

The Gap in Standards for Special Libraries

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THE DIVERSITY THAT Cowgill and Havlik¹ discussed in 1972 in a previous article on this topic in *Library Trends* remains the starting point of any consideration of uniformity or standardization of special libraries.

The issue of standards for special libraries brings to mind the fable about the boy whose father gave him a bundle of switches to break. The lad learned that the switches could not be broken all at one time, but that they could easily be broken one at a time. Special libraries comprise such a large and heterogeneous group that no successful effort has been made to establish standards that would apply to all of them. Instead, efforts have been concentrated on developing standards for groups of special libraries. Other articles in this issue cover such more nearly homogeneous subsets as hospital and medical libraries, libraries serving the institutionalized, library services for the visually and hearing impaired, and special libraries within academic and public libraries.

In 1979, Markuson and Woolls² reported that the U.S. library system consists of 12,000 special libraries—more than the combined total of 3000 academic libraries and 8307 public libraries. The exact mix of this multiverse of special libraries is not precisely known. However, two recent estimates give some indication of the distribution. In 1981, Dodd reported to the joint National Commission on Libraries and Information Science/Special Libraries Association (NCLIS/SLA) Task Force on the Role of the Special Library in Nationwide Networks and

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Cooperative Programs³ a tabulation made from the 1977 publication, *Institutions Where SLA Members Are Employed*.⁴ Dodd's count showed 58 percent worked in for-profit organizations, 16 percent in academic libraries, 8 percent in government agencies, 7 percent in public libraries, and 7 percent in associations or other private nonprofit organizations. The remainder worked in school libraries, medical libraries or law libraries. The accuracy of this count is limited because: (1) the directory could list only those SLA members who gave their business addresses on the membership application or renewal form; (2) it is a listing of personnel, not libraries; and (3) the categories given were not mutually exclusive. For instance, some law libraries are in profit-making organizations, as are some medical libraries. At the same time, Ruth D. Rodriguez, manager, Membership Department, Special Libraries Association, reported to the task force a simplified breakdown of the employment situations of the membership: 55 percent in corporate libraries, 22 percent in government or other social service libraries, 13 percent in academic (including school) libraries, and 10 percent in public libraries.⁵

These tabulations indicate that a large percentage of special libraries are in profit-making organizations, mostly in business and industry. Because of the existence of these special libraries, the "divide and conquer" approach to standards for special libraries has not been entirely successful. Still valid is former SLA President Strable's 1974 comments to NCLIS:

A sizable proportion of special libraries spring from, and are very much a part of, the capitalistic system. And this is a system which emphasizes competition, individuality, privateness and other characteristics which are in opposition to commonality of goals and activities. In addition, all special libraries, whether in the profit sector or not, have long followed traditions based on non-standardization, unalikehood, and uniqueness. Much has always been made of how well the special library eschews slavishness to the norms followed in other types of libraries, but rather chooses adaptation or the creation of new techniques in order to meet the special needs of special clientele. The universality of this tradition has never been measured or tested. But it is an ever-present and important element in the self image of special librarians.⁶

A factor that Strable did not touch upon is that the private sector is not sensitive to pressures for accreditation or certification. There are no unions and no government regulations that are in a position to effect performance standards in a private library, and the library profession itself does not yet have the clout of enforcement that other professions such as medicine, accounting and law have.

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The innate resistance to conformity that Strable writes about is not the only difficulty in determining and applying standards to these special libraries. It is within this group that the greatest amount of all special library diversity is found. The sizes of the libraries range from the one-person operation to the massive libraries and library networks that are to be found in large corporations. Also, standards that might be meaningful for a chemical research organization would not necessarily be valid for a bank library, regardless of size.

Efforts to establish standards applicable to all special libraries have been tangential in approach rather than direct frontal assaults on the problem. The most persistent efforts concern salaries. In 1982, the Special Libraries Association will conduct its seventh salary survey of its membership. The previous ones were reported in *Special Libraries* for the years 1959, 1967, 1970, 1973, 1976, and 1979.⁷ The purposes of the salary surveys were stated in the 1979 report, as follows:

To obtain systematic accurate information about the salaries of special librarians and information personnel; to establish a data bank from which inquiries about salaries can be answered for members of the Special Libraries Association, for persons engaged in personnel and recruitment activities, and for persons planning special library careers; to enable SLA members to assess their own salaries in view of the numerous variables.⁸

To supplement the in-depth triennial surveys, SLA has conducted interim updates in recent years by sending a smaller questionnaire to only 25 percent of the membership. The most recent update, published in October 1981, states the purpose of the survey to be "an effort to assist special librarians in salary negotiations...." It states further: "The results provide an overview of the salaries of special librarians and a measure of annual salary increases since the last survey."⁹

For the 1982 survey, the association staff, particularly Dr. Mary Frances A. Hoban, manager, Professional Development, is collaborating with the SLA Statistics Committee, chaired by Beth G. Ansley, in order to use the survey to gather additional statistical information about the association and "to make it a more valid document for wage and salary negotiations." Ansley further reports that: "Members of the Statistics Committee have met with professionals in the wage and salary field in order to obtain their expert, external view of what the survey should contain."¹⁰

SLA continues to make another, though less effective, effort to establish a minimum salary standard for special libraries. Since April 1974, the association has issued a leaflet entitled *Employment Oppor-*

tunities. It is: "issued monthly...as a service to SLA members who are seeking positions and to employers who are seeking qualified special librarians....Positions with starting salaries of \$10,000/year or more are listed in *Employment Opportunities* as 'Professional Positions.' Positions with starting salaries less than \$10,000/year or with non-professional requirements are listed as 'other.'"¹¹ The initial minimum salary designated "professional" in this leaflet was \$9000. Some SLA members think that the \$10,000 figure is too low. The most recent decision by the Board of Directors on this matter was in June 1980, when it did not act on a recommendation from the chapter cabinet that the figure be raised to \$12,500.¹²

Cowgill and Havlik¹³ discussed the 1964 publication in *Special Libraries* of "Objectives and Standards for Special Libraries."¹⁴ When that article was later reprinted in 1970 by SLA as a separate pamphlet, the title was shortened to "Objectives for Special Libraries," and the "Appendix: Standard Specifications" was dropped. The deleted material was concerned only with physical standards for shelving, lighting and stack area arrangement, and had nothing to do with service or performance standards.

The Special Libraries Association has continued to have a standards committee under one name or another, and continues to be a voting member of the American National Standards Committee Z39.

A brief recounting of the activities of the SLA committee will show that it has been fully occupied with problems other than performance and service standards. At the time the Cowgill and Havlik article was written in 1972, Cowgill was chairman of the Standards Committee.¹⁵ His untimely death shortly thereafter caused a brief hiatus in the work of that committee. Under the later leadership of Fred J. O'Hara (1973-75), Zoe Cosgrove (1975-77), Scott Kennedy (1977-78), LeRoy Linder (1978-80), and Audrey Grosch (1980-82), the committee has been concerned with such issues as:

- surveys and statistics;
- projected manpower needs;
- a commonly accepted definition of special libraries;
- a system of classification and categorization of special libraries;
- job descriptions for exempt and nonexempt library employees;
- liaison with the National Center for Education Statistics;
- representation on the ALA/LAD, Library Organization and Management Section, Statistics Coordinating Committee;
- common bibliographic exchange format;
- AACR2;

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ANSI Z39.7; and recommendations from the White House Conference on Library and Information Services.¹⁶

The SLA Standards Committee was renamed the Standards and Statistics Committee in 1976. In June 1978, the 1977-78 Board of Directors of SLA acted to dissolve the Standards and Statistics Committee. One week later, the 1978-79 Board of Directors authorized the reestablishment of two committees: the Standards Committee and the Statistics Committee. The Statistics Committee has since been chaired by Scott Kennedy (1978-80) and by Beth G. Ansley (1980-82), and continues work on statistical concerns of the former Standards and Statistics Committee.¹⁷ The makeup and the definition of the Standards Committee was most recently changed by action of the Board of Directors in October 1981:

Standards Committee

Five members appointed for overlapping terms of three years each. Members may be appointed as SLA representatives to other organizations serving a similar purpose; or, as the President shall see fit, SLA representatives to such organizations may serve as ex officio members of the Committee for the terms of their appointments. Ex officio members shall participate fully in all the Committee's activities.

The Committee shall: (1) identify and disseminate to Association members existing and proposed standards for services, facilities, staffs and resources of special libraries and information centers; (2) review proposed standards and initiate ideas for new standards related to special libraries and information centers; and (3) serve as liaison between the Association and other organizations concerned with standards.¹⁸

The purpose of authorizing the ex officio members is to strengthen the relationships between SLA and organizations working in the field of standardization, especially ANSC Z39.

Action by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management in December 1981 threatens serious erosion of the educational requirements and salaries for federal librarians and information specialists.¹⁹ Any changes in these "Classification and Qualification Standards for Federal Library Information Positions" would affect not only federal information personnel, but may also be felt by special libraries in the private as well as other public sectors.

Given the rapid changes in the information field, particularly technical advances, and the need for flexibility in profit-making organizations so that they can respond to changes in the marketplace and in the economy, it is unlikely that comprehensive standards of performance

and service will ever be developed for business and industrial libraries. However, we can continue to write about and describe the successful ones.

The lack of standardization pertains only to the internal operation of the organizations. Special libraries in the profit sector are increasingly aware of the need for external standardization so that they can interface with other libraries, particularly through networks. Investigations by the NCLIS/SLA Task Force have revealed widespread participation for libraries in profit-making organizations throughout OCLC and related and similar networks.²⁰ Certainly, the lack of comprehensive performance standards has not been a hindrance to libraries in the profit sector in taking active and leading roles in the profession.

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