
To “degree” or not to “degree”: Academic librarians and subject expertise

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The qualifications that should define the professional librarian are often and vigorously debated. If the MLS is generally upheld as the *sine qua non* for academic, public, and special librarians, the value of additional “paper” qualification is not. In academia, however, the attainment of a research-oriented terminal degree is a given; it is vitally important, if not essential, for college and university faculty. Wherever librarians have faculty status, they are likely to find their portfolios being evaluated as if they were teaching faculty. Academic librarians who do not have faculty status may find it even more difficult to win professional respect from teaching and research faculty. Of course, a librarian does not need a subject master’s, much less a doctorate, in order to make a major contribution to an academic community, but lack of academic credentials may make it very hard to be perceived as making a significant contribution and impossible to be perceived as an equal partner in the educational enterprise.

Some will say that the academic librarian has to play various roles and meet various expectations, often with little institutional support. This is not unusual. Teaching faculty complain of inadequate support. However, the fact is, an academic librarian will never recoup in salary the financial and emotional investment that graduate degrees require. Moreover, timing graduate study is uniquely difficult for librarians. If they enter library school with graduate degree(s) in hand, they have to struggle with cognitive dissonance or “unlearn” their previous graduate acculturation and later reintegrate it into their librarianship.¹ If they try to pursue graduate education after they become librarians, they may encounter various constraints. Some colleges and universities do not permit faculty or professional ranks to pursue “in-house” degrees, and the logistics (not to mention the costs) of attending another institution may be daunting. In any case, pursuing graduate education is difficult; doing it while holding down a full-time job is much more difficult. The bifurcation of roles as librarian and embryonic scholar has to be stressful, and the stress can be exacerbated by the demands

of disciplinary acculturation, which the librarian must balance with the professional acculturation of librarianship. This process of reconciliation can be especially challenging if a doctorate is pursued.²

Yet, despite the clear costs attached to graduate degrees, academic librarians need them in order to be credible. Nor is credibility the only reward they offer. In-depth acquaintance with the intellectual agenda of a discipline sensitizes the academic librarian to the fields of research and the sociology of knowledge within that discipline. An informed appreciation of a discipline’s mission and growth is especially critical to collection development that supports an institution’s or a department’s research and instructional vision. Subject expertise can only enhance a librarian’s ability to interpret the collections to students and scholars. Public services can make a rich contribution to the educative process when they are performed by librarians who have a solid grounding in a subject discipline.

While it is debatable what formal qualifications an academic librarian should ideally possess, a requirement of certain knowledge bases and a sound appreciation for the mission of higher education should be accepted. Graduate education in a subject provides useful tools—they may be languages, statistics, methodologies—and instills a scholarly ethos. It is indicative of an intellectual commitment to the goals of scholarship that the teaching faculty has a right to expect of academic librarians. A period of guided intellectual effort in a subject indelibly affects those who experience it. The benefits translate into social and intellectual cachet in a community which implicitly maintains that to be equal though different, academic librarians should undergo this rite of passage. ■ ■

¹Jeffrey Cooper, Janet Gertz, and Mark Sandler, “From Ph.D. to MLS: Retraining in librarianship,” *Library Journal* 112 (May 1, 1987): 41–42.

²B. M. Clark and T. M. Gaughan, “Socialization of library school students: A framework for analysis of a current problem,” *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 19 (Spring 1979): 283–93.



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Cornell math faculty donate funds for endowment

Cornell University math professors have begun teaching extra classes and donating those earnings toward a half-million-dollar endowment fund to buy books and periodicals for their library.

Cornell's library system has been increasing its acquisition budget at double the rate of inflation for years. The university, in its \$1.25 billion capital campaign announced last October, is planning to provide \$30 million for the university library's acquisition endowment. However, the added revenue won't arrive for some time, and the math faculty does not wish to risk a decline in the quality of the library that is so vital to their research.

"Mathematics is a contemplative science," says department chair Keith Dennis. "In mathematics the research laboratory is the library. There are not many machines that will help you do math—unlike physics or chemistry. There is no multimillion-dollar equipment for doing math—with the exception of computers."

Three years ago, Dennis hit upon the idea of teaching a course—the department chair is a non-teaching position—and donating the funds to the library. When his dean approved the idea, Dennis began speaking with his faculty, one-on-one, about raising money for their library. He asked them to teach one extra course over the next five years and

donate the funds to the library, provided he could raise matching funds. Dennis reports that about 90 percent of his department has or will participate, and that outside funding is beginning to come in as well. A number of the faculty received outside funding for research, travel, sponsoring conferences, etc., that they have also donated. Others wrote checks. The mathematics faculty have collected over \$70,000 for the endowment, which they plan to open July 1 of this year. Dennis hopes to raise \$250,000 from faculty contributions and match that with another \$250,000.

At first, the idea didn't sit right with all of those now participating. Professor Moss Sweedler, for instance, grumbled when he was invited to participate. But as he considered financial realities of the periodicals market, he decided to participate. "An endowment that will pay for subscriptions to 50 journals a year will make a big difference in the short run. But I'm skeptical of how much of a difference this money will make compared to the magnitude of the problem," said professor John Guckenheimer.

Mathematics librarian Steve Rockey reports he'll spend \$110,000 on periodicals, a 30 percent increase over last year's \$84,000. Most math journals cost about \$200 per year. ■ ■