



Placement

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ONE EFFECT OF THE present acute shortage of trained librarians has been to bring the placement process up for very close scrutiny and, inevitably, for considerable criticism. The Subcommittee on Placement Service of the Board on Personnel Administration, in transmitting its report to the Executive Board of the American Library Association, defined "placement" as ". . . any type of activity which brings together the employer having a position vacancy and the individual seeking a job. It further agreed that good placement could be defined as selecting qualified individuals matching the position's requirements, furnishing supporting data to employers and individuals, and providing counseling to both groups."¹ There are clearly, then, three aspects of placement: first, the individual librarian's concern with starting or forwarding his career; second, the employer's task of discovering candidates suitable either to immediate position vacancies or to his ideas about what types of staff members the organization may need in the future; and third, the responsibility of the professional organizations, the schools, and other agencies toward assisting both the individual and the employer.

In order to define the scope of this article, it seems advisable to note that "placement" is to be considered broadly, but will be separated, as far as possible, from the placement of staff within any particular organization. The chain of events in the total personnel effort may be listed as: first, recruitment of prospects for the field of librarianship; second, the education and training of students in the library schools; third, the selection of graduates by employers; and fourth, the advancement of successful staff members (either within the library in which they are originally placed or in some other system) through training programs and meaningful experience. The capacity and incentives of the individual, the training which he receives in school and on the job, the care with which the personnel system in which he finds himself has been constructed, and the attitude of the em-

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Placement

ployer toward his organization, all influence the placement of individual librarians within their profession. Some combination of these factors may influence one person to develop as a librarian and another to develop a distaste for librarianship. Another combination may result in unequal development of individuals with more or less equal talents, or may enable one library system to gain a fine reputation for excellent service while another library gradually declines in importance. Formal placement activities, then, though an important factor in the development of good librarians, is perhaps not so large in importance as it may seem during the current shortage of personnel. Possibly because of that fact, there is no single work in the literature of librarianship which deals with the entire scope of placement.

The substantial works dealing with even a part of the library placement process are very few. Under the heading "Selection of Employees," Ralph McCoy² reviewed a considerable number of articles and books which pertain in some way to library placement. Of the sixty-six references in the bibliography for that chapter, only thirty-seven may be considered as directly and solely applicable to librarianship; and of those, most are concerned either with the qualifications needed for this profession—or some part of it—or with methods of personnel selection. E. A. Wight,³ reviewing personnel and financial administration in public libraries, does not cite even one item which bears directly, not to say exclusively, on library placement. The most comprehensive review of the current status of placement in librarianship—the appendix to the report¹ of the placement subcommittee referred to above—is, unfortunately, not generally available.

The bulk of library placement has been carried on by the library schools and the professional library associations. Virtually every library school makes some attempt to place its students upon their graduation, and many endeavor to maintain lists of available positions for their alumni and rosters of graduates who may be interested in locating new jobs. Many schools designate a staff or faculty member to be responsible for placement activities. In a few instances, the central placement office for the institution of which the library school is a part handles this function. Harold Lancour⁴ has summarized the history of library school placement activities, and Gertrude Wulfoetter⁵ presented a picture of those activities as of 1945 (which probably has not changed substantially since that time).

Though the American Library Association does not now have any formal placement service, many other professional library organizations do. The Special Libraries Association, Law Library Association,

Music Library Association, and Medical Library Association, for example, have more or less formal placement offices which serve to bring employer and employee together. The American Library Association did operate a placement service, under various titles, from 1917 until 1948,⁴ and the placement subcommittee is studying the possible means by which placement assistance might again be offered by that association. Rezia Gaunt⁶ has presented a summary of the plans offered and the problems encountered by that group and the reaction of the A.L.A. Executive Board to its report.

The professional schools and associations are by no means the only agencies which offer employment information and advice to employers and job applicants. Commercial placement agencies contribute some valuable efforts. School administrators, particularly, turn to teacher employment agencies when seeking school librarians. Of the total placements, however, the commercial organizations probably account for a very small percentage. Personal contact with other librarians, including members of library school faculties, undoubtedly results in many more placements, especially for positions on a relatively high level.

Another means of locating employees or positions is through the advertising columns in the professional journals, such as *Library Journal*, *A.L.A. Bulletin*, and *Wilson Library Bulletin*. Advertisements placed in these periodicals were once scorned as the last resort of the unsuccessful. As a matter of fact, they are probably more satisfactory, at least in attracting a relatively large number of candidates, than are letters to a half-dozen or so library schools. It is, of course, difficult to describe fully in an advertisement either a position or an applicant's complete qualifications. As a result of that fact and of an apparent lack of attention to the importance of careful wording in classified advertisements, this method of placement is often unsuccessful. A. J. Vennix⁷ has made a study of classified advertisements in an effort to assist both individuals and employers to make effective use of this approach to placement.

Yet another type of placement agency is the state library or state library extension agency. The Washington State Library, the Missouri State Library, and the California State Library are among the many that maintain lists of persons wishing to locate positions in the various states. They also invite libraries to send in notices of vacant positions. For the most part, these state agencies operate on a "referral service" basis. That is, they do not attempt to maintain complete records on the qualifications of the individuals registered, but merely serve to

Placement

send employer or employee appropriate notices as available. There are, of course, exceptions to that statement; occasionally a state librarian will compile a list of vacant positions and circulate it among the library schools of the country, and also gather reference reports and full records for candidates. In recent years several state librarians have arranged to post notices of vacant positions and to interview candidates at A.L.A. conferences or on visits to library schools. These efforts have not ordinarily met with great success, but may be an indication of future developments.

None of the foregoing agencies are completely satisfactory, since successful placement work is dependent upon both employer and employee for the supplying of facts about positions and candidates. It is virtually impossible for a single office to gather full information on a national scale about either the positions which are to be filled or about the persons who may be interested in locating jobs. Some employers have tried to save time in filling positions by duplicating letters and job descriptions by mechanical means, only to find that their messages have lost the personal touch which has become so important during the current employee shortage. A few large libraries, such as the Detroit Public Library, the Enoch Pratt Free Library, and the University of California Library, send a recruiting representative to a number of library schools over the country each spring. More frequently the head librarian of the small or medium-sized library writes or travels to the schools within a few hundred miles and recruits staff members himself. A surprising number of libraries will hire staff members on the basis of written recommendations alone, especially for jobs at the entering professional level. In short, the placement process as it now exists is costly and frequently quite unsatisfactory.

From the employer's point of view, the current placement scene exhibits two major faults: first, an insufficient number of candidates is available; and second, there are so many possible sources of recommendations of candidates that exhausting them consumes a great deal of time. Further, it is often difficult for the employer to place the proper evaluation on the recommendations which he receives. If he writes to eight or ten library schools, he inevitably is attempting to recruit personnel from a large geographic area, and ordinarily he is in correspondence with persons whom he does not know well. If he places an advertisement in a professional journal, he must expect that up to 90 per cent of the letters he receives will be from persons not qualified for the job. If he writes to professional or state agencies, he

frequently receives only sketchy information about potential candidates and must enter into lengthy correspondence to discover the particular talents of the applicants. Meanwhile, if he does not move quickly, and frequently, even if he does, he stands a good chance of seeing the candidates disappear into other libraries. Worst of all, he has no assurance that all his labor will produce even one truly good employee. Remembering the pressure which any administrator feels from his departmental supervisors to keep professional positions filled, it is small wonder that the other important tasks of personnel administration, such as proper placement of staff members within the organization, often become submerged.

The individual seeking to advance his career in librarianship is in a somewhat better position in regard to placement than is the employer. As the shortage of personnel has persisted, employers have circulated notices of vacant positions to more and more agencies. Thus, the library school placement office, the professional association, and the specialized agency have all been aware of a wide variety of jobs which are to be filled. Furthermore, in some instances schools and associations have been so concerned with their responsibilities to the entire profession that they have not restricted their placement services to their own graduates or members. Placement officers, for a decade or more, have frequently recommended as candidates individuals who have been willing to work beyond the limits of the position they hold and who have prepared themselves for opportunities which might arise even when they have not actively sought assistance.

The library school student about to begin a career has had available through the faculty and placement facilities of his school sources of sound advice and, in recent years, a remarkable array of notices of job vacancies. He has had a relatively wide choice of type of library, field of specialization, salary level, and geographic area. Many school placement officers, consequently, have been able to advise students to consider each position in relation to three questions. First, does the institution offer professional stimulation and opportunity for growth? Second, is it in a community where one may find personal and professional interests? Third, does the salary scale offer both an equitable entering rate and opportunity for advancement? In short, the career possibilities of each position have played a more important part in the placement of library school students than was the usual case before World War II.

For the experienced librarian, existing placement avenues are also relatively fruitful. Developing programs in all types of libraries have

Placement

increased the need for staff members having broad experience in a variety of fields; adult education, indexing of scientific literature, and extension programs are only a few miscellaneous examples. Too, a number of factors, including the personnel shortage and consequent loss of staff to other organizations, have induced employers to examine their organizations with an eye to establishing promotional lines and to increasing the attractiveness of their institutions to the staff. Consequently, the established librarian will seek first to consider his opportunities for promotion within the organization before turning to the placement agencies. What are the requirements for promotion? How may they be met? Is promotion based on merit or solely on length of service? Satisfactory answers to questions of this kind may convince some librarians that they should not attempt to move from one library system to another. In the best libraries, as elsewhere, promotional lines will have been established through careful job analysis and the construction of a system of classifications.

One frequently hears the remark that during the 1930's an unhealthy personnel situation existed in that competition for jobs was keen and salaries, consequently, were depressed. During those years it was generally unnecessary to institute good personnel practices solely in order to attract staff members. Whether the current situation is better is largely a matter of opinion, but it is possible that librarianship may realize some benefits. For example, as the competition for personnel continues, we may hope that the importance of establishing comprehensive personnel policies will become apparent in many libraries where it has not seemed so in the past. It is remotely possible that, as small independent public libraries find more and more difficulty in recruiting staff members, we may see more rapid federation or consolidation of those libraries into larger units of service. The profession might also benefit if the personnel shortage were to result in a reduction in the number of professional positions, providing that reduction were accompanied by a sharper definition of professional duties.

Each of these potential advantages is accompanied by certain hazards. The inadequacies of our present placement agencies may well lead to a general lowering of standards in the selection of personnel. Because placement officers are now able to advise potential employees to select positions on the basis of the strength of the library and the possible career aspects of each available job, the large libraries will almost inevitably attract candidates more readily than the small libraries. The result may well be that the strong libraries

will become stronger and the weak weaker. There is no real evidence of a suddenly increased nationwide movement toward consolidation of libraries, and certainly a shortage of personnel is a rather weak lever by itself to force such a trend. Inability to keep its professional positions filled may merely lead the small library to drop certain services and to water down the quality of others.

Except that there is considerable current interest in the matter of library placement, there seems to be no indication of a trend toward improvement of existing services. There is no doubt that library schools have benefited considerably from the placement work which they have done, as have some of the professional organizations. However, the recent decision to abolish the position in the Columbia University School of Library Service which carried the responsibility for placement and to add those duties to another position seems to indicate further curtailment of placement assistance. Other schools, already inadequately financed, doubtless are being forced to look critically at this activity, formerly accepted as a traditional part of the program.

If the demand for trained librarians remains long at its present level, and if the library schools continue to find it impossible to prepare a sufficient number of candidates for the field, there may develop the use of so-called subprofessional positions as a field of recruitment and training. In areas or specialties where the shortage of personnel is especially acute (for example, work with children) some public libraries have recruited young women who do not look to librarianship for a career, have inaugurated in-service training programs for specific types of positions, and have thus reduced their need for library school graduates. In a sense, this type of solution represents a retrogression and definitely presents certain hazards both to librarianship and to the individuals so trained. However, it also may enable libraries to maintain services which might otherwise have to be curtailed.

As in many other areas, the administrator would benefit considerably from a central source of placement statistics. Information as to the salaries which library school graduates found acceptable, some indication of the number of candidates who might be available for new programs, and similar items could assist the employer in establishing workable salary scales and meaningful personnel classifications. Donald E. Strout is compiling useful presentations, which it is hoped will be regularly continued.⁸⁻¹⁰

Another trend which may result from the work of the subcommittee of the Board on Personnel Administration⁶ is the coordination of

Placement

existing placement services. The duplication of effort and lack of coordination now apparent even to the casual observer might possibly be reduced, and the resulting savings in time used to better advantage. It should be remembered, however, that an item in the budget of almost any organization which cannot be directly related to its immediate aims will be quite vulnerable in a period of economy.

Although there is considerable discrimination against women in appointments to top level jobs in public libraries¹¹ (and doubtless in college libraries, too), there is relatively little prejudice shown in initial selection. A rather subjective analysis of opportunities indicates that women probably have less difficulty in reaching the top positions in special and school libraries and in work with children and young people in the public library field than in other areas. Perhaps a trend which could be encouraged by library schools and others concerned with placement should be toward the acceptance of women as the equals of men at all levels of selection.

Many of our placement problems stem, largely, from the lack of candidates. There will not be more candidates until the nation enters another period of depression or until each librarian takes upon himself the responsibility for recruiting young people to the profession. Successful recruitment involves personal contact with potential library school students and the exercise of considerable initiative on the part of practicing librarians. In very few cities is there a group of librarians organized so that interested high school and college students may turn to them for information regarding a career in librarianship. College and school librarians have the best possible recruiting ground, yet few organized recruiting programs are in effect in schools or colleges, even though recruiting materials are available.¹²

Most potentially promising of current activity with scholastic groups is the library club movement now developing in several states. Of particular interest is the rapidly growing undergraduate library fraternity Alpha Beta Alpha, which brings together college students interested in library work.^{13, 14}

In the very important matter of recruiting to librarianship, the profession seems to have been largely talking to itself. The emphasis on career guidance in the public schools in recent years has resulted in the development of a ready-made outlet for information about librarianship at the most appropriate level—the high school. Librarians, if they are to provide the means of solution for the placement problem, must very soon exploit the school guidance program along with all other possible avenues.

There are other ways, too, in which the practicing librarian may improve the prospects of the profession for recruiting a larger group of prospective students from whom the library schools may select their classes. Alice I. Bryan,¹⁵ in her chapter "Summary and Conclusions," sets forth a six-point program intended to create a more adequate personnel for the public library. If followed, the program undoubtedly would benefit libraries of all kinds by making the profession more attractive to young people of talent and ambition. In broad outline, her program aims to build strong library *systems*, to define clearly the duties of the professional librarian so that adequate salary scales may be justified and so that meaningful classification schemes may be developed, to strengthen and unite our professional association, and to place education for librarianship on a truly graduate level. If such a program is to be realized, librarians in the field must be prepared to work toward those major aims. The effect upon placement of achieving the program will not be felt immediately, but it is imperative that librarianship be made more attractive as a career field if the problem underlying placement is to be solved.

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Placement

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