Workforce Competencies: Focus on Urban Public Libraries

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Abstract

Urban library leaders convened in 2008 to explore gaps between essential organizational competencies and the individual competencies of professionals entering the field. The 2008 Urban Libraries Summit aimed to focus collective wisdom in shaping suitable curricula for the education and training of future library professionals. This article examines the results of focus groups undertaken at that time, which identified current and future challenges facing librarians in urban settings and the educational and training experiences that would best prepare young professionals to confront them. Content analysis is applied to texts gleaned from structured questions posed to members of the focus groups. The questions probed the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) considered by members of the focus groups as critical to the successful employment and performance of individuals aiming to work in urban or complex library settings. Results of the focus groups yielded insights of potential value for new professionals, practitioners, and LIS educators in the United States. Substantial experience in community organizing, teaching, and face-to-face customer service is preferred. Candidates for urban libraries would be best equipped with undergraduate study in social work, urban planning, popular culture, languages, business administration, and instructional design.

Introduction

Library critic Jesse Shera concluded that the objectives of American public libraries depended on the objectives of their constituents (1949, p. 248). Societal objectives, however, shift during periods of insecurity,

crisis, and change. Since 2001, public libraries in the United States have confronted accelerating demographic, economic, and cultural change. In the last ten years, the American public absorbed an unprecedented series of crises, including a terrorist attack, two wars, a multistate natural disaster, flu pandemics alarms, the implosion of financial markets, and failures in the automotive and housing sectors. These events unfolded against a background of demographic shifts due to immigration, internal migration, aging, and economic dislocation, as the corporate base of many communities evaporated or moved overseas.

At the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century, census data indicated that foreign-born individuals amounted to 16 percent of the total population, the largest proportion since the 1920s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Other provocative highlights include the attainment of majority-minority status by four states (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2005); the climb of the median age to 36.7 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010); increasing income disparities (Johnston, 2007); and the doubling between 2008 and 2009 of the national unemployment rate from 4.8 to 9.6 percent, equal to its last peak in 1982 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009a). State and federal government officials project monumental budget deficits for years to come (National League of Cities, 2009; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009). This combination of factors has raised concerns among policy makers about the adequacy of the American workforce to compete successfully in the global economy and underscored the need for civic engagement and cross-cultural understanding (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008). The expectation that public libraries address these new and pressing needs has intensified (American Library Association, 2009c).

Background

During the 1990s, a period of relative prosperity, libraries were perceived to have lost their foothold in the marketplace of information services. Libraries were compared negatively against coffee-and-couch bookstores and online vendors. Library visits, circulation, and reference transactions dipped, and budgets were trimmed accordingly (Benton, 1996, pp. 8–16; Sannwald, 1998, p. 200). Many argued against the need for brick-and-mortar libraries or prophesied their imminent demise (Rothstein, 2008). With public opinion hardened against the provision of public goods, significant numbers of voters sought tax caps and smaller government with corresponding reduction of amenities, including services provided by libraries (Buschman, 2006, p.6).

Public library administrators adjusted accordingly by reducing hours, staff, benefits, and purchases and by deferring maintenance and securing grants to support new customer-pleasing programs (OCLC, 2008). When funds were available, libraries installed coffee bars and added CDs and DVDs to their collections, displaying them according to retail

merchandising techniques. While preserving homework centers and after-school accommodations for youth, libraries transformed traditional spaces to accommodate groups, families, and people with special needs (Kent, 1996, pp. 207–208; Rippel, 2003). Most importantly, librarians took advantage of new technologies to place their catalog and finding aids online, integrate library system functions, link to external resources, and provide computers with Internet access to the public (National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1994). These systems, along with the expertise to maintain and expand them, formed the basic infrastructure of an essential community resource (Holt, 1996; Molz & Dain, 1999).

Current Challenges of Urban Public Libraries

The current economic crisis (2007 to date) is threatening libraries and all other community resources (American Library Association, 2009b, p. 6). Most communities large and small are currently confronting similar difficulties—reduced wages, loss of jobs, shuttered businesses, home foreclosures, and the evaporation of property values, all of which result in a reduced tax base. Many communities also are facing unprecedented high levels of transiency, as individuals and families move from region to region in search of employment, affordable housing, adequate schools, and health care. Coupled with the economic distress is the fear that these difficulties will not be overcome anytime soon.

The problems are more concentrated in urban areas that are additionally burdened with dysfunctional governance and overwhelming population losses. Urban centers also contend with distressing levels of illiteracy among the poor and immigrant groups who have limited formal schooling in their native language and limited English-language skills. High school retention and graduation rates are, at best, improving very slowly. There is a high incidence of heart disease, diabetes, and other preventable diseases linked to ignorance about diet, lack of healthy food, and the absence of primary care providers. Gang-related activities have been spreading to suburban and rural areas but are still concentrated in urban areas, where they threaten neighborhoods and schools and impact mundane matters, such as the cost of insurance premiums and simple decisions as to whether to walk down the street or use a park.

All of these factors affect library administration and management activities such as budgeting, fund-raising, facility location and maintenance, collection development, programming, and staffing. All aspects of staffing—including recruitment, hiring, promoting, staff development, and evaluation—become acutely sensitive processes. Urban libraries must contend with city ordinances, union rules, and human resource categories that hamper flexibility to develop new programs and services. Many urban libraries are located in new buildings that are expensive to maintain or historic landmark buildings that are difficult to retrofit with much-

needed new technologies. Older library spaces are inadequate for the accommodation of training and demonstration programs or even for the provision of physical comfort, lighting, and ease of mobility that employees as well as the public have come to expect.

Confronting the Challenges

Library educators and leaders cannot change the physical and administrative infrastructures of urban public libraries or alter the external factors affecting these institutions. Educators can, however, work with future-thinking library administrators to select for and train the most capable, enterprising, and energetic service-oriented professionals possible. At the Urban Library Summit held in 2008 at Wayne State University (WSU) in Detroit, Michigan, library directors, librarians, educators, researchers, and national leaders convened to explore potential gaps between needed organizational competencies and the individual competencies of professionals entering the field. The summit aimed to focus the collective wisdom of urban library leaders in shaping a suitable curriculum for an academic program specifically centered on urban librarianship. One major goal of the event was to identify the unique competencies—distinguishable from the American Library Association (ALA) core competencies—that should be selected for and cultivated in professionals who aspire to work in and lead urban libraries. Since attendees are responsible for the strategic direction, recruiting, and making hiring decisions for their organizations, they are ideally placed to discuss workforce competencies. Because of its location in the center of Detroit's cultural district, WSU can provide a living laboratory and the expertise to research the context of the issues involved as the competencies are tested in the actual work environment.

Nearly one hundred information professionals representing all types of libraries from across the region attended the one-day summit hosted by the faculty of the WSU School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), then known as the Library and Information Science Program (LISP). Faculty and staff led a total of eighteen separate focus-group sessions. The sessions probed the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) considered by members of the focus groups to be most critical to the successful employment and performance of individuals aiming to work in urban or complex library settings (Wayne State University LISP, 2008, p.2). Urban libraries include all types of libraries, but the formal presentations preceding each of the group sessions emphasized the concerns of urban public libraries.

In the United States, there are over 9,200 public libraries administering 16,600 main and branch facilities (Institute of Museum and Library Services [IMLS], 2009, p. 22). Two percent, or 184 libraries of the 9,200, serve populations of 250,000 or more. There are, however, only seventy-five American cities that have attained that population size. The rest of the

library administrative units, well over one hundred of them, may very well be serving counties or federated library systems spanning one or more jurisdictional areas. Despite the size of their service population, these administrative units may not consider themselves "urban."

Keynote speaker and former president of the Urban Library Council Martin Gomez (2008) noted that it is politically risky, if not dubious, to distinguish among urban, metropolitan, or any other jurisdiction. He explained—and focus group participants agreed—that urban libraries are less well characterized by population or legal boundaries than by the challenges they face. These challenges are compounded by the complex and diverse needs of the population served (New Jersey Library Association, 2002, §1). A complex mix of individual and organizational competencies will be required to confront the current workforce dilemmas: diversity, location, recruitment and retention, retirement, and community expectations.

THE COMPETENCY PERSPECTIVE

Implicit in the proceedings of the summit is the assumption of widespread understanding and acceptance by attendees of the concept of competencies and of the competency perspective. There may be reason to expect as much. Currently, every type of library association has published its own set of competencies and demonstrated some level of implementation by members for recruiting, crafting job descriptions, hiring, staff development, and performance evaluation. Similarly, library school faculty, in general, use frameworks of competencies as basic building blocks for curriculum design; individual educators focus on specific clusters of competencies to develop coursework. Professional competency as a primary aim of library and information science education has a long history in the United States (Watson, 1994, p. 88).

Competencies include the skills, knowledge, experience, abilities, and aptitudes possessed by individuals, whom an organization effectively employs in order to accomplish agreed-upon objectives. The process of identifying competencies is painstaking and involves intensive analysis of the essential and necessary tasks of a field, a specialty, or a function for the purpose of clearly discerning the knowledge, experience, skills, and personality traits that are necessary to carry out an activity in an exemplary way. Fortunately, competency frameworks for the major specializations in the library and information science field have been completed. It is now relatively easy to generate variants that are suitable for different work settings, present and future.

The competency perspective recognizes that in order to optimize individual competencies, the organization must also contribute institutional competencies on a sustainable basis. Institutional competencies consist of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are imbued throughout the

organization itself. These competencies may be represented by senior staff or high-level administrators, and they also may be built into the organization's policies, procedures, communications, and knowledge management systems. This ensemble is considered to be its culture. Herein lies the concern, and the opportunity, generated by the large numbers of senior members retiring from urban libraries.

The possession of competencies by an individual or an organization does not necessarily result in coherent performance or in the completion of goals. The ability of an organization to make the best use of its employees depends on the distribution of competencies along an operational framework that is compatible with the structure of the institution. In large urban libraries, hierarchical organizations are the norm. Employees are categorized in many ways, professionally and functionally, as well as by rank, pay band, and seniority. Performance is also assessed according to levels, such as basic, advanced, and expert or entry-, mid-, and senior-level. In such a setting, competencies are assumed to be congruent with the individual's position in the hierarchy. The individual's position in the hierarchy would change as more "advanced" competencies are attained. This has not always been the case, and perhaps it should not be the case. Entering or new professionals are now expected to be work-ready and are tapped rather quickly to fill supervisory and management roles.

Deep understanding of the issues, courage, leadership, and strategic thinking are necessary at all levels of the organization, including staff in the front lines closest to the public. These front lines include welcome, information, material circulation, and reference areas that are in large libraries seldom staffed by administrators or senior-level employees. In his keynote speech, Gomez (2008) emphasized that the Urban Libraries Council is concurrently grooming a new generation of neighborhood librarians and executive leaders, coaching both groups in new styles of leadership. The new styles of leadership are less consensus-oriented and evidence-based and more likely to embrace ambiguity, controversy, and experimentation. A broader spectrum of competencies is needed in such environments and must be developed early in their careers by professionals destined for them.

Focus Groups

During the Urban Library Summit, two series of discussions were held, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Grouped in clusters of six to eight, attendees convened in separate rooms for one-hour sessions. Discussions ensued from structured questions posed to all members of the focus groups. Wayne State University SLIS faculty and staff presented the questions and recorded responses, but they did not participate in the discussions. At the end of the afternoon sessions, the hardiest participants convened as a group to report findings and recap the highlights of the day.

The morning session, "Components of a Successful Urban Librarianship Curriculum," aimed to determine what unique subjects or coursework should be incorporated into an Urban Libraries concentration, so that students who complete such a program of study are differently and uniquely prepared in comparison to other MLIS students. The following questions were posed to each of the focus groups:

- Question 1: What knowledge, skills, and abilities do you see as critical for working in an urban library setting? What knowledge, skills, and abilities do you use most?
- Question 2: When reviewing a potential applicant's resume, would an indication of particular coursework stand out as a selection criterion for you? If so, which courses would you most look for?
- Question 3: Are there particular personality traits or attributes that you seek when hiring librarians to work in urban settings? Are there any traits or attributes that stand out as being particularly challenging for librarians working in an urban setting?

The afternoon session, "Hiring Urban Librarians: Critical Characteristics," sought criteria for settings for the student practicum and for the structuring of the elements of the internship. Since the practicum and the internship would be the hallmarks of the concentration, the following questions were posed to elicit recommendations about these on-the-job components:

- Question 4: What challenges do you face most often in your work? What are the greatest challenges for your library/library system?
- Question 5: When hiring urban librarians, how important is "work experience" to your hiring decision?
- Question 6: Are there specific work assignments or work settings that particularly stand out for you?
- Question 7: What work settings and/or experiences do you think we should provide for every student in the Urban Libraries concentration?

Once compiled, the notes gathered by the nine focus-group recorders yielded about 4,000 words on ten pages of text. Responses to each of the questions were distilled and organized in alphabetical order, and thus anonymized. These texts provided the data set on which the content analysis was based. Having set the comprehensive context of the focus groups and preliminary analysis, the rest of this article examines more closely the texts gathered during the sessions.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was applied to the texts (Wayne State University LISP, 2008) that resulted from the recorded discussions as each of the seven

questions was posed. The individual responses in each of the seven texts were matched against a preliminary list of thirty-five categories based on the ALA core competencies for the "newly graduated generalist librarian" (American Library Association, 2009a §1A-8E). The ALA document was chosen as the base for analysis, as it is specifically intended to focus on goal attainment during the course of study for librarianship as well as to standardize curricular objectives for the Master's degree in Library and Information Science (MLIS). The category definitions were expanded to accommodate the questions posed to the summit participants about work experience, setting, and personality traits, as the ALA document is primarily focused on knowledge and demonstration of knowledge.

The concurrence of participants' remarks with the ALA competencies was assumed when close correspondence between a response and the definition of an existing category was found. Silence on a topic, however, was not construed to mean rejection or a determination of a competency as not relevant for urban libraries. When responses did not concord with, or match, the existing category list, a new category was added to the list. In many cases, new items represented the very distinguishing characteristics that the focus groups noted as critical for the urban libraries concentration. For example, when related to the question about settings and work experience, responses such as "working with gangs, real street experience, even if it is not library experience," and "relates positive personal experience with practicum within social work field" were categorized separately.

Findings: Responses from Focus Groups

About 250 unique responses were recorded in response to the prepared questions. A summary of responses to specific questions follow in order.

Question 1: What are critical or most often used KSAs in urban libraries?
This and Question 7 elicited the most distinctive responses, with a total of fifty-six and forty-nine responses, respectively. Thirty-two of the fifty-six (57 percent of the responses to the first question) focused on the imperatives that drive urban librarians, what they advocate, and how they respond to individuals of all ages and groups. This is the focus of the ALA core competencies listed under Reference and User Services. Paired with this nucleus is the responsibility to hone communication skills including close listening, technical writing, and proficiency in at least one other language.

KSAs recommended by the focus groups fell within this key cluster of competencies but often included significant embellishments. For instance, in relation to the ability to synthesize information from diverse sources for use by individuals of all ages and groups (American Library Association, 2009a, 5B), a respondent added, "A lot of librarians like me

have to know a lot about [popular culture, such as] music of all styles, television programs . . . new CDs, DVDs, and books. I sit up nights watching BET [Black Entertainment Television]. I select books for children. I must know their people. All those shows that come on. Sometimes I watch the Spanish station. In the schools, you will find all of the different cultures." Another respondent added that "new generations of librarians must be comfortable [with] diverse cultures . . . but also all the 2.0 stuff. Facebook, games, avatars, Twitter, etc."

Like all other enterprises, urban public libraries want to hire highly qualified individuals best suited to serve their communities. Recruitment for urban libraries presents special challenges, not least of which is finding candidates who represent the diversity of the communities they are to serve (Winston & Li, 2007, pp. 70–72). Creative recruitment and training strategies have been developed by urban library systems in conjunction with library schools. For instance, to diversify their workforce and prepare staff from underrepresented communities to pursue the professional degree in librarianship, the St. Paul Public Library and St. Catherine University in Minnesota combined to set up a ten-month intensive certificate program for library paraprofessionals (Wagner & Willms, 2008).

It may very well be that the best candidates for advancement as program directors and branch managers in urban libraries are not college graduates in search of professional work but the people drawn from the service communities who are already working in libraries, including student interns and pages. Many more innovative recruitment, training programs, and paths to internal promotion are needed as have been implemented at such different institutions as Queens Borough (DCTV, 2007) and Salem Public Libraries (Rengert, 2009, p. 4). Experimentation, research, and continuing debate is needed to more adequately address the complex implications of this seemingly simple probe.

Question 2: Are any courses of study seen as distinctive in hiring?
This question elicited very few clear recommendations. Since the previous discussion had been exhaustive, it is understandable that few suggestions were made in response to this one about distinctive courses of study. A few respondents stressed the need for the curriculum to emphasize communicative skills such as conflict resolution, public speaking, fluency in a second language, and the ability to teach and provide instruction on a number of specialties to people at various levels of attainment.

Communicative skills are already integrated into the existing core curriculum and enhanced with workshops and simulations on these topics; students are strongly encouraged to seek leadership in the various student organizations and are rewarded for it. Although there has been resistance among library students to taking on the role of teacher, the Instructional Methods for Librarians class, at Wayne State for example, has proven to

be a popular elective. Fluency in a language other than English is less common, so indeed such mastery by a candidate would stand out during the hiring process (Wayne State University SLIS, 2009, p. IV, 6–7).

At the end of the day, when given the opportunity to contribute additional comments, respondents noted that background in social work, urban planning, instructional technology, education, and small business administration were most desirable for urban librarians. These reactions proved much more revealing since, except for education, the other disciplines were not typical of applicants seeking admission to library schools.

It became clear from focus group responses that new pools of applicants and different recruitment strategies need to be sought out and implemented. New and potential entrants could be attracted to the challenges presented by urban libraries. They may be deterred, however, by low levels of compensation, public misconceptions about what librarians do, and the low prestige ascribed to the profession (Library Research Service, 2004, p. 96). Young people, mostly women, who in the past have been attracted to the service professions, now have other, better compensated and respected options (Bonnete, 2004, p. 135).

Out of necessity, library administrators have been depending on larger numbers of volunteers and partnering with nonprofit and government agencies in order to cope with the demand for alternative materials, training, and services; they look "outside their borders" (Horrocks, 2005, p. 81) to recruit the critical language skills, cross-cultural experiences, and interdisciplinary perspectives required to assemble new organizational competencies.

Focus-group participants noted that various institutions have initiated relevant programs and proposed them as potential models. The Free Library of Philadelphia collaborated with Clarion University's Department of Library and Information Science to provide tuition assistance to thirty students who are minorities, speak foreign languages, or have an interest in children's services (IMLS, n.d.). A grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services supports the collaboration of Rutgers' University School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies with the Central Jersey Regional Library Cooperative and other institutions to help selected New Jersey urban library employees to achieve their next level of library education (IMLS, n.d.). An ambitious four-year program under the umbrella of the Urban Libraries Council involved twenty-one urban libraries in guiding a cohort of 156 neighborhood librarians through structured training seminars (Urban Libraries Council, 2009a).

Question 3: Are there personality traits particularly apt for urban settings?
Four major themes about individual attributes surfaced during this discussion. First was the need for discipline and rationality, as exemplified by

the use of basic tools such as time and project management. In line with core competencies (American Library Association, 2009a, §1G), respondents recommended a functional grasp of security and safety issues as well as the legal framework within which libraries operate. Third mentioned was a cluster of characteristics based on self-knowledge that rendered the individual tolerant, flexible, open to new experiences, and inured to the limited physical circumstances and deterioration of library and surrounding facilities. Finally, participants felt that the urban librarian must be in possession of a generous appreciation of poverty and what it means to be poor. This last attribute may be the most difficult requirement for individuals who do not have deep roots in affected communities, extended experience in the developing world, or a nuanced understanding on the long history of a city's ills.

These suggestions are in line with ALA core competencies related to user services. According to participants, these competencies have to be qualified to acknowledge the harsher and more pronounced realities found in urban areas. Even the most dedicated staff become "dispirited after working in daunting circumstances for years" (New Jersey Library Association, 2002, §5). Despite the investment in state-of-the art central urban libraries, Gomez (2008) noted there are still many branch libraries in distressed neighborhoods that have not had the benefit of renovation. Jobs are not always available at the main library but rather at branches that are usually smaller and less attractive (M. Bruni, personal communication, September 23, 2009). New librarians who are interested in working in urban libraries may also be discouraged by the high cost of living and the lack of amenities in central urban areas. If they do not already live nearby, relocation costs add to the discouragement, as do residency requirements that some municipalities still enforce for employment in city institutions. The too real threat of layoffs, eliminated positions, hiring freezes, reduced hours, relocation of staff among branches, and increased service demands also affect the most pragmatic, seasoned, and dedicated workers (New Jersey Library Association, 2002, §4–§5). Those whose wages, hours, and working conditions are protected by unions have faced hardball tactics from elected officials looking for concessions (Meyerson, 2009). A participant's recommendation that preference be given to people with prior careers in other fields is apropos here; as the participant noted, the change in career may show that the individual has chosen LIS as their field of endeavor, not just "fallen" into it.

Question 4: What are the greatest challenges for your library/library system?
Numerous challenges were mentioned. Among those listed are staying current, sustaining harmonious interpersonal relationships, maintaining integrity, watching out for burnout, working within union restrictions,

facing the ubiquitous budget cuts, and influencing "how government leaders look at libraries." In general, the specific challenges resolved into one refrain, "expect the unexpected." Acceptance of this reality leads to two major obligations: (1) to accept and adapt to the continual changes and ambiguous demands of new cultures, and (2) to align the goals and objectives of the library with multiple, if not conflicting, community expectations.

The public expects that libraries will continue to nurture discovery, learning, creative expression, and innovation. Librarians and library goers have discovered new uses for libraries and are inspired to develop more. For instance, people who have rediscovered the library as a place where they can research new jobs recognize that they can also access library databases to research small business start-up opportunities (Urban Libraries Council, 2005, pp. 19–21).

Computer literacy programs in libraries have opened up new possibilities for digitizing, collecting, and managing documents online as well. Learning centers, such as the one established by the Toronto Public Library (2009), teach library users how to "develop and design Web pages; create reports, newsletters, and flyers; and edit photos and home movies"—skills that can be profitably turned into small home-based businesses or used at work. The ad hoc creation of no-cost library services to meet user demand has generated new library functions and emerging positions in patron training, project management, and community development, such as "economic gardening" (WebJunction, 2010).

To the right person, these challenges compensate for some of the negative aspects of urban librarianship identified in Question 3; adequate preparation also helps. The reality of preparing students to actively face continual and unrelenting challenges goes well beyond understanding the principles of transformational leadership (American Library Association, 2009a, §8E). The recommendations underscore the need for continuing, if not concurrent, professional development to start as soon as possible (American Library Association, 2009a, §7A).

Question 5: How important is "work experience" in hiring decisions?
Work experience in a variety of environments and contexts was identified as desirable. The following were preferred: community organizing; teaching and instructional design; retail or food service with a face-to-face customer service component; and technical skills and training in several technologies. These responses are congruent with findings from a recent ALA report that noted that "almost 60 percent of libraries strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that the library does not have enough staff to help patrons and that about 52 percent agreed or strongly agreed that library staff does not have the necessary skills to meet patron demand" (2009c, p. 23).

Counter to the claims that the increased technological prowess and computer literacy of the general public will render professional librarians superfluous (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009, §5), other research points to the future need for more, not less, professional library staff support to meet the everyday and emergency information requirements of communities (Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2008, p. 287).

Focus group participants also pointed out that work experiences that demonstrably foster people skills, teamwork, and collaboration distinguish a candidate during the hiring process. Also prized by participants is the ability to communicate about the transfer of skills from other work settings and experiences to the urban library setting. These preferences combine several of the ALA core competencies related to the foundations of the profession (American Library Association, 2009a, §1) but require that job-seeking candidates muster the ability to communicate complex abstractions and relate them to specific knowledge about library functions and processes. In combination, the abilities indeed demonstrate a potent mix of skills, knowledge, experience, and wisdom. The combination is what makes it possible to "express ourselves in the language of the community . . . and decision makers" in order to connect the agenda of the library to that of the community (Haycock, 2005, p. 67).

Of added concern is the correlation of retirement with total years of service (Connecticut State Library, 2006, p. 5). The retirement of a large percentage of librarians with twenty or more years of experience in the field represents a significant loss of knowledge, leadership, institutional memory, and painstaking relationship-building across the community. The accumulated loyalty of library stakeholders is risked. Senior members of an organization interpret and communicate the library's goals and objectives. Channels of communications collapse with the retirement of key individuals. Sometimes laid-off or retired library professionals are brought back to work at their former jobs on an interim basis in order to oversee transitions or to provide mentoring (Connecticut State Library, 2006, p. 6). These substitutions are not always the best solutions, but all available means must be considered in order to maintain critical dialogues with community members.

Question 6: Are there work assignments or work settings that are preferable?
The proposed urban library certificate program to be offered by WSU intends to provide the student with the equivalent of nine semester hours of supervised fieldwork in cultural institutions in the Detroit area. Current estimates assume that the certificate program will require forty-eight to fifty-one semester hours to complete. The fieldwork is expected to consist of a combination of paid, unpaid, or partially subsidized internships and practica at different libraries or at least in different departments of one institution.

Focus group participants recommended a variety of work assignments be incorporated in the fieldwork. The activities they preferred included student attendance at library staff meetings, active participation in collection development for specific user or community groups, Web development, and digitalization projects. Although any of these projects would result in competencies related to the management and preservation of information resources, these exercises would enhance collaboration and the development of networks with stakeholders and the communities served as well (American Library Association, 2009a, §2C, §8D, 2D).

The proposal that these work assignments address the student's "areas of least comfort" and lead to self-knowledge and awareness would demand that the assignments have reflexive and leadership development components. This falls within, but goes beyond, the scope of having knowledge of effective personnel practices and human resource development (American Library Association, 2009a, §8B). Students must be provided with the opportunity for extensive participation in various workplaces. To provide them, new partnerships between the library school and school boards, civic organizations, nonprofits, and other government agencies have to be nurtured (Urban Institute & Urban Libraries Council, 2007).

Question 7: What common experience should all students in the concentration share?
According to respondents, the central experiences of the urban library concentration would revolve around a continuum or combination of rigorous, well-supervised, structured, project-based volunteer commitments, practica, and internships. These need not all be completed in a library but most certainly in a distinctly urban setting. Respondents emphasized the need for experience outside the walls of the library. The most ideal experience would be projects that provide sustained interaction with community leaders and the opportunity to learn the specific interests of special-needs and underrepresented communities; the large and varied Arabic-speaking populations in the Detroit area were highlighted by the participants.

This last recommendation most closely parallels core competencies related to the ability to assess and respond to diversity in user communities and the need to assess impacts of current and emerging circumstances on service development (American Library Association, 2009a, §5F,5G). The emphasis that the experiences be rooted outside the library and in unequivocal urban environments diverges significantly from ALA's location-neutral core competencies. The emphasis also underscores the need to characterize the constituent elements of an urban setting more clearly.

CONCLUSIONS

The responses to the questions posed during the focus groups were marked by their variety. In most cases, the competencies suggested by the respondents matched those adopted by ALA (2009a). This is not surprising, considering the collective effort and time invested by various task forces, committees, the ALA Governing Board, and the ALA Council in producing the ALA competencies (Congress on Professional Education, 2000). The combination of competencies and qualifiers put forth by summit participants, however, suggests that urban libraries demand substantially more well-rounded, energetic, and outgoing individuals, perhaps more empathic and tolerant than most.

Two or three universities have created programs—not all ALA-accredited—specifically to train staff for work in urban libraries and intentionally recruited underrepresented minority students or members of the diverse communities that they are to serve. Thus, the public face of the library has a better chance to reflect its immediate community. This is an important service to communities, but unless advancement paths and opportunities are found for non-degreed staff, the present stratification according to race, ethnicity, language, and nationality will persist for a long time.

In connection with personality traits suitable to work in urban libraries, for example, respondents suggested that the individual "has to have some appreciation for poverty and what it means to be poor, as well as an understanding as to how the city got to where it is" and "knowing how to work in an aging facility."

When asked about critical KSAs for urban libraries, several respondents proposed that individuals must be "multi-skilled. We need our people to be not only a reference or a teen librarian but to do outreach, programming, collection development" and "understand the dynamics of how cities are run and made up and the directions they are going." At the same time there were several reminders of the need to adhere to the best practices of time, project, and financial management in order to succeed. Urban librarians are under pressure to assume supervisory and management responsibilities early while simultaneously fulfilling a variety of library functions.

The ideal urban librarian must be at ease among diverse individuals and in a variety of situations. Successful urban librarians effectively reach out to and vigorously advocate for the diverse communities they serve. Noted by others (Arns & Price, 2007; Promis, 2008; Sheldon, 2009), much of what is mentioned as essential for all librarians turns out to be soft skills associated with emotional intelligence and leadership, such as self- and social awareness and self- and relationship management. Above all, urban librarians must promote and defend the very libraries that employ them.

Competencies are not all that an organization must possess. Past experience indicates that institutional sustainability requires ample resources

(money), perceived value (reputation, esteem), brand loyalty (active registered cardholders), and supportive community partnerships. According to Shera's dictum, for the libraries to survive, urban librarians need to understand and respond to the objectives of their publics.

The model urban librarian—part social worker, part advocate, pop culture expert, always library activist—identified by the focus-group participants also reveals several aspects about the participants themselves. Their comments suggest that, as practitioners and educators, they are already facing all the dilemmas described above, actively providing services to populations with complex needs, and anticipating more to come. Although not discussed in detail, the assumption was made that if they are to model a commitment to revitalization and civic engagement, the library schools and the universities that urban librarians attend must also serve as community catalysts. As described, some institutions have done so.

Little discussion focused on the financial pressures faced by states or the worsening national economic situation. Considering the setting of the summit in the center of Detroit, the economic situation may be considered a given. In many ways, the economic and social conditions faced today by the summit participants mirror the circumstances of the 1970s, when many of them were entering the field.

Another surprising finding was the relative lack of focus on technologies. This is in keeping with study results by Chaudhry and Yeen (2002, p. 37), who surmised that the librarians they surveyed were not as concerned about them as predicted. Some participants alluded to the need to be proficient with typical office equipment and current with assistive, mobile, and social-networking technologies but assumed that technological infrastructure fell in the province of specialists.

The candid discussions about competencies have implications not just for curricular development, but also for the student body that SLIS and other library schools would have to recruit. Organizational needs of urban public libraries will require that graduates have different disciplinary backgrounds and pre-service requirements than those who previously have been attracted to LIS schools.

Similarly, the results indicate the need for different patterns of recruitment of students and evaluation at admission. Besides having greatly assisted in the process of crafting the new curriculum, the identified competencies provide a rough template for the guidance for self-development and the continuing education of librarians already working in urban libraries. Successful completion of the MLIS is just the beginning.

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