

International Perspectives on the New Librarian Experience

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Asking questions

As a "seasoned" new professional (seven years in the profession), I am always eager to explore the perspectives of new librarians from different regions of the world. In October 2006, I issued a short questionnaire to the IFLA New Professionals Discussion Group listserv to find out more about their views.¹

The following article, based on the results of this questionnaire, a literature review and anecdotal evidence from discussion lists, explores the views and activities of some recently qualified librarians, particularly regarding their participation in library associations.

Mapping responses

- A total of 176 individuals responded to the questionnaire, including new librarians and soon-to-graduate librarians from five continents and 12 countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa and the United States.
- Of these, 64% were librarians with five or fewer years of experience. A total of 72% were under the age of 38 (51% of respondents were 32 years old or younger).

- Respondents were drawn from a variety of library settings, including special libraries (32%), public libraries (29%) and academic libraries (29%).
- Participants worked as reference librarians (29%), technical services staff (20%) and administrative staff (14%); other respondents included researchers and students.
- A substantial 91% of respondents were women. *Diversity Counts*, a report published in September 2006 by the American Library Association, indicates that 80% of ALA members are female.² Broad figures for credentialed librarians and library assistants in the United States echo these percentages.³

Library associations and the new librarian

In recent years, library associations from a number of countries have developed initiatives to include new librarians in their activities. The evidence suggests that new librarians are, in fact, participating in their national library associations. A total of 73% of questionnaire respondents are members of a national library association; 14% are non-members and 13% have not renewed their memberships, either because they



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could not pay the dues, are disappointed with their associations or did not know how to renew. Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that their national library association has a section for new librarians (see sidebar).

To what degree are new professionals involved in their associations? While all respondents agreed that their national associations welcome participation from new librarians, 55% were uncertain whether their association hosted conference programs targeted at new librarians. Regardless of actual availability, responses suggest a need for better communication between associations and newcomers.

These days, it's easy to spot mechanisms that could enhance dialogue between newcomers and associations. Innumerable wikis,

blogs, forums and websites offer prime opportunities for information exchange. They create discussion spaces that allow for the sharing of news, events and trends, regardless of geography. The creators and users of some of these social software tools might be approached to work in conjunction with library associations in developing even more powerful information tools that will engage a broader set of participants.

The leadership angle

An encouraging 58% of respondents said that their associations offer leadership programs for new librarians, and a new wave of professionals is capitalizing on these opportunities. ALA launched its Emerging Leaders program in January 2007 at the midwinter conference in Seattle. This initiative trains 100 new librarians for six months to prepare them for leadership opportunities within the Association, its divisions and state chapters. REFORMA, the U.S. Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, and an ALA affiliate, boasts a successful mentoring program that matches new librarians and students with more experienced library specialists.

In the United Kingdom, CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) has developed mentoring programs. ALIA (the Australian Library and Information Association) hosts the Aurora Leadership Institute, which seeks to "assist future leaders in the library and associated cultural and

information industry to maximize their leadership skills and potential."⁴ The Institute is accessible to librarians from both Australia and New Zealand. ALIA's New Librarians' Symposium, a two-day annual conference, is a popular event that includes professional and social programs. The ALIA Biennial Conference features events planned by the New Graduates Advisory Group.

Our professional futures

Although other surveys – such as "The Entry-Level Gap"⁵ – have revealed that often new graduates have difficulty accessing entry-level positions, many questionnaire respondents have successfully won positions in which they can develop diverse skills.

Nevertheless, the findings show that 97% of respondents would consider pursuing a position in a library sector other than the one they belong to now. The reasons given included the desire to acquire skills suitable for different library settings, the possibility of finding a job in which they have access to mentoring, and a desire to move to a domain more in line with their educational backgrounds. Still, they are willing to take on jobs wherever they find challenging environments in which new professionals are respected, and where there is opportunity to participate in institutional planning.

Given the opportunity, most respondents would opt to work in another library field, and more than half would change careers altogether. A significant 61% of respondents

wished to pursue a career outside the library field. Reasons for wanting to leave the profession included low pay, lack of a stimulating work environment, little recognition of skills and knowledge, and more opportunities in the private sector.

But when asked if they are planning to stay within their library sector for the next five years, 73% of respondents said yes. Only 12% said that they were not planning to stay, and 15% said that any change will depend on family considerations, opportunities in their current positions and libraries, avenues for professional growth and job availability. Still, this kind of feedback should serve as a warning sign for administrators, who must look to improve work environments in conjunction with new librarians or risk losing many qualified candidates.

A plan for action

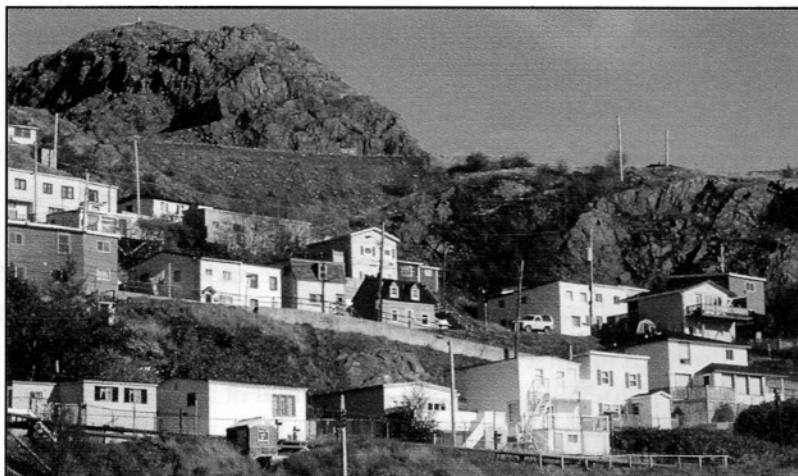
Below are a few concrete suggestions for facilitating the development of newcomers. They are designed to speak to administrators in all library sectors:

- Develop tools and materials to assist new librarians in becoming effective leaders within libraries and professional associations.
- Help to increase awareness about the interests, skills and professionalism of new graduates.
- Recognize new professionals' needs for appropriate pay, respect, and inclusion in strategic planning activities; many newcomers want to help drive change.

- Partner with national, provincial and regional associations to offer workshops for all streams of new librarians.
- Increase funding that enables new librarians to attend professional conferences.
- Create in-house career development and leadership training programs for newcomers.
- Promote new librarians as the future of the profession (and the workplace).
- Take risks with new librarians; trust that they have the education, skills and desire necessary to successfully execute projects.

This kind of encouragement will position new librarians to take their place as effective future leaders. ☺

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The Battery Village, St. John's, NL
- Courtesy Marilyn Rennick, Ottawa

Notes

1. Information about the listserv can be accessed from www.ifla.org/VII/dg/npdg/index.htm. For more information about the questionnaire (entitled "New Librarians International/National Association Activity") and the findings, contact the author at sisterama1@yahoo.com.
2. Denise M. Davis and Tracie D. Hall, *Diversity Counts* (American Library Association Office for Research and Statistics, Office for Diversity, 2006), www.ala.org/ala/ors/diversitycounts/DiversityCountsReport.pdf (accessed January 12, 2006).
3. Mary Jo Lynch, "Association Know Thyself: ALA Embarks on a Mission to Know Its Demographics," *American Libraries*, vol. 34, no. 11 (2003), pp. 76-77.
4. Aurora Foundation, "Aurora Leadership Institute," www.alia.org.au/aurora/aurora.html (accessed January 12, 2006).
5. Rachel Holt and Adrienne L. Strock, "The Entry-Level Gap," *Library Journal* vol. 130, no. 8 (2005), pp. 36-38.

Association Opportunities for New Librarians

Below are just some of the professional association opportunities available to new librarians and those with an interest in the field:

- CLA hosts a New Librarians and Professionals Interest Group and discussion list
- ALA operates a New Members Round Table for individuals of any age who are new to the Association
- CILIP in the U.K. maintains a Career Development Group that attracts many new professionals
- the Italian Library Association hosts a similar group. ALIA in Australia has a New Graduates Group along with a New Generation Policy and Advisory Group
- the latter advises the ALIA board on services for students and new professional members.