Hiring Non-MLS Librarians: Trends and Training Implications

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Abstract

Non-MLS librarian hires may be anathema to some, but survey data indicate a significant level of acceptance among academic and public library directors. Primary reasons for not requiring the degree include the need to expand applicant pools and the nature of the work for academic libraries, and budget constraints for public libraries. The types of positions least likely to forgo the MLS degree requirement for both types of libraries include Administration/Management, Cataloging/Bibliographic Control, Collection Development/Management, and Reference. Distinctions made between librarians and library professionals are tenuous and not consistent across libraries.

Introduction

Are libraries hiring professionals from outside librarianship to fill librarian positions? If so, what is the potential impact on the profession and the culture of libraries? This is the subject of a 2010 study on hiring trends in academic and public libraries funded by the American Library Association (ALA) Carroll Preston Baber Research Grant. Identifying the dynamics involved in such a shift offers a context for understanding current and future employment needs in libraries and promises better informed decisions surrounding the assimilation and training of non-MLS librarians.

What is a non-MLS librarian? "Non-MLS" refers to professionals without the traditional credential of librarians: the Master of Library Science (MLS) and related degrees, including the Master of Science in Library Science (MSLS), the Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS), and the Master of Science in Library and Information Science (MSLIS) degrees. What constitutes a "librarian" position can vary from library to library, complicating research in this area. For instance, some libraries restrict the term "librarian" to those holding the degree even if similar work is performed by a non-MLS professional.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the idea of a non-MLS librarian can be controversial. For example, in 2010 the McMaster University Library in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada came under fire for its plan to hire Ph.D. subject specialists and information technology professionals to run the library.[1] In 2011, a backlash ensued when the Alachua County Library District (Florida), a large public library system with a service area population close to 250,000, posted a vacancy announcement for a new director that did not require a completed MLS. The incumbent, an award-winning non-MLS director, was quoted in the local newspaper as follows,

"the master's degree in library sciences prepares one to be a librarian, not a library administrator."[2] Library hiring bodies, if not restricted by state, university, or union regulations, may have the power to change hiring practices in order to address what they perceive are the needs of their user communities.

For many, the concept of a non-MLS librarian may appear to demean the profession by suggesting the degree is not essential to being a librarian in the sense that the degree serves as a professional credential indicating mastery of the theory and practice of librarianship. For others, it represents a practical response to the changing demands on libraries. In conducting surveys as part of the research project, I yielded telling comments, such as the following representations:

> "I believe that it is an affront and disservice to the profession of librarianship to call those without the MLS a librarian. There is no doubt that non degreed people do a great job in many cases but they are simply not librarians." (Public Library Director)

> "I have often questioned whether the credentials were more important than experience. Professional degrees are meant – in a sense – to replace the apprenticeship stage of professional learning. If that is the case, then the credential is not more important than experiential learning. I can think of several examples of outstanding librarians in many sectors who do not have the degree or did not have the degree when they were hired." (Academic Library Director)

According to the ALA Policy Manual, an MLS is the appropriate professional degree for librarians:[3]

> 54.2 Librarians: Appropriate Degrees

> The master's degree from a program accredited by the American Library Association (or from a master's level program in library and information studies accredited or recognized by the appropriate national body of another country) is the appropriate professional degree for librarians.

> 54.2.1 Academic Librarians

> The master's degree in library and information studies from a library school program accredited by the American Library Association is the appropriate terminal professional degree for academic librarians.

The ALA Web site provides guidance for those interested in librarianship. It refers the reader to a list of types of jobs in a library to find out if a degree is typically required, but the list doesn't actually offer this information. Of interest to the issue at hand, the Web site states, "Many smaller libraries have a difficult time filling positions, even for directors, and often will hire people with other degrees or equivalent experience. Some large urban libraries are also having difficulty filling front line librarian positions and hire librarians without master of library science degrees."[4] The Public Library Association career Web site states that most public librarian positions require an MLS.[5] In May 2011 the Association of College and Research Libraries

modified and reaffirmed its statement that the MLS is the appropriate terminal professional degree for academic librarians.[6]

Background

The ALA Carroll Preston Baber Research Grant is given annually to one or more librarians or library educators to conduct research into a topic that is of importance to the library community and could lead to an improvement in library services. My research project involved an examination of non-MLS hiring practices in academic and public libraries and the identification of possible training needs for non-MLS hires. Surveys constituted the main component of the information gathering part of the study and are the focus of this article.

My motivation for doing the research stemmed from personal observations made at my workplace. As a member of library faculty search committees, I learned that the MLS was not always the required qualification. Instead, the MLS or equivalent was listed as a preference for some librarian positions. Alternatively, the candidate could have an advanced degree in a related field because it might be difficult to find someone with an MLS who also matched other aspects of the job, including expertise and experience related to a discipline-specific area (e.g., Jewish Studies), technical area (e.g., Digital Services), or administrative role (e.g., Development Officer). The relevant knowledge and skills acquired through an MLS degree were deemed teachable on the job relative to the other areas of expertise.

Additionally, my perception was that hiring of this nature was occurring more frequently, even if still a relatively low percentage compared to the overall librarian population. At the University of Florida (UF) librarians are considered non-academic tenure-track faculty with ranks as Assistant, Associate, and University Librarian. The non-MLS faculty members who hold positions that were advertised as requiring an MLS or a related advanced degree were hired into the librarian ranks, and no distinction was made between these librarians and the librarians with the MLS degree. It is interesting to note that two out of the last seven chairs of the Library Faculty Assembly at UF, an elected position, were non-MLS librarians, demonstrating an acceptance among the library faculty.

Literature Review

The issues surrounding non-MLS hiring have generated discussion within the profession for many years. The controversy at the Alachua County Library District (Florida), which is described above, is echoed in news items from 25 years ago challenging the value of the degree for public librarians.[7] However, the preponderance of literature on this topic addresses academic librarianship rather than public librarianship.

Citing the aging of the profession, in 1996 Wilder questioned how impending retirements would impact hiring. Although he did not specifically mention non-MLS hires, Wilder pointed out that the high rate of expected retirements would prompt administrators to realign positions to meet the changing needs of their libraries.[8] By 2000, Munde noted that vacancies in academic libraries were "being redirected toward new functions and services" in an effort to "reinvent

library work."[9] Both authors voiced concern that library schools might not graduate enough librarians with the required skill sets to fill positions.

In their 2001 article about the relationship between MLS holders and non-MLS staff, Parsons and Christenson discussed role blurring, whereby non-MLS employees are promoted to fill former librarian lines and librarians are moved into positions that do not require an MLS, as a consequence of budget and technological pressures. In their opinion, this phenomenon exacerbates a longstanding divide between those with the degree and those without, and is indicative of the "huge variations in position descriptions, job requirements, titles, and pay for both MLS and non-MLS staff in different types and sizes of libraries."[10] Looking ahead to the 2004 launch of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellowship for Humanities in Libraries, Oder quoted library leaders who both welcomed and decried programs providing a path to academic librarianship that did not require an MLS. According to Oder, the program was an outgrowth of the new demands placed on libraries along with a shortage of MLS applicants with relevant skill sets.[11] Berry responded to the announcement of the CLIR launch with a similar recap of the debate about the extent to which such alternatives threaten or complement MLS training and also touched on the legitimacy of calling the graduates "librarians" if they do not have an MLS.[12] In addition to challenging assumptions about the divide between librarians and paraprofessionals, Jones and Stiver's 2004 analysis of personnel categories in academic libraries highlighted the "fuzziness" factor whereby non-MLS professionals, or specialists, are hired to perform both non-bibliographic (e.g., Human Resources) and bibliographic (e.g., Curators) duties.[13]

In 2006, Neal shined a new light on the non-MLS discussion when he declared that academic libraries were, in fact, appointing librarians without the MLS at an increasing rate and suggested the impact of this trend would be significant for libraries and the profession. Whether MLS programs impart a unique professional "librarian" identity - and one that is not attainable through other means – is, according to Neal, not only uncertain at this juncture, but has been the subject of debate for many years.[14] Wilder's review of 2005 data about academic libraries confirmed tremendous growth in the proportion of library professionals without the MLS, with most in that group occupying nontraditional positions, characterized as new types of positions as well as those not previously associated with librarianship.[15] Citing comments from a non-MLS public library director who minimized the value of the MLS, Miller offered a perspective quite different from Neal's when she countered, "… it's not the job that makes you a librarian, it's the degree."[16]

Blixrud's 1999 survey of 111 member institutions of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) found that 44% of the libraries do not require an MLS for all librarian positions.[17] Later, in 2011, Shaffer pointed out that the survey results were based on an expressed willingness to hire a non-MLS candidate, "not that they actually were seeking someone without that credential, or with different credentials."[18] However, Grimes and Grimes' 2008 study of over 4,000 job advertisements from 1975-2005 in *College and Research Libraries* documented a significant decline in listings requiring an MLS. Those academic librarian positions deemed to represent "basic core functions" – public services, technical services, administrative – were much more likely to require the MLS than positions needing specialist skills – systems, special collections.

They concluded "the degree's relative importance has declined over time, particularly in those areas of librarianship strongly impacted by structural change," and inferred from this that MLS training may be considered outdated in light of evolving needs.[19] Mullins' findings from a random focus group of nine ARL directors held in 2011 supported this supposition.[20]

Surveys

A total of 1,370 surveys were distributed to academic and public library directors in spring 2011 via Survey Monkey. Sampling size was established based on data presented in *The Evaluation and Measurement of Library Services*: 500 academic library deans/directors, extracted from a total of 1,509 colleges and universities, and 370 public library directors, extracted from a total of 8,118 public library systems.[21] The details are described below.

Two random samples of academic institutions were identified by compiling a list of the 1,509 colleges and universities listed in the 2011 edition of *The Complete Book of Colleges*.[22] To address size of institution, the Index by Size list, which categorizes institutions into groups based on student population sizes less than 4,000, 4,000-10,000, and more than 10,000, was scanned and converted to text using optical character recognition to facilitate sampling. The two largest groupings were combined and alphabetized to create two levels of institutions – those with student populations less than 4,000 and 4,000 and greater. Target institutions were selected using random numbers gathered via Random Integer Generator.[23] Fifty-six% of the academic institutions surveyed had student populations of less than 4,000 and 44% had student populations 4,000 and greater. The return rate was 76% of 500 academic library deans/directors sampled.

For the public library survey, a list of 8,118 public library systems was compiled from PublicLibraries.com.[24] A random sample was selected using Random Integer Generator. The return rate was 41% of 370 public library directors. The population of the "legal service area" of the respondents was skewed to smaller libraries with 69% representing libraries with 25,000 or less.

Results

Respondent characteristics:

The length of time the survey respondents have been directors is spread across a spectrum (Chart 1, below). For academic library directors there are 27% with less than 5 years as director, 26% with 5-10 years of experience, 27% at 11-20 years, and 20% with more than 20 years. For public library directors 35% have less than 5 years of experience down to 13% with more than 20 years.
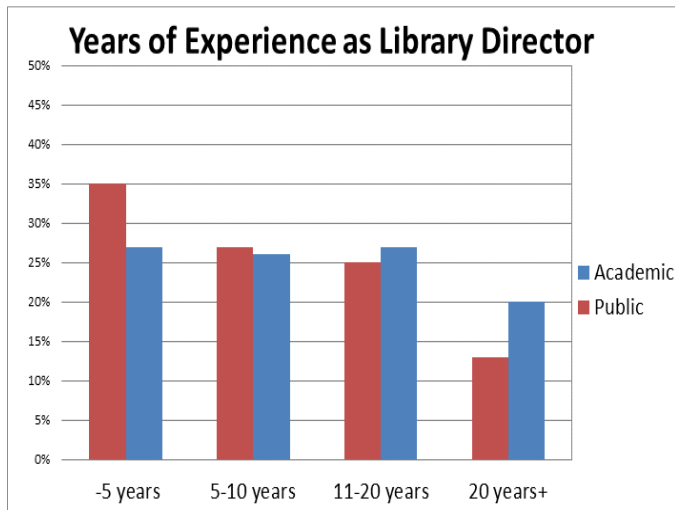
Years of Experience as Library Director

Chart 1

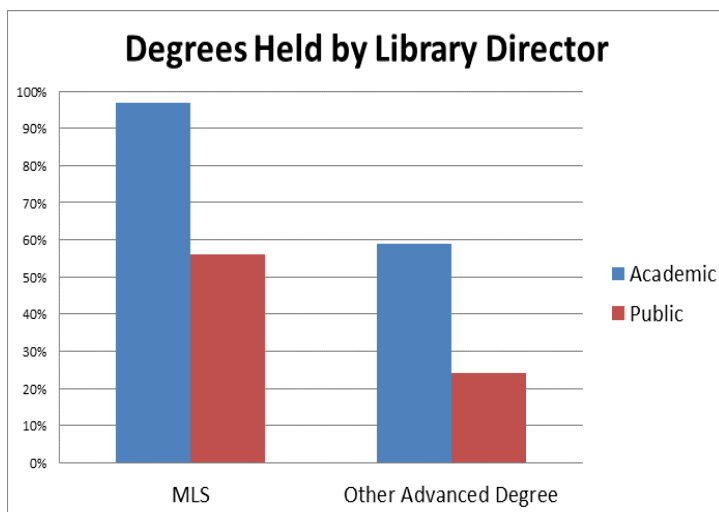**Degrees Held by Library Director**

Chart 2

The overwhelming majority of academic library directors, 97%, have an MLS (Chart 2). This is dramatically different from the public library directors where slightly more than half, 56%, have an MLS. Of the public library directors who do not have an MLS, 94% work at libraries where the service area population is 25,000 or less. As noted below, state exemptions based on library size impact degree requirements for public librarians.

More than half of academic library directors responding, 59%, have a master's degree in another field. This contrasts with public library directors where less than a quarter, 24%, have a master's degree in another field.

Institutional requirements:

MLS Requirement for All Professional Librarian Positions

A bar chart titled "MLS Requirement for All Professional Librarian Positions." The y-axis shows percentages from 0% to 100% in 10% increments. Two categories on the x-axis: "MLS Required" and "MLS Not Required." Legend: Academic (blue), Public (red). For MLS Required: Academic about 87%, Public about 37%. For MLS Not Required: Academic about 13%, Public about 63%.
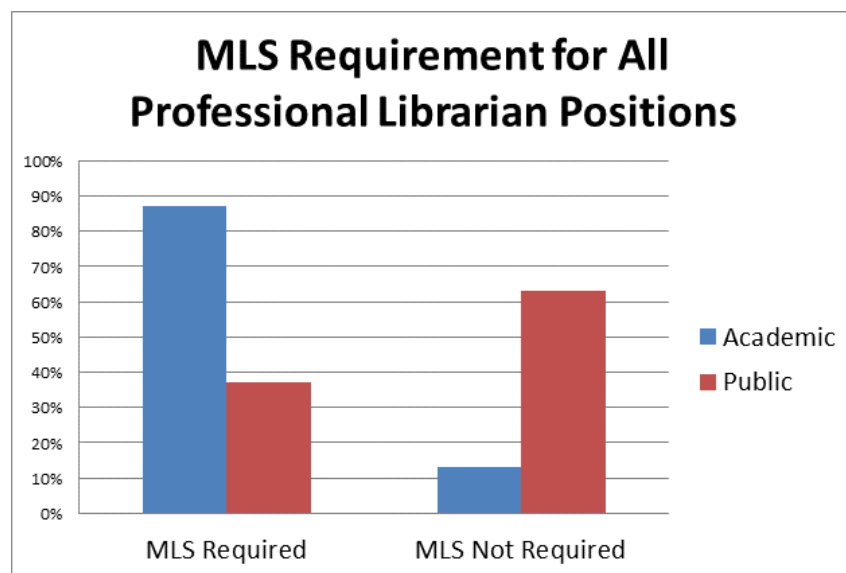
Chart 3

A solid majority of the academic library directors, 87%, said an MLS is required for all professional librarian positions at their library (Chart 3). The opposite is true for the public library directors, of which 37% said that it is required.[*]

After citing low salaries as impacting recruitment, one of the public library directors said, "I have learned that not all positions require an MLS or an advanced degree; rather the attitude of the person and the willingness to learn is what makes a good librarian." Another said, "an MLS degree does not necessarily make you a competent director, experience matters!" An academic library director explained, "Being a librarian is a profession, and an MLS is a credential that indicates that a person has the formal education and training necessary to be a member of the profession. It is beyond just being able to do a job; it has to do with having a common set of values and ethics, and carrying out responsibilities with these in mind."

But even though most academic library directors said an MLS is required for all professional librarian positions, that still means that 13% said it is not, and as indicated, 63% of the public library directors said it is not required.

The data do not show a relationship between years of service as a director and a response indicating the MLS is required for public library directors. This is not the case with the academic library directors. Those academic library directors who are relatively new to their position or

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[*] The survey did not define what a professional librarian position is because the purpose of the survey was to elicit from the directors their views of professional librarianship and not impose a set of restrictive criteria. It was left to the library directors to interpret based on their own context. This approach mirrors the methodology used by the Association of Research Libraries for the ARL Salary Survey http://www.arlstatistics.org/documents/admin/sal12_uinstr.pdf.

those who have served more than 20 years were more apt to say that it is required than those with 5-10 and 11-20 years of experience.
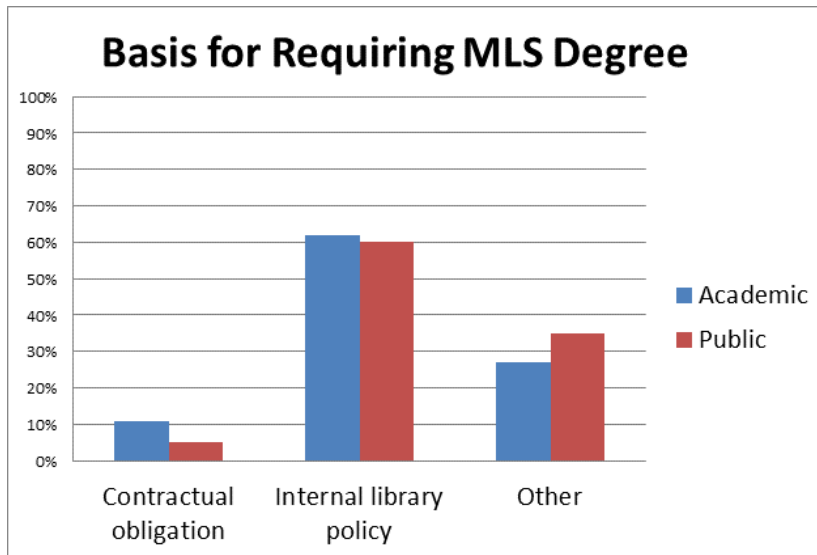

Chart 4

The public library directors who said the MLS is required for all professional librarian positions were asked why (Chart 4). Most responded that internal library policy drives the decision: 62% for academic and 60% for public. Eleven% of the academics and 5% of the publics checked the option that said "Contractual obligation (for example, a collective bargaining agreement, etc." Comments noted in the Other category for academics were university, state, and accreditation requirements and for publics were state, county, and city requirements.
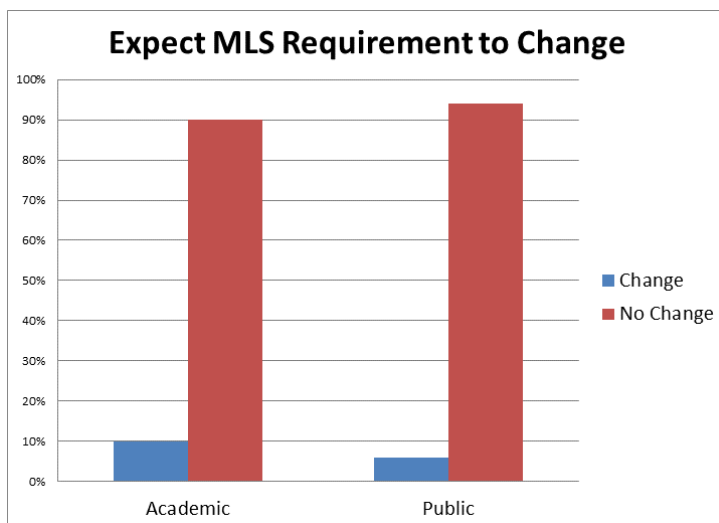

Chart 5

The library directors who said that the MLS is required for all librarian positions at their library were also asked if they expect this to change in the future (Chart 5). Ten% of the academic

library directors and 5% of the public library directors said they do expect a change. So even among the directors who said the MLS is required currently, a small minority were inclined to think this would not be true moving forward.

When asked, academic library directors cited the need to hire non-MLS librarians for subject expertise and technical skills, such as Web design, data management, and digital services as well as data curators, copyright specialists, instructional design specialists, rare books curators, subject liaisons, and archivists. A few expressed concerns about MLS preparation as noted by one respondent who said, "… the skills and knowledge needed to run today's and tomorrow's libraries are increasing and increasingly complex, and may not all be provided by the traditional MLS." In this regard, another comment made was, "The poor quality of the ALA-accredited MLSs that are being produced is one of the reasons that some directors are considering forgoing the degree."
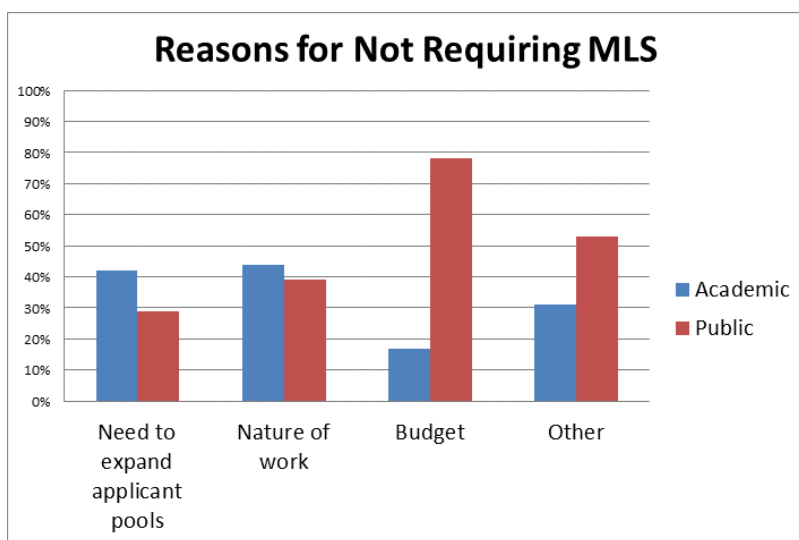

Chart 6

When asked their reasons for not requiring the MLS, the directors were given the option of checking all that apply (Chart 6). The list included the need to expand applicant pools, the nature of the work, and the budget, and allowed the respondent to indicate other reasons. Close to half of the academic library directors, over 40%, indicated the need to expand applicant pools and the nature of the work are the driving forces behind not requiring the degree. A much smaller percentage, 17%, said it was driven by the budget. However, a strong majority of the public library directors, 78%, said that the budget was a factor in not requiring the degree. The need to expand applicant pools and the nature of the work, while still notable, appear to be lesser issues for the public library directors. In the Other category, state exemption due to library size was the predominant reason public library directors cited. Responses in this area from academic library directors mostly reiterated that the nature of the work is an important factor, but there were comments voicing the opinion that the MLS degree is increasingly irrelevant and that domain and specialist knowledge is critical and may come with another, discipline-specific, degree.

Many respondents made a distinction between positions that are professional and support the work of the library (e.g., HR, IT) and those that are considered more traditional librarian positions (e.g., Acquisitions, Cataloging, Collection Management, Instruction, Reference). This quote from an academic library director reinforces this point: 'It is important to distinguish between "librarian" positions and professional positions in libraries. The two are not the same. I would not hire a non-librarian to run cataloging or reference & instruction, but I would have no problem with a non-librarian running our data management services or in Web design.' But, as noted above, libraries vary in their understanding of what is considered a "library professional" versus a "librarian". To complicate matters further, a number of the survey respondents seem quite willing to hire non-MLS degreed applicants into professional librarian positions as long as they agree to get an MLS within a specified number of years, which implies that the degree is actually a requirement, if not a prerequisite for performing the job.

Importance of MLS to Academic Library Directors Who Do Not Require MLS for All Professional Librarian Positions
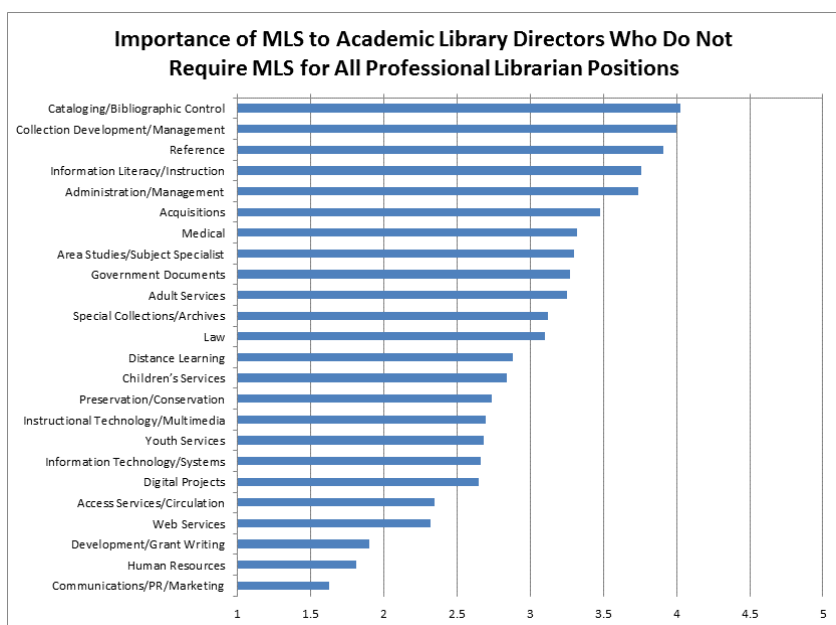
Chart 7

The academic library directors who said they do not require an MLS for all professional librarian positions were asked how important it is for particular types of positions to require an MLS using a scale with 1 = not important to 5 = essential (Chart 7). The position types correspond to those used by ALA JobLIST with some modification.[25] Charts 7 and 8 represent the rating averages for each position type as indicated by the directors. The top five position types considered most important for academic library directors are Cataloging/Bibliographic Control, Collection Development/Management, Reference, Information Literacy/Instruction, and Administration/Management. Those position types considered least important to have an MLS are Communications/PR/Marketing, Human Resources, Development/Grant Writing, Web Services, and Access Services/Circulation.

Importance of MLS to Public Library Directors Who Do Not Require MLS for All Professional Librarian Positions

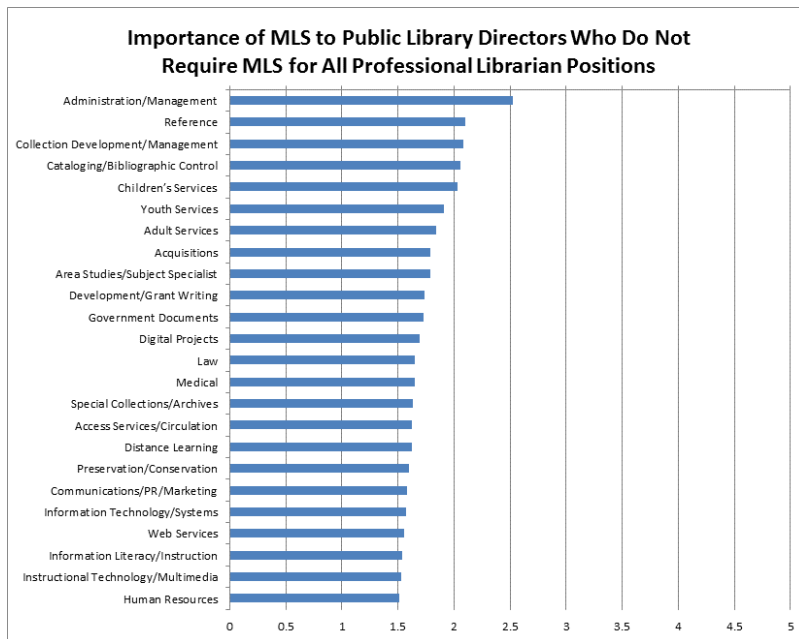| Position	
Administration/Management	
Reference	
Collection Development/Management	
Cataloging/Bibliographic Control	
Children's Services	
Youth Services	
Adult Services	
Acquisitions	
Area Studies/Subject Specialist	
Development/Grant Writing	
Government Documents	
Digital Projects	
Law	
Medical	
Special Collections/Archives	
Access Services/Circulation	
Distance Learning	
Preservation/Conservation	
Communications/PR/Marketing	
Information Technology/Systems	
Web Services	
Information Literacy/Instruction	
Instructional Technology/Multimedia	
Human Resources	

Chart 8

For public library directors, the types of positions considered most important to have an MLS are Administration/Management, Reference, Collection Development/Management, Cataloging/Bibliographic Control, and Children's Services. The types of positions considered least important are Human Resources, Instructional Technology/Multimedia, Information Literacy/Instruction, Web Services, and Information Technology/Systems.

Highest Rating Average

Legend: ■ Academic ■ Public

Categories: Administration/Management, Cataloging/Bibliographic Control, Collection Development/Management, Reference, Information Literacy/Instruction, Children's Services
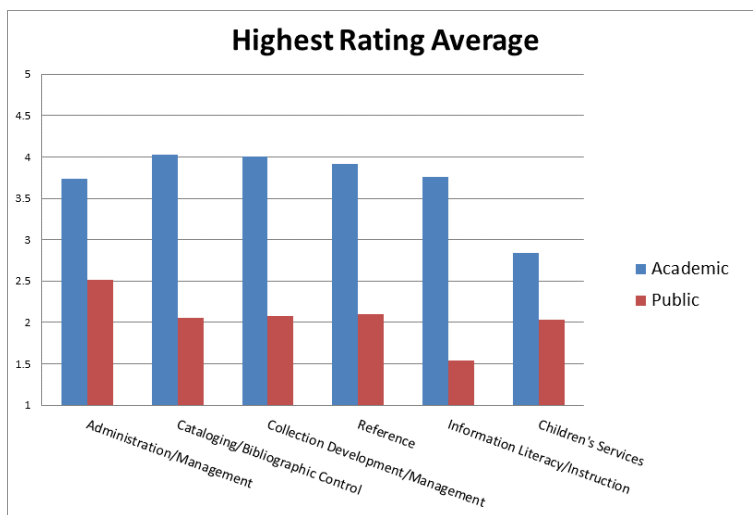
Chart 9

Chart 9 compares the positions most often requiring an MLS, combining the top five from the academic library directors and the top five from the public library directors. Interestingly, four position types appear in both lists: Administration/Management, Cataloging/Bibliographic Control, Collection Development/Management, and Reference. It is worth noting that the

highest rating averages for the public library directors were still significantly lower than most of the rating averages (high and low) for the academic library directors.
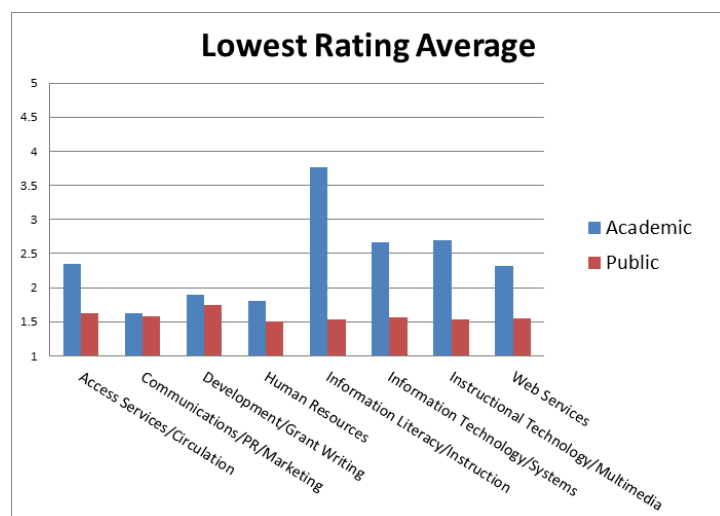

Chart 10

The lowest rated positions are noted in Chart 10. Only two appeared in the lowest group for both sets of directors: Human Resources and Web Services. Information Literacy/Instruction is noteworthy because it was in the top five for the academic library directors and in the bottom five for the public library directors.

Conclusion

Librarians come to the field from widely varying backgrounds and experiences. This diversity not only enriches our libraries, it also creates an environment where non-MLS librarians may be more easily assimilated. The MLS degree has been the primary means through which the profession creates a unifying identity with a shared set of values and knowledge/skills, but there is a growing acceptance that librarian status is not solely degree-based. Some may denounce this, but the survey data indicate that in public libraries hiring non-MLS librarians is common practice and in academic libraries, this type of hiring is gaining momentum, given that 13% of academic library directors said the degree is not required for all professional librarian positions and another 10% said they expect this to be the case in the future. While the debate continues, some library administrators and hiring authorities are finding that meeting the needs of their constituents may mean hiring professionals without the MLS and fully integrating them as librarians.

The research results validate previous findings that the MLS is not consistently a requirement in librarian recruitment and hiring and point to the need for additional research about the impact of this practice on the workplace. What type of orientation and training is needed for non-MLS librarians? How does their job satisfaction compare to MLS librarians? Are there differences in their opportunities for advancement? Is the compensation for the two groups different, and if so, why? Such investigations will inform hiring decisions and professional development activities, thus insuring the workplace fully supports all librarians.

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