

Educational Credentials, Professionalism, and Librarians

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The *ARL Annual Salary Survey* broadly defines those professional positions that are to be included in the reporting of the Salary Survey statistics--reflecting an ambiguity that often causes major debates among library professionals.¹ The ARL definition tries to be inclusive of the varying criteria that member libraries currently use for determining professional status. As a result, each library reports the salaries of those staff members it considers professionals, including, when appropriate, staff who are not librarians in a narrow definition of the term, such as computer experts, systems analysts, budget officers, etc.

A 1995 ARL OLMS SPEC Kit found inconclusive evidence as to whether ARL libraries "are moving toward the appointment of individuals who lack formal library education to librarian positions."² The same survey also identified a "gap between an expressed willingness to consider such individuals and actually making these appointments in any significant numbers."

The [1995 SPEC Kit](#) on *Non-Librarian Professionals* reports the results of a survey with 95 respondents, of which 56 (59%) libraries reported that they are willing to consider applicants without the M.L.S. degree for professional positions. However, by examining 750 professional job searches that were conducted by this group of 56 libraries during 1991/92-1993/94, the SPEC Kit identified that only 36 (64%) of the 56 libraries reported having filled 110 positions (15% of the positions) with non-M.L.S. professionals.

An ARL Quick-SPEC survey sponsored by New York University Library in November 1999 and examination of educational credentials as reported in the *ARL Annual Salary Survey* every four years continue to point to a contradiction between perceived and actual hiring practices--though the contradiction has been reversed. On the one hand, the Quick-SPEC survey identified an expressed willingness to safeguard the M.L.S. as a professional degree; on the other hand, the percent of non-M.L.S. professionals reported through the *ARL Annual Salary Survey* is increasing.

In answer to the Quick-SPEC survey question of whether institutions have a strict M.L.S. requirement, 67% of the institutions (74 out of 111) responded "yes" and 33% (37) responded "no." The more recent Quick-SPEC reverses the earlier 1995 SPEC Kit findings: A larger number of libraries (74 libraries in 1999 compared with 39 libraries in 1995) report that they are willing to have a strict M.L.S. requirement in hiring library professionals.³

Examination of the *ARL Annual Salary Survey* historical data on educational credentials shows an increasing number of professionals reported as having no library degree. In 1985, 4% of all the professional women working in ARL university libraries did not have a library degree; by 1998 this number more than doubled to 9%. Similarly, 10% of all the professional men did not have a library degree in 1985; this number increased to 17% by 1998. Overall, professionals with no library degree tend to be men rather than women (See [Table 1.](#))

Since professional boundaries are socially constructed, they can change. The empirical evidence we have from the various surveys to date is contradictory. On the one hand, libraries report that they are imposing a strict requirement regarding library credentials; on the other hand, an increasing percent of non-M.L.S. professionals are coming into ARL libraries. The likelihood of a profession, namely librarianship, surviving depends to a large extent on its ability to articulate professionalism in such a way that it will meet the ever-changing needs of the library users of the future. Whether the M.L.S. requirement as a minimum professional qualification is serving libraries well in moving towards that

goal seems to be in question. The need to broaden professional requirements is manifest in the work of the ALA Congress on Professional Education, which emphasizes the need to identify core values and explicit competencies for the profession.⁴

Faculty Status and Tenure

Professionals in university research libraries often compare themselves to the larger body of teaching faculty in terms of tenure and promotion. Data on faculty status and tenure for the 111 ARL university research libraries (See [Table](#)) show that:

- Of the 111 ARL university libraries, 57 (51%) grant faculty status to their librarians; 42 of these 57 libraries (38% of the total) require a library degree in hiring.
- Tenure is awarded to librarians at 42 (38%) ARL institutions; 33 of these 42 libraries (30% of the total) require a library degree in hiring.
- Thirty-nine ARL libraries (35%) award both faculty status and tenure to library professionals.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, the New York University Library's [Open Forum on Proposal to Change Library Bylaws](#) 18 Oct. 1999, <<http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/etc/libc.htm>>.
2. John G. Zenelis and Jean M. Dorrian, *Non-Librarian Professionals*, [SPEC Kit 212](#) (Washington: ARL, 1995).
3. A forthcoming SPEC Kit will analyze hiring requirements for professional librarians in more detail. The soon-to-be-published SPEC Kit 256, *Changing Roles of Professionals*, is also looking into some of these issues.
4. The Congress on Professional Education website is located at <<http://www.ala.org/congress/>>.

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