Public Librarianship as a Career: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Over twenty-five years of research has shown that in spite of low salaries, few opportunities for advancement, and challenging work environments, most public librarians are satisfied overall with their jobs and careers, primarily because of the intrinsic rewards of the profession. In this article we present results from the Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science 1 (WILIS 1) project[1] that are related to public librarianship. We give an overview of the careers and perspectives of current and former public librarians with respect to their experience of the challenges and rewards of public library service, and compare their views with those found in previous research.

Introduction

The mission of public libraries in the United States is to serve the unique needs of their local communities. Library services are often constrained by the availability of resources and the support and backing of local government and community leaders. Library administrators must advocate not only for their organizational needs, but for the needs of a diverse and increasingly multilingual citizenry. Child and adult literacy programs, informational and recreational reading, cultural programming, computer and Internet access and training, audiovisual resources and equipment, local history and genealogy, meeting facilities, small business support, and information referral are just a few of the services offered by the public library and the librarians who work there.

Although few could argue against the benefits of a literate, connected, and well-informed community, no public agency is exempt from having

to demonstrate its worth and its stewardship of the tax dollars it receives. As veteran public librarians continue to retire from the workforce, it will be important for them to pass on their experience and strategies for effective advocacy. During this time of increasing retirements, recruitment of new librarians who can continue the library's service mission and take on the difficult job of illustrating its value will become increasingly important.

A concern about the aging public library workforce prompted the Public Library Association's Recruitment of Public Librarians Committee (PLA-RPLC) (Jordan et al., 2006) to conduct a survey of librarians and administrators in U.S. public libraries to "obtain a better statistical picture" and inform workforce planning over the next decade. Their findings are in line with other research (see Landry, 2000; Houdyshell, Robles, & Yi, 1999) and point to several issues that may impact recruitment and retention of public librarians, including poor compensation, bureaucratic organizations, and inadequate budgets.

A recent job satisfaction survey conducted by *Library Journal* (*LJ*) confirms these results, suggesting that these challenges and few advancement opportunities are the most troubling to those currently working in public librarianship (Kuzyk, 2008). In spite of these issues, which tend to drive down levels of job and career satisfaction and influence turnover, the *LJ* survey found that 70 percent of public librarians are satisfied with their jobs and 87 percent would recommend the career to others. Many respondents said the drawbacks are often offset by the intrinsic rewards that public librarianship offers such as the satisfaction derived from helping library users and making a positive impact on the local community. In this article we present results from the Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science 1 (WILIS 1) project that are related to public librarianship, and we give an overview of the careers and perspectives of current and former public librarians with respect to their experience of these challenges and rewards of public library service.

Background

The experience of stress and burnout among public librarians is not a new phenomenon. Twenty-five years ago research confirmed that many public reference librarians were experiencing burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low sense of personal accomplishment) on the job because of conflicting or ambiguous work roles (Birch, Marchant, & Smith, 1986; Smith, Birch, & Marchant, 1986). The researchers found that burnout was highest among younger, unmarried librarians who were working full time in larger libraries. In open-ended responses to the survey questions, individuals mentioned hierarchical management structures, inadequate compensation, and the lack of opportunities for advancement or career development as primary sources of their distress.

The survey was conducted prior to 1985, and overwork, staff cutbacks, and the economic downturn at that time were also mentioned as factors that influenced burnout.

Fifteen years ago, *LJ*'s library career survey found that public librarians had similar concerns. Sixty-two percent indicated that their current jobs did not offer any opportunities for career advancement. Librarians were also unhappy with their salaries, their bureaucratic institutions, lack of funding (52 percent indicated this was their biggest on-the-job challenge), and overwork. Yet again, 85 percent of the librarians were satisfied with their jobs, citing the service component of their job as most rewarding (St. Lifer, 1994).

At the start of the new millennium, Gilton (2000) surveyed ninety public librarians about their current job, past promotions, and prospects for future advancement. This research found some evidence that contradicted earlier literature emphasizing career stagnation of public librarians (see Bernstein & Leach, 1985; St. Lifer, 1994; Weaver-Myers & Bostian, 1995). Approximately two-thirds of respondents were in upper and middle management positions, while one-third were in nonsupervisory roles. Fifty-nine percent had been promoted within their current organizations, and over 70 percent of them attributed their promotions to the relevance or length of their experience; 39 percent attributed their advancement to other circumstances such as civil service examinations or "implied 'it's who you know'" (Gilton, p. 215). Interestingly, the statistical analysis backed up these attributions. Of those who had been promoted internally, their length of time in the job did correlate with internal promotions; 80 percent of those who had more than twenty years of experience in their current libraries had been promoted. However, only 46 percent of midcareer librarians with eleven to twenty years of experience had been promoted, indicating a certain amount of career plateauing. This phenomenon may well be related to the large number of baby boomers who were hired in libraries in the 1970s. In many libraries, there were a large number of librarians with similar levels of experience who were waiting to be promoted, but limited numbers of senior positions.

Working conditions have not changed much in public libraries, according to the most recent *LJ* job satisfaction survey; Kurzyk (2008) focuses her overview of the public librarians who responded to the survey on such topics as "the bureaucratic mire," "budgets under the gun," "sore about salaries," and "patrons make the job worthwhile." Librarians in their twenties find advancement difficult, and they mention that their ideas are not always welcome among the older or experienced librarians who are entrenched in organizational politics. Similar to previous surveys, *LJ* found that in spite of the difficulties associated with their jobs, the majority of respondents are satisfied (70 percent).

In 1988 Crismond and Leisner named "political savvy" as one of the top ten characteristics of public library leaders, they state that library

> leaders need all the political skills they can marshal to convince boards and elected officials that programs are meeting public needs and that greater support is necessary. Leaders are aggressive and consistently get their slice of the pie rather than waiting for only crumbs. They . . . [have] good visibility, [are] media conscious and charismatic, and work comfortably outside the library. (p. 122)

This quality is no less relevant today. Library directors and librarians with administrative responsibility who responded to the 2008 *LJ* survey recognize that persuasive advocacy is essential to securing support and funding from local government and library boards, but note that their efforts to convince funders of the value of the library often fail because of the recurrent misperception of leaders that traditional services are no longer necessary—a luxury in times of fiscal crisis. In the earlier *Library Journal* survey, St. Lifer (1994) also describes this challenge, relating the story of the closing of the South Dakota State Library by the governor because of his view that it was "just fluff" (p. 45).

Other challenges that do not seem to go away are gender inequities in career progression and compensation, and the lack of a racial/ethnic minority presence that mirrors the communities served by public libraries (see Ayala, 1978; Greiner, 1985; Sprinkle-Hamlin & Worrell, 1987). The 2008 *LJ* survey indicates that men are more likely to be directors of libraries and earn salaries that are 12 percent higher than those of women. Respondents to the Public Library Association survey (2006) were 92 percent White/Caucasian. Gilton (2000) found that White librarians were more likely to hold directorships (42 percent) than librarians of color (17 percent), most of whom were in middle management (62 percent). For an investigation of diversity issues in librarianship, see the article by Morgan, Farrar, and Owens in this issue.

While it is encouraging to see public librarians persisting in the profession because of its intrinsic rewards, it is unfortunate that the same issues continue to plague this sector after a quarter of a century or more. The following discussion reports the findings of the WILIS 1 project with regard to the public librarian respondents, their demographic characteristics, work environments, and job satisfaction, as well as their outlook on public libraries and librarianship as a profession.

METHODS
The WILIS 1 project conducted a Web survey of North Carolina library and information science (LIS) graduates (1964–2007) to investigate LIS career paths, issues affecting recruitment and retention, retirement plans, and the work-related concerns of LIS professionals. For full details of the

project and survey methodology, please see the articles by Marshall et al. and Morgan, J. Marshall, V. Marshall, and Thompson in this issue.

For this analysis, the dataset was divided into groups by the type of library in which the respondent currently works. An additional analysis was conducted focusing on respondents who worked in public libraries in their first job after completing their LIS program but left to work in other types of libraries or outside of the field. The following section presents descriptive and comparative statistics on these groups and the perspectives offered by current and former public librarians on the challenges and rewards of their jobs.

Results

Public librarians (n = 310) represent 15 percent of those responding to the WILIS 1 survey who are currently working (n = 2,061). On average, they are forty-eight years old and primarily female (81 percent) and White (93 percent). These demographic findings mirror those of the studies discussed above. The survey participants entered the field for a variety of reasons, but the most common reason cited was that it was a good fit for their interests (93 percent). This reason was closely followed by the fact that the librarians had an affinity for working with people (88 percent) and the desire to have a job where they could "make a difference" (83 percent). Some respondents mention the important role of libraries in their own lives or in the community as an influence on their career choice. Several were working in libraries and pursued the master's degree in order to advance their career. Others mention their enjoyment of previous paid or volunteer work in libraries as a motivating factor. Another common theme is the desire to leave teaching for a different career. When asked about their professional identity, 66 percent identified themselves as a "librarian" only, and 31 percent considered themselves to be both a librarian and an "information professional." This suggests that public librarians may be thinking more broadly about their professional role and career possibilities.

Career Progression and Compensation

Ninety-one percent of public librarians are working full time. Women are more likely to work part time (11 percent) than men (3 percent). Although 70 percent of the public librarians have a supervisory role, and 56 percent indicate that they perform administrative functions in their organizations, only 8 percent are library directors/assistant directors, and 7 percent are branch heads/managers. Seventy percent of directors and 84 percent of branch heads are women.

While women are well-represented in director and branch manager positions, the difference between men and women in intra- and interorganizational career progression is marked. Nearly three-quarters of male

public librarians (74 percent) have held two or more jobs moving up in their organization, and 16 percent have held two or more jobs moving both up and laterally across their organization. In contrast, just over half of female public librarians (51 percent) have held two or more jobs moving up in their organization, and 32 percent have held two or more jobs moving both up and laterally across their organization. Lateral moves for women appear to be a bit more common—11 percent have made two or more moves across the organization, compared to 5 percent of men. These differences are borne out in terms of overall career progression as well (see fig. 1). Women describe careers with more job changes and fewer women indicate steady upward progression.

The survey did not ask specifically about the opinions librarians hold about promotion and advancement, but one public librarian commented that

> during my seven years working in public libraries, I have seen people being promoted because of whom they knew rather than their expertise and experience. This would really bother me if I were younger and wanted to advance. It is very political. Many employees are unqualified for their new positions and as a result the whole organization suffers.

The salary differentials between men and women are notable, but not statistically significant, showing that pay inequities due to gender still exist at the highest levels of management, but have converged at other levels. While the median salaries for male and female branch libraries are identical at $48,000, at the director position, the median salary is $71,950 for men and $59,800 for women; comparing the median salaries of all other men and women working full time, they are virtually identical at approximately $46,000. Several former public librarians mentioned that the poor salaries pushed them to school librarianship which paid better.

Challenges of the Work Environment
Public librarians are generally satisfied with their work environment, with a few important exceptions. Nearly all feel that they are part of the group they work with and that their coworkers give them the support they need to do a good job (95 percent). The majority feel that they have opportunities for creative input and innovation in their work (94 percent) and that they have "a lot of say" in what happens on their job (87 percent). On the other hand, overwork is a problem; 52 percent believe that they do not have enough time to get required work done, and 50 percent say that they have too much work to do everything well.

Thirty-nine percent state that they would like to reduce the number of hours they work. Most would like to have more time for personal interests, family, and leisure. Others would like to reduce the amount of work-related stress in their lives. Another common theme is the desire to reduce hours or have a more flexible schedule as the worker gets older or
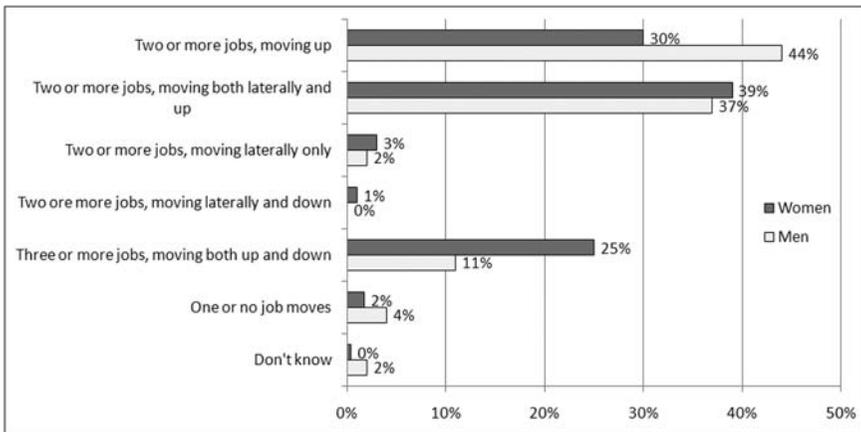
Figure 1. Career Progression of Public Librarians

closer to retirement. A representative quote comes from one respondent who notes that "as I move toward retirement I would like more time to explore what my next phase might be." However, age is not necessarily a factor in the desire to have more free time. One thirty-eight-year-old library director states that "I would much prefer having more time off than make more money. I have a lot of hobbies and interests outside the library, family and friends that I would like to spend time with. I would love to retire RIGHT NOW if I could, then I could volunteer at a library and at other places too." Another librarian in his forties says "as I move closer to fifty I would like more time to explore other activities," reflecting that work-life balance is vital at any age.

In contrast, several librarians mention that their jobs are not challenging and do not require them to use their higher-order skill sets. Reflecting on one of her public library positions, a children's librarian notes that,

> I find it strange that a profession that caters to the needs of the public has such a lack of regard for its employees. The profession in my experience has become glorified retail. I spent the vast majority of my day signing people onto the Internet or answering Internet use related questions. I provided very little reference and other than the children's programming I provided, I was bored stiff. I went into this profession imagining that I would have stimulating important work and instead spent hours surfing the Internet and dealing with an increasingly rude and unpleasant public. I would recommend that anyone considering becoming a librarian examine the working conditions very realistically. I was very naive about what librarianship truly was.

Another concern is the opportunity for career development and advancement—31 percent disagree that their employer does a good job

helping them develop their career and 24 percent do not think that they have opportunities for promotion in the field given their education, skills, and experience; however the opinions of librarians in special, academic, and school libraries and those of respondents who work outside of libraries do not differ substantially in these areas. In fact, one public librarian holds an alternative view:

> I feel that there is too much emphasis placed on "management" and "advancement" at the expense of the experienced, capable public service professional . . . I feel that the gap between those doing a lot of public service and those making decisions is widening on a daily basis and causing a lot of morale problems. I am voluntarily resigning from "advancement" for advancement's sake and instead concentrating on opportunities which are interesting to me and which match my skills. I am also making security-related job choices, because this is a difficult field in which to get a desirable job (and also to re-enter).

Employer-sponsored continuing education may be an important component of increasing these public librarians' feelings of self-efficacy and their belief in the support of their employer in the area of career advancement. Most are motivated to participate in continuing education courses and training in order to improve their job skills (84 percent), grow professionally (83 percent), keep abreast of changes in the field (71 percent), and network with other LIS professionals (41 percent). Respondents indicate that they are most interested in participating in technology training (70 percent), management training (56 percent), or in improving their subject expertise (65 percent).

When asked about the continuing education and training in which they had participated over the past twelve months, 59 percent indicated that they had participated in some form of training, averaging 9.4 hours (sd 16.9) over the last year. The 41 percent of public librarians who had not participated in continuing education named the following as the most common barriers that prevented them from doing so: their employer did not offer continuing education opportunities (43 percent); a suitable training program was unavailable (33 percent); family responsibilities did not leave enough time (25 percent); and, they had no interest or training was not needed (24 percent). Twenty-five percent cited other reasons, most of which related to financial and time constraints, as well as the inconvenient location of the training.

Retention
Of the WILIS 1 respondents who are currently working ($n = 2,061$), 7 percent began their post-LIS program careers as public librarians but left for other types of librarianship or other occupations. Eighty-three percent of those who left were female. Figure 2 illustrates the current work settings of former public librarians. It is noteworthy that 40 percent have left library employment completely.

The public librarians who left the profession are pursuing diverse careers in education, information technology, government, and industry, and many are self-employed. The data suggest that most are pleased with their decision to leave; 95 percent are satisfied with their current jobs, and 73 percent do not intend to leave their employer in the next year.

The reasons for leaving the first public library job are varied, but those listed most often as a "major reason" are better opportunities for career development or growth (53 percent), more challenging or interesting projects (47 percent), moving to another location (42 percent), better salary (34 percent), seeking a better quality of management (25 percent), and better working environment (22 percent). Several cited changing family circumstances, difficult working relationships, burnout, and inability to advance. For instance, one librarian relates, "I was burned out and felt unappreciated. I was not being promoted to other positions and felt stuck—I wanted to run a branch, so I left when I turned forty to pursue other career goals." Several of the factors that influenced public librarians to pursue new work in other library, information, or nonlibrary settings are consistent with the grievances that come out time and again in library career surveys, and any retention program targeted toward public librarians will need to address them.

Rewards and Future Trends

The WILIS 1 survey, like the studies described above, found that in spite of any difficulties faced by public librarians on the job, the vast majority still like their jobs (93 percent). Ninety-two percent are satisfied with what they do in their jobs, and nearly all are satisfied with their career (96 percent). Many mention the importance of the intrinsic rewards of public librarianship. One respondent reflected that she was motivated by her "belief in the value of the public library as a valuable asset for community and education." Another stated that

> A great deal of my career has been spent supporting the role of library as place and community center. I truly believe this is the way public libraries will continue to be relevant in the communities they serve. Working within our communities and providing more services in direct response to patron demand will keep us from becoming merely repositories of information but more active vibrant places.

What do public librarians think is in store for libraries in the future? Many echo the sentiments of the quoted librarian. Despite the fact that most (99 percent) believe that use of the Internet from home will increase, they also see an increasingly important role for the public library to serve in the community. Seventy-nine percent believe that libraries will become more central to their communities, and 76 percent predict that the "library as place" will become even more important in the future. When asked what libraries should increase their focus on in the future,
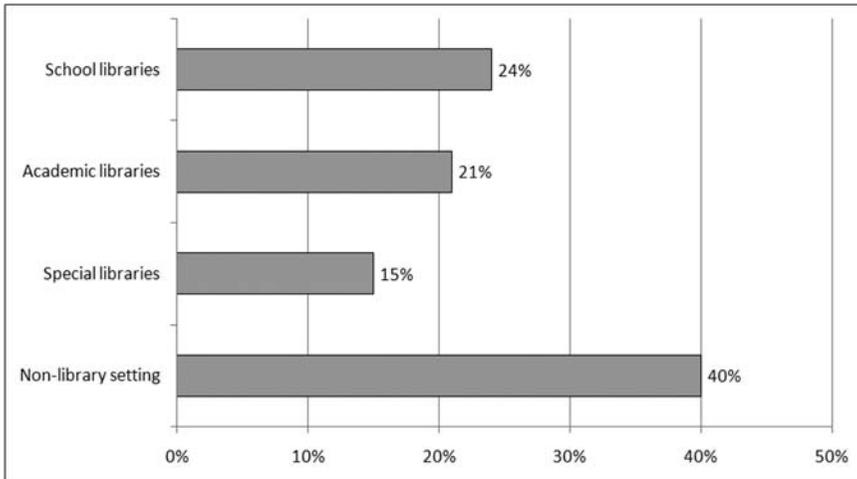
Figure 2. Current Work Settings of Former Public Librarians

the most popular responses were: marketing library services (85 percent), demonstrating the value of the library (80 percent), increasing its role as a community center (80 percent), partnering with other community agencies (79 percent) and libraries (67 percent), increasing remote access to libraries (75 percent), improving information literacy (74 percent), supporting staff continuing education and training (71 percent), and increasing intergenerational and family programming (67 percent).

Recruitment
Public librarians navigate difficult terrain, mandated to serve their communities effectively with stagnant or decreasing budgets. There will continue to be a need for motivated librarians who are willing to face the fiscal challenges, potentially lower salaries, and the bureaucratic or politicized work environments of some public libraries. Unfortunately it appears that recent graduates of North Carolina LIS programs are less likely to consider working in a public library than an academic library. Of respondents who graduated between 2001 and 2005 and completed the job search section of the survey ($n = 327$), 38 percent considered working in a public library at the time of graduation, compared to those who considered academic libraries (45 percent) and school libraries (44 percent). Fewer of those 327 recent graduates (15 percent) went on to work in public libraries after graduation, compared to academic libraries (21 percent) and school libraries (37 percent); perhaps this is because of fewer job openings, as anecdotal evidence has suggested, or because the graduates were offered less attractive opportunities in this sector, as evidence from the PLA-RPLC survey (2006) indicates. The survey aimed

to get the staff and employer perspective on trends in the hiring process in public libraries. When asked about the compromises they had to make when taking their positions, 35 percent of recent graduates (2000–4) working in public libraries had accepted a lower salary, 18 percent had to relocate, and 16 percent had accepted part-time employment. On the employer side, close to half of the respondents who had hiring responsibilities in public libraries (43 percent) said their libraries had hired more part-time than full-time staff members over the preceding three years, and over one-quarter (28 percent) said that they had hired staff without master's degrees to work at the reference desk over that same time period.

Recruitment of LIS professionals to public librarianship could benefit from internal searches and support for continuing education and LIS master's degrees. When asked why they pursued a degree from their LIS program, 65 percent of those currently working as public librarians cite their experience working in libraries or the necessity of getting the master's degree to advance a preexisting public library career as motivators. One respondent reflected that she pursued a master's degree in library science out of her "desire to expand what I would be able to do as library staff, versus paraprofessional limitations." Public library directors may find it worthwhile to build on the commitment that paraprofessionals, students, or volunteers already have to their library and the community by supporting their career advancement.

DISCUSSION

The data from the WILIS 1 retrospective career survey suggest that graduates of North Carolina LIS programs (1964–2007) who have pursued public librarianship have had experiences in the profession that are similar to those of librarians surveyed over the past twenty-five years. However, these results add another dimension to the research on this sector of librarianship in that they represent the views and experiences of present *and* former public librarians at all stages of their lives and careers. Additionally, the analyses presented here represent a small fraction of those that are possible with the data collected, given that the respondents also offered details of their educational and career histories, including their job before attending a LIS program, the job they held the longest, and the job they consider to be the one of highest achievement. Respondents described their job responsibilities, their retirement plans, and a variety of other perspectives on issues in public libraries as well as in the other work settings (library and nonlibrary) in which they have worked.

Drawn to the profession because it matched their interests and allowed them to work with people and "make a difference," respondents are overwhelmingly satisfied with their jobs and career in LIS. Nevertheless there are a number of issues that emerge as potential threats to retention, par-

ticularly low salaries, organizational bureaucracy, and the deficiency in career advancement opportunities.

Although collegial work environments, job autonomy, and the intrinsic rewards of public librarianship help to sustain commitment to the profession, the drawbacks are significant enough to dissuade prospective professionals from pursuing this sector or from being recruited to the field at all. If the opinion of most respondents holds true, that libraries will become more central to their communities, it will be even more important to attract and retain those people who are representative of the local community and dedicated to the effectiveness of the library services to its residents. While public librarians may be asked to do more with fewer resources and stagnant compensation, it will be incumbent on the profession, its associations, and LIS educators to equip them with the intellectual resources, skills, political savvy, and best practices to advance their own careers, keep their work interesting and challenging, and achieve the objectives of their organizations.

NOTES

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