



Evidence Summary

Novice Academic Librarians Provide Insight into Choosing Their Careers, Graduate School Education, and First Years on the Job

A Review of:

Sare, L., Bales, S., & Neville, B. (2012). New academic librarians and their perceptions of the profession. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 12(2), 179-203. doi: 10.1353/pla.2012.0017

Reviewed by:

Carol D. Howe
Reference Librarian/Associate Professor
Gabriele Library, Immaculata University
Immaculata, Pennsylvania, United States of America
Email: chowe@immaculata.edu

Received: 2 Aug. 2012

Accepted: 26 Oct. 2012

© 2012 Howe. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 2.5 Canada (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/ca/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

Abstract

Objective – To study the ways in which novice academic librarians' perceptions of librarianship develop from the time they decide to attend library school through their first 6 to 24 months of library work.

Design – Grounded theory method utilizing two qualitative research techniques: one-on-one, face-to-face interviews and document analysis.

Setting – The libraries of three Texas universities, three Texas four-year colleges, and one Texas community college.

Subjects – 12 professional academic librarians who graduated from eight different graduate

schools. Participants were 6 to 24 months into their professional careers and had little or no pre-professional experience.

Methods – The researchers sought participants through mailings, emails, electronic mailing list postings, and referrals from other participants. They conducted a small pilot study with two novice librarians to refine their research methodology. The researchers interviewed additional participants and analyzed the interview transcripts until categories of interest were identified and saturated. Saturation occurred at 12 participants, not including the pilot participants. Each interview was 30-45 minutes. The researchers recorded the interviews and systematically coded the transcripts using activist imagery. Four of the

participants gave the researchers their “statement of purpose” essay that they used when applying for graduate school. These documents were also discussed with participants and analyzed.

Main Results – From the data they collected, the researchers identified six categories of interest regarding librarians’ perceptions of librarianship: deciding upon a career, experiencing graduate school, continuing education, defining the work, evaluating the work, and (re)imagining the future. In considering librarianship as a career, the participants had not been entirely sure what it entailed, but they utilized what they did know about libraries and librarianship to generally deem the profession solid, safe, and/or noble. They had further explored librarianship to determine its compatibility with their personal characteristics. Such personal reflection had led participants to graduate school where they gained a real understanding of librarianship. The participants had not generally found graduate school to be academically challenging. They had also valued practical over theoretical instruction. Once in the workplace, the participants noted the value of continuing education to strengthen the skills they had learned in graduate school. Participants benefitted the most from informal mentoring and on-the-job training, i.e. “learning by doing” (p. 192). As novice librarians, the participants had learned to feel their way around their job expectations and note the differences between their responsibilities and those of paraprofessionals in the library. As the novice librarians further defined their work, they had also learned that academic librarianship is the sum of many parts, including collaboration with peers. In evaluating their work, the participants noted that they had come to distinguish “real” academic library work, that which uses their expertise and helps society, from “other” work such as clerical work (pp. 195-196). The sixth and final category was “(re)imagining the future.” Most of the participants predicted having advanced as academic librarians in the next five years but were otherwise unsure about what their futures would hold.

Conclusion – The researchers made a number of valuable observations in their work with novice librarians. As the step of deciding upon a career seemed to be a murky quest, they thought it would be helpful to analyze public opinion of librarianship and use that information to offset misperceptions about what librarians do. This might help those considering librarianship to make informed and conscious decisions.

The study data also provided insight into graduate school. The fact that the participants did not consider graduate school to be rigorous concerned the researchers. They feared that librarians entering the field might not deem it a serious profession. Because the participants favored practical over theoretical classes, the researchers thought it important for graduate schools to teach theoretical concepts in a way that is more satisfying to students. They felt that other applied fields, such as nursing, might provide examples of how to do so. The researchers also noted that graduate schools could do more to prepare students for life on the job. As new librarians reported favouring “real” work over “other” work, the researchers felt that students should hear it first in graduate school that all the work librarians do is an important and necessary part of academic librarianship. As most participants were uncertain about what their futures as academic librarians might look like, the researchers thought that graduate school professors should address that issue as well.

Data from this study also gave insight into how employers might best serve new librarians. The researchers suggest looking to new teacher induction programs to get ideas for orienting new librarians to the profession. Orientation might include a combination of formal and informal techniques such as peer mentors, peer observation, new librarian training, and new librarian handbooks in the first year of employment.

Finally, the researchers proposed ideas for future research. They believe it might be helpful to study experienced academic librarians or new public librarians for comparison to this study.

Commentary

Other studies have examined students' perceptions of librarianship, new librarians' perceptions of specific aspects of librarianship, and experienced librarians' perceptions of the profession. This study is the first to examine new librarians' perceptions of academic librarianship as a continuum: the evolution of a budding librarian into a professional. The grounded theory method proved an effective way to bring the most meaningful data to the surface. The six distinct categories that emerged give a broad sense of the path that a new librarian follows.

The study has some significant weaknesses, however, that cast doubt onto the validity of the results. Most obvious is the small number of participants combined with the fact that all participants were from Texas libraries. In addition, the researchers did not include much information about their interview strategy and whether specific questions were consistently asked. This might have explained to some extent the small number of participants, or in other words, why the researchers felt that saturation occurred at 12 participants. Also regarding the interviews, the researchers indicated that they cross-coded 20% (translating to about two and a half) of the interview transcripts. The small number of cross-coded transcripts leads one to question the coding consistency. Finally, the terminology describing the pilot portion of the study was confusing in that the two pilot participants were referred to as participants one and two, and the 12 actual study

participants were referred to as participants 3 through 14.

Because of its small size, one cannot use the data from this study to reliably generalize to the larger population of novice academic librarians. It does, however, provide an interesting initial exploration of their perceptions of the profession. Many readers will relate to the participants' imprecise method of choosing librarianship as a career, the rewards and frustrations of graduate school, and the process of slowly but surely creating one's identity as a professional librarian. The strengths of this study are twofold. First, it provides ample avenues for future research. This might include similar studies with more, randomly selected participants from different geographic locations. As stated by the researchers, it would also be interesting to compare this data to that from experienced librarians or public librarians. Second, the researchers fleshed out several important themes: the influence that public perception of librarianship has on those considering entry into the field, the role of graduate school in preparing future librarians, and ideas for effective post-graduate training. This data, combined with data from potential future research of this sort, might be noteworthy to several populations. Those considering librarianship would find an insider's perspective from potential peers invaluable. Graduate schools looking to increase their impact as well as employers looking to effectively support their new librarians would also be wise to examine the results of such studies.