strategy could further hurt the chances of increasing interest in this area of work.

Library and information science programs across the U.S. are facing not only librarian shortages but also constant changes in technology, which lead to changes in practice in libraries. The Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) (2002) published the KALIPER report describing the trends shaping curricula of these programs. Technology seems to be the top priority in curricular changes. This illustrates how slowly changes are made in many academic institutions and also the importance of the constantly changing technology to information professionals.

One of the trends, however, was focused on an area of interest for proponents of curricular change. This trend involves the experimentation with specialization within curriculum. ALISE found that some schools are offering dual degree options, encouraging work experience in a specialized area and starting special certification programs. The certifications are offered for specializations such as school media, medical and law libraries. The dual degree options allow students to share credits between two master's degree programs within a university. It serves as a value and incentive for further study or specialization. The specialized work experience could indicate internships, practica or recruiting from specialized professions.

All of the trends help the schools to update and develop their programs to entice new recruits in some way. One discusses the implementation of bachelor's degree programs or channeling students directly from undergraduate programs (ALISE 2002). Also, by offering web-based and distance learning options, schools open themselves to students who may not be near a library and information science (LIS) program or who may be too busy to take regular class times away from work. Busy businesspeople who may have a desire to change careers can take a step towards their MLIS and a career as business librarian through the flexible scheduling of distance and web-based courses.

These curricular trends could be helped with a strong advisory component within the LIS programs. With faculty encouraging those with business experience or background into a possible future as a special librarian, these trends can become a reality for most LIS programs.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency that supports museums and libraries and administers the Library Services and Technology Act has shown support for such

changes. It awarded $1.8 million to seven universities and colleges to recruit and educate LIS students (G.F. 2002). The money will also help to fund continuing education and digital technologies. Those receiving the grants will match the funds.

Improvements like these can be important steps in enticing students to study in a particular program. Another step must be taken. All librarians must do their best to present the profession in its best light, as vital in the information age and encourage others to pursue employment in the field. One important problem to research is finding out what draws people to particular professions.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2002) presents the idea of further study of vocational choice to help determine the best avenues in which to advertise the profession. They discuss the possibility of examining MLIS graduates to determine why they select the types of libraries they do. This strategy could also be applied to compare the differences between vocational choices of business students and LIS students.

Immediately, one could look to the implied prestige and higher salaries found in business positions as probable factors that preclude any consideration of an MLIS program or a career in libraries. Why wouldn't a newly minted professional try for a position as, for instance, a Top Executive as described in the Occupational Outlook Handbook. Information Officers fall under this category for business professionals and share many of the same duties as librarians. Compare the descriptions below to see the similarities.

"Librarians in administrative services oversee the management and planning of libraries, negotiate contracts for services, materials, and equipment, supervise library employees, perform public relations and fundraising duties, prepare budgets, and direct activities to ensure that everything functions properly... Many companies are turning to librarians because of their research and organizational skills, and knowledge of computer databases and library automation systems. Librarians can review vast amounts of information and analyze, evaluate, and organize it according to a company's specific needs." (BLS 2002, pp. 188 - 190)

"Top executives must have highly developed personal skills. An analytical mind able to quickly access large amounts of information and data is very important, as is the ability to consider and evaluate the interrelationships of numerous factors. Top executives must also be able to communicate clearly and persuasively. Other qualities critical for managerial success include leadership, self-confidence, sound business judgment, and determination." (BLS 2002, p.67)

On paper, without salary comparisons, librarianship could sound appealing to a motivated individual who would be attracted to a fast-paced career in a corporate environment. However, with average librarian salaries at $38,370 (BLS 2002) at the low end, librarianship loses a little of its luster. Those performing comparable duties in business earn salaries at $69,790 (BLS 2002) at the low end. One bright spot to consider as a good recruiting figure for the profession is that SLA reports the median special librarian salary in the U.S. to be $56,500 (SLA Salary

Survey 2002). A figure like this could channel those recruits with a business background directly into those unfilled librarian positions.

The profession is attractive, the schools are improving, and librarians are getting active. It is apparent that professionals are working to fill gaps in the pool of professionals. However, it is also obvious that this is no small task, with low salaries and self-image to contend with, not to mention the difficulties in obtaining funding to try to remedy these and other issues within the profession. Clearly, more research on the current state of the profession is needed to be able to truly assess the current environment and aid in developing strategies to effectively move the entire profession in a positive direction.

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