

Navigating the Modern Libraryscape: The Changing Roles, Labor, and Education of Public Librarians

Rachel Williams^a, Melissa Gross^b, Don Latham^b, Brittany Baum^b, Leah T. Dudak^c, Darin Freeburg^a, Sarah C. Johnson^d, Shannon Crooks^c

^aSchool of Information Science, University of South Carolina, United States

^bSchool of Information, Florida State University, United States

^cSchool of Information Studies, Syracuse University, United States

^dSchool of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, United States

rw63@mailbox.sc.edu, melissa.gross@cci.fsu.edu, dlatham@fsu.edu, bbaum@fsu.edu, ltdudak@syr.edu, darinf@mailbox.sc.edu, sjo0034@illinois.edu, scrooks@syr.edu

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public libraries; education of information professionals; continuing education; critical librarianship

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Public libraries/librarianship; LIS education; social services; critical librarianship

Copyright 2024 by the authors. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2024.1708>

ABSTRACT

Public libraries and their staff have recently faced a wide array of challenges. Some of these challenges include supporting services for incarcerated individuals, unhoused patrons, and others experiencing crises (American Library Association, 2023; Gross et al., 2024; Knox, 2023; Wahler and Johnson, 2024). These recent challenges give us, as scholars and educators, an opportunity to take a step back and trace the dynamic work of public library professionals. In response, public library workers take on a variety of tasks. These may involve connecting patrons to social service resources, partnering with community organizations, or creating programs to support specific community needs and interests. Some of this work undertaken by public library staff involves routine, everyday tasks. Other labor is in response to community crises. Understanding this work is central to our ability to consider how the realities of public library work impact LIS scholarship and education. This panel provides a space for open

conversation among panelists and the ALISE community to address the following overarching questions:

- What does the work of public librarianship look like, in terms of roles and labor?
- How can a better understanding of these roles and the reality of public library work inform how we approach LIS scholarship and teaching?

Our panel will consider several aspects of public library work, with a view toward connecting theory, research, and practical workforce preparation.

Confirmed speakers/areas of focus:

Melissa Gross and Don Latham are professors and Brittany Baum is a doctoral candidate in the School of Information at Florida State University. This presentation will share findings from a series of six online focus groups, two with public library administrators, two with adult services librarians, and two with youth services librarians. Research objectives were to explore how librarians currently see the professional scope of librarianship, their visions for how to best respond to the social service needs of their communities, and the implications for preservice education, continuing education, and the future of librarianship.

Leah Dudak is a Ph.D. candidate at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies. She studies trauma in the workplace experienced by public library staff, giving special attention to issues causing trauma, trauma-informed care, and library labor. Her current projects involve the library worker's body at work, trauma and censorship, pathways to librarianship, and partnering with Urban Librarians Unite on their groundbreaking trauma study and upcoming peer support network.

Darin Freeburg is an associate professor at the University of South Carolina who studies workplace information practices. He will present findings from an IMLS-funded project currently underway that investigates issues of identity in the routine work of public librarianship. While routines can increase efficiency and help staff get work done, identity standards encoded into a routine's blueprints can also introduce significant barriers. This means that, as staff take on additional tasks in the modern public library, they are also taking on additional standards for who they should be—coming from management, patrons, colleagues, community partners, etc.

Sarah C. Johnson, MLIS, LMSW, is an Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where she teaches a graduate course on Library Social Work. She is a licensed social worker and her aim is to foster quality collaborations among social workers and public librarians, with the goal of enhancing services to library patrons and their wider community. Sarah also promotes thoughtful integration of social work concepts and skills into LIS education to better prepare students for public librarianship.

Shannon Crooks, MSW, MLIS, is currently a PhD Student at Syracuse University in the School of Information Studies. She currently studies social work in libraries and how librarians humanize patron experiences when asking for help in the library. Libraries are considered to be

safe spaces within the public realm of society, where people feel comfortable being vulnerable by sharing personal life experiences during the reference interviews with library staff. Through research, Shannon is trying to understand the underlying motivation for patrons to feel comfortable expressing vulnerability in public spaces.

Moderator. Dr. Rachel D. Williams is an assistant professor in the School of Information, University of South Carolina, whose research examines public librarianship as a profession. Williams' work gives attention to supporting patrons and communities in crisis, developing healthy boundaries and professional resilience, and exploring the connections between social work and librarianship. As moderator, Williams will facilitate discussion with the audience and take notes to share with participants.

The panelists will begin by briefly discussing their perspectives to kickstart conversation between panelists and the audience on the proposed discussion questions. Audience members may respond to questions, ask questions of their own, and share their experiences and expertise as we consider these vital issues in LIS education and practice. The proposed starting discussion questions include the following:

What role should public librarians take in the provision of social services information to the public?

Why is trauma-informed librarianship important, not only to patrons, but to library staff and what are the implications of a trauma-informed library space?

Who are public library workers expected to be and how does this align with who they want to be?

How can cross-disciplinary concepts and skills such as social work be thoughtfully integrated into LIS education in order to better equip librarians for the field?

How do we humanize patrons' experiences when they are interacting with librarians and library staff at the reference desk?

REFERENCES

- American Library Association (2023). *State of America's Libraries Report*. <https://www.ala.org/news/sites/ala.org.news/files/content/state-of-americas-libraries-report-2023-web-version.pdf>.
- Gross, M., Latham, D., Baum, B., Crabtree, L., & Randolph, K. (2024). "I didn't know it would be like this": Professional Preparation for Social-Service Information Work in Public Libraries. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 65(1), 40-54. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis-2022-0067>.

Johnson, S. C. (2023). Teaching library students about trauma informed approaches. *Public Libraries*, *62*(3), 16–18.

Knox, E. J. M. (2023). Responding with Policy. *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy*, *7*(4), 3–4. <https://doi.org/10.5860/jifp.v7i4.8043>.

Wahler, E.A., & Johnson, S.C. (2024). Creating a person centered library: Best practices for supporting high-needs patrons. [Bloomsbury](#).