



Evidence Summary

Mismatch Between the Demands for Tenure and Those of Public Services is Creating a Crossroads in Academic Librarianship

A review of:

Johnson, C.M. and E.B. Lindsay. "Why We Do What We Do: Exploring Priorities within Public Services Librarianship." portal: Libraries and the Academy 6.3 (2006): 347-69.

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Abstract

Objective – To explore how public services librarians in academic libraries perceive their duties and experience job satisfaction especially in relation to faculty status (tenure track or non-tenure).

Design – A multi-site study.

Setting – Academic libraries in the United States.

Subjects – Academic public service librarians.

Methods – In March 2004, an online survey containing 25 questions was sent out to 1,510 academic librarians across the United States. The survey included demographic and professional work-related questions, but mainly focused on retrieving information about librarian feelings, thoughts, and perceptions in relation to six aspects of the role of the public service librarian, namely: reference, collections, publishing, teaching, committee, and

management activities. The survey data was stored in an SQL database and analyzed in various ways to try to see if there were correlations in the replies. In some cases, Chi-square was used to test for statistical significance.

Main results – 328 (22%) out of 1,510 potential replies were received. 74% came from public universities and 26% from private institutions. 23% of the respondent librarians had received their MLS before 1980, 34% between 1980 and 1994, and 43% 1995 or later. About 50% had worked as an academic librarian fewer than 10 years and 50% for 10 or more years. About 50% had worked at their current institution five years or fewer and the other 50% for six years or more. 49% had job descriptions which clearly indicated the relative emphasis of each of the main areas of their job. 50% came from tenure-track and non-tenure-track institutions alike.

The librarians were asked to reply to “most” and “least” questions. The following lists show the most chosen responses (in %) to the questions.

“Most” questions:

80% felt that they were most prepared for reference activities by their library school training.

50% felt most satisfied with doing reference activities.

25% felt that administrators viewed reference activities as being most important.

41% thought that reference activities had most service impact on users.

24% found teaching activities the most challenging aspect of their job.

49% had attended most training in the area of reference activities.

31% thought that reference activities would be most important for them 5 years later on (that is, at the date of publication of this review, 2009).

For those with a position description, 49% had descriptions that most emphasized reference activity.

For those in tenure-track positions, 78 % replied that publishing activities were most important for tenure.

“Least” questions:

28% felt that they were least prepared for teaching activities by their library school training.

44% felt that committee activities were the least satisfactory part of their job.

33% felt that administrators regarded publishing as the least important aspect of the job.

49% thought that publishing activities would have the least service impact on users.

46% thought that committee activities were the least challenging.

31% had attended least training in publishing activities.

35% thought that publishing activities would be least important to them 5 years later.

For those with a position description, 33% had descriptions that least emphasized publishing activities.

For those in tenure-track positions, 31% replied that management activities were least important for tenure.

There was a correlation at an individual level between reference activities considered as having the most service impact on users and giving the most job satisfaction; and what the librarian thought was the most important to administrators.

There was an overall correlation between what librarians found most challenging and the type of in-service training they had attended, with the notable exception of publishing.

The area of scholarly publishing was perceived generally as the second most challenging area (18%) after teaching. However, very few (2%) replied that they had (recently) attended in-service training in this area.

Librarians with publishing as a clear component of their job description were more likely to find publishing challenging and to say that it was an important component for their administrators. Publishing was clearly considered important for tenure.

There were some statistically significant differences between more- and less-experienced librarians and more- and less-recently qualified librarians. In general (according to the authors), less experienced librarians tended to place more emphasis on teaching and committee activities, whereas more experienced librarians tended to emphasize collection development and management.

Conclusions – Generally, the authors conclude that “librarians feel that they are in tune with their library administrators” (360). The authors found a clear link between in-service training opportunities chosen by

librarians and the areas that the librarians thought that the administration regarded as important.

However, there seems to be discord between the requirements for tenure (the majority ranked publishing as most important for tenure) and the service needs of users, librarian job satisfaction, and the perceived demands of administrators. The authors conclude that academic librarianship is at a “crossroads” where “librarians need to decide how and if publishing activities can be successfully balanced with other job components that are arguably more central to the library’s mission” (363).

Commentary

Generally, the study casts a broad (perhaps too broad) net on the sea of librarian feelings, thoughts, and perceptions concerning duties, job satisfaction, and administrator expectations. Unfortunately, after reading the article one ends up feeling more confused than enlightened by the complexity of the results. In contrast, the mismatch between the demands for tenure and those of public services librarianship seems clear. The study is probably most useful to help management understand training requirements in connection with strategic library development and to enlighten administration about the mismatch.

The authors themselves point out a number of areas for concern in the study. Firstly, a random survey pool was not created, but the survey was sent to public service librarians as far as they could be identified from the Web. Secondly, the idea of tenure was unclear to many respondents. Thirdly, many participants found it difficult to classify their duties into the six suggested public services work categories.

It is a pity that the results concerning how much time librarians spent on the six activities were unavailable. For example, 50% replied that they found reference activities most satisfying, but it is unknown how much time was actually being spent on such activities.

Many of the tables seemed unnecessary, as the information was adequately presented in the text. However, a table would have been helpful to clearly denote the often statistically significant responses between more- and less-experienced librarians and more- and less-recently qualified librarians. Readability may also have been improved by using more sub-titles in the results section.

Generally speaking, the study seems fairly valid and some comparison is made to the published literature. It is unclear how representative the study is, as the total population of academic public services librarians in the United States is both unclear and probably unknown. The results of the study, especially when it comes to the general popularity of reference activities and unpopularity of academic publishing activities, seems applicable to many library environments; although other results of the study may be culturally and institutionally dependent.

The benefits of academic publishing - such as providing insight into the nature and opus of academia, giving insight into the research process, improving critical analysis skills, increasing understanding of the needs of academic writers, mentally preparing for an increasingly complex work environment, and considering long-term library development and the further development of the library profession - need to be more skillfully argued. Discussion regarding these benefits would steer discussion away from Johnson and Lindsay's simplistic "crossroads" metaphor at which, if the

"wrong turn" were made, would be the demise of EBLIP. Others are better skilled at arguing these points (Neal) and providing tips (Kraemer; Tysick and Babb).

Finally (in order to finish on a high note), a quote from the Johnson and Lindsay's article: "Both newer and more experienced librarians tend to be more satisfied with job areas they also find challenging, which is certainly a positive finding for the profession" (362).

Works Cited

Kraemer, Elizabeth W. "Keeping Up with the Journals: A Library Journal Club at Oakland University." Journal of Academic Librarianship 33.1 (2007): 136-7.

Neal, James G. "The Research and Development Imperative in the Academic Library: Path to the Future." Portal: Libraries and the Academy 6.1 (2006): 1-3.

Tysick, Cynthia, and Nancy Babb. "Writing Support for Junior Faculty Librarians: A Case Study." Journal of Academic Librarianship 32.1 (2006): 94-100.