
Volume 13
Number 1
New Voices/New Views: The Next Wave of Librarians (Spring 2007)

July 2014

Finding My Library Niche: Making Jello Without a Mold

Sue Phelps
Washington State University, Vancouver

Recommended Citation

Phelps, S. (2014). Finding My Library Niche: Making Jello Without a Mold. *OLA Quarterly*, 13(1), 3-6.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1143>

Finding My Library Niche:

Making Jello Without a Mold

by Sue Phelps

*Washington State University Library,
Vancouver*

*2006 Graduate of the School
of Library and Information
Management,
Emporia State University*

After the celebration of graduation and a short rest we, newly minted librarians, are hitting the bricks anticipating our first professional job. Some of us have left careers in other fields and expect to start over. Some of us are entering librarianship as a first career. Presumably, all of us have high hopes of putting what we have learned into practice in the library specialty of our choice. I am looking forward to a career in an academic library and look to the literature of local and national organizations and publications to assess the current employment climate.

The Oregon Library Association's Vision 2010 committee developed a plan for the future of Oregon Libraries based on a

vision of what Oregon will be like in the year 2010. In their profile of academic libraries, one of the issues the committee addressed is the declining applicant pool of qualified individuals. Additionally, the Association of College and Research Libraries has also named recruitment, education and retention of librarians as one of the top seven issues facing academic libraries (Hisle, 2002).

These organizational reports give me the impression that academic libraries are in need of new librarians and that jobs should not be in short supply. At the same time library literature validates the experience of many in my graduating class who



Sue Phelps

are having a hard time finding a full-time, permanent, professional position in an academic setting. Why is this? In seeking to answer this question, I learned that it is not just job seekers in the academic field who are struggling. In fact, according to recent articles in library journals, entry-level professional jobs are hard to find in every area of librarianship. If we thought library school was tough, now we really have our work cut out for us! Here is what I found that may explain the discrepancy.

Projections from the 1990 census data indicated that there would be a large number of librarians retiring between 2010–14. However, those predictions have changed since the 2000 census. Now we are looking at those retirements being pushed back to 2015–19, assuming a retirement age of 65. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the jobs retiring librarians will be leaving, many in management, will be filled with current librarians, leaving vacancies for new graduates to move into entry-level positions. Librarians, it seems, are not eager to move out of frontline jobs to assume management positions. Though there is a need to prepare the leaders of the future, the potential candidates are not motivated toward that end, leaving a shortage of qualified managers (Gordon, 2006).

Gordon describes this as a glut on the front lines, which is made more difficult by the cost-cutting measures seen in all types of libraries. According to a survey of nearly 900 job advertisements, full time, professional, entry-level positions are rare (Holt and Strock, 2005). Many professional positions are being refilled with non-professional staff or not being replaced at all. In addition, the entry-level positions that are available are going to librarians who have already been working in the profession. Holt and Strock, citing an earlier ARL Bimonthly Report published in 2000, state

that of 800 new hires in academic libraries in 1998 only one third were new graduates. This is also happening in public libraries. Professional jobs are being reduced to part-time or being filled by paraprofessionals or non-librarians with skills in technology.

If that weren't enough to put a damper on the job search, think of the ALA estimates from 2000 predicting approximately 41,000 job openings between 2000 and 2010, or 4,100 jobs a year. At the same time, ALA also reported an average of 5,000 new MLS graduates entering the job market each year (Holt and Strock, 2005). Locally, two library schools and numerous online programs make the Northwest market especially tight for the place-bound job hunter. Even those casting a national net are likely to look for about a year before finding their first job.

Despite the difficulties described in the literature, people from my graduating class of May 2006 have found jobs during library school and since graduation. Many of those jobs are part-time, temporary, on-call, or paraprofessional. Happily some have found full-time permanent jobs in their chosen specialty. Still, like other MLS graduates around the country, others are considering leaving their hopes of being a librarian behind to see where else they can put their degree to work.

Graduates who have taken part time, temporary and on-call jobs have a mixed take on their status, myself included. First and foremost, we are happy to be working in a library. For those of us who are in our first library job it is the type of immersion learning that is just not possible in a brief practicum experience. People who are working part time or on-call in more than one library learn different systems, network with many different librarians and have the opportunity to learn skills and discover where they fit into the profession in a way



that someone in only one library cannot. For those who have family responsibilities, part-time positions might be just what they need in the professional world for now.

The down side of these part-time, temporary and on-call jobs is at least financial. It feels like an added cost of the MLS. For people who want a full-time professional position, we miss the sense of belonging that comes with having a job that fits your needs and matches your skills. This lack of belonging can translate into a lack of commitment as the librarian looks for permanent work elsewhere. It can be a nerve-racking process to be in a temporary position waiting to see if your contract will be renewed or to be interviewing for your job along with other candidates. For those who work in more than one library, there is a risk of becoming over extended as you take on projects that interest you in each site and soon find that there is no time to do it all.

Currently, there is a two-year study sponsored by the Institute for Museum and Library Science looking at the future of librarians in the workforce. Headed by Dr. Jose-Marie Griffiths, Dean of the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, investigators will conduct a series of Web-based surveys of public, academic, school and special libraries. The goal is to assess the anticipated labor shortages, the types of jobs that will be available, and the skills that will be needed to fill vacancies, as well as how the field should approach recruitment, education and retention. For more detailed information check out the Web site at <http://www.libraryworkforce.org/tiki-index.php>. We can hope the outcomes will resolve the conflicting information that we are hearing at this time.

So, what can make the difference for students and graduates looking for jobs

right now? Experience! Practicum placements, especially for students who are new to the library field, are invaluable to add hands-on experience to academic learning. Though practica are encouraged, many people do not want to pay tuition in order to work for no compensation. Consequently, they miss out on the opportunity to gain valuable library experience. This experience is especially important because of the theoretical nature of MLS programs based on ALA accreditation. Projects completed during a practicum are often something that can be added to a resume, to say nothing of the professional reference from the site supervisor. There are also instances where practicum placements have turned into jobs.

Graduates can benefit by volunteering at a library or working in a part-time or temporary position to gain experience

Is managing your e-journal collection
more difficult than you expected?

We can help.

EBSCO's services include e-journal audits to confirm that your library is billed only for the titles ordered, itemized invoices to facilitate budget allocation, and customized serials management reports to assist with collection development.

We assist with non-access problems, IP address changes and more. And our e-resource access and management tools minimize administrative tasks while maximizing patron experience.


To learn more, contact your EBSCO sales representative today.

www.ebsco.com
CUSTOMERFOCUSEDCONTENTDRIVEN



to include on a resume while continuing to look for full-time employment. Staying in touch with the library and other librarians after losing regular contact with library school can help aspiring librarians avoid the temptation to give up as well as provide opportunities to network and make contacts that could be references or leads to jobs. Additionally, looking at job ads to see what skills are desirable and considering continuing education can make for a more attractive resume. Just when you thought you could read novels and take long walks on the beach ...

Finally, as we advance in our careers we need to consider how our choices contribute to the future of librarianship as well as to our own success. Though right now many of us are focused on looking for our first professional job, there are questions to answer and problems to be solved about employment and other issues in our new profession. Technology, the economy and politics on a local to global scale will have an impact on how we are able to provide information services in the future. It is both exciting and frightening to take responsibility for what becomes of libraries in this new environment. We have a tradition to uphold and a future that looks like “jello without a mold.” We can make an impact on what libraries and librarians will look like down the road if we are involved in library organizations, the community, and the institutions that support our libraries. We can all read *Vision 2010*, the white papers and reports offered by OLA and ALA, and find an area of interest in which to work and make our contribution. The greatest challenge may be to keep an open mind while we ride the wave of ambiguity we’ve heard so much about. My hope is that

as members of the professional library community we can support each other through the challenges and spark each other’s imaginations to creative solutions. After all, isn’t that how we got through library school? 

References

- Gordon, R. S. (2006). Secure our professional future. *Library Journal*, 3:50.
- Hisle, W. L. (2002). Top issues facing academic libraries: A report of the Focus on the Future Task Force. *C&RL News*, 63:10. <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrl-pubs/crlnews/backissues2002/novmonth/topissuesfacing.htm>
- Holt, R., and Strock, A. L. (2005). The entry level gap. *Library Journal* 8:36–39.
- Institute for Museum and Library Science <http://www.libraryworkforce.org/tiki-index.php>
- Oregon Library Association *Vision 2010*. <http://www.olaweb.org/v2010/index.shtml>

