
A Generalist in the Age of Specialists: A Profile of the One-Person Library Director

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ABSTRACT

THIS STUDY FOCUSES on defining the role of the one-person library director in public, academic, and special libraries. Some literature exists on the management of one-person libraries, but little research exists on the directors themselves. A profile survey of sixty-seven such directors reveals the career paths which led these individuals to one-person librarianship. Additional results provide data on education and training, staffing, issues of concern, job satisfaction, and demographic characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no term more aptly describes the one-person library director than the British acronym for such an individual—an OMB, the one-man band (St. Clair & Williamson, 1986, p. 2). The picture this brings to mind is an accurate reflection of a one-person library director—i. e., one individual who does it all. A one-person library is usually defined as one where all the work is performed by the librarian. A more specific definition, and one that more accurately fits the profile of this study, is that of the Special Libraries Association (SLA). SLA defines the solo librarian as “the isolated librarian or information provider...who has no professional peers within the immediate organization” (St. Clair & Berner, 1991, p. 4). However, the accepted terminology in library literature is one-person library. For the purposes of this study, the term *one-person library director* is interpreted as the one professional librarian within the

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organization. There is a broad range of responsibilities within this scope. The work of the one-person librarian may be limited to professional duties with support staff, students, or volunteers available to handle clerical duties, or the individual may literally do *all* the work. The official title of the one-person librarian varies greatly. They may be called director, head librarian, university librarian, coordinator, or simply the librarian, but they all direct the work of the organization and are responsible for its operation. The libraries these individuals manage include all types with the majority, as might be expected, holding positions in special libraries and in school libraries. However, academic libraries and public libraries have their share of one-person library directors. The Federal State Cooperative System for Public Library Data in 1988 reported that only about 10 percent of U.S. libraries serve populations of 50,000 or more. Nearly half (45.6 percent) serve populations of less than 5,000 (Berry, 1990, p. 6). Texas, for example, has one-person library directors operating approximately 280 public libraries and twenty-five academic libraries (Texas Public Library Statistics, 1991; Texas State Library, 1992). The library training and educational backgrounds of the individuals who manage one-person libraries range from M.L.S. degree professionals to information providers with no formal training. Of the 280 public libraries mentioned, fifty-five of those have directors with an ALA-accredited M.L.S. degree. The remaining 225 one-person library professionals are identified as librarians as opposed to "other paid staff." The profile study will shed more light on the educational background these individuals bring to their role as one-person library directors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There does not appear to be a great deal of research in the area of one-person librarianship. For example, research conducted on First Search (WorldCat) yielded over 900 titles on the subject of small libraries, but only six of these dealt specifically with the one-person library. While much of the information concerning small libraries may overlap and can be useful in the area of research under review here, still about 85 percent of the titles deal with the "how-to" of small library operations. Virtually no research exists on the librarians who direct these operations.

Article1st (First Search) produced twenty-eight articles on small libraries. Again, the majority of these records are limited to management issues, advice to small libraries, descriptions of programs, and other similar topics.

The ERIC database yielded 912 records under the heading of small libraries. Those that deal with one-person librarianship in this body of materials are scarce.

In all searches using keyword or subject searching under *one-person libraries*, *one-professional libraries*, and similar components of the phrase yielded few results. It is necessary to look at the larger body of records under the heading *small libraries*. How well does the term *small libraries* serve one-person librarianship? One might ask what specifically defines a small library? There are obvious criteria that serve to define such an organization—size of staff, population served, budget, or size of the collection. In perception, however, what is large in one particular state might be considered small in another (Reed, 1991, p. vii). For purposes of research, the body of work dealing with small libraries is currently the most useful available on the topic but is limited in that the major topic is management of such institutions, and very little deals with the directors who manage these organizations.

ROOTS

The tradition of a library in the charge of one individual is certainly an old one and its roots can be traced to medieval times. When Sulla captured Athens in 86 B.C. and with it the library of Aristotle, he placed two librarians in charge of the collection. If such a significant collection had two librarians, it is probably safe to conclude that other collections had at least one librarian (St. Clair, & Williamson, 1986, p. 3).

Monasteries of the seventh and eighth centuries had large numbers of monks involved in copying manuscripts, and references are frequently made to the one librarian in charge of these sizable collections.

The first public library in Great Britain was provided to the city of London by Richard Whittington, and its chained collection was the responsibility of one person, the Chaplain of Guildhall College. Similar collections were established at Worcester and Bristol, and regulations were drawn up proclaiming that “books should be chained and catalogued and that the librarian should be a bachelor of divinity, or at least a graduate” (St. Clair & Williamson, 1986, p. 4).

The forerunner of the public library, the subscription library, appeared in the eighteenth century. In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin and friends created the Library Company of Philadelphia which Franklin called “the mother of all North American subscription libraries” (Gray, 1936, p. 4). It was only after monies were collected, books were on the shelves, and the catalog was underway that the directors decided the time had come to appoint

a librarian. Louis Timothee, a French refugee and a protégé of Franklin was appointed. Timothee's primary duties were:

to give due Attendance in the Library on Wednesdays from Two to Three o'clock and on Saturdays from the hours of Ten till Four. He was to allow any Civil Gentlemen to peruse the Books of the Library in the Library Room but...not lend to or suffer to be taken out of the Library by any Person who is not a Subscribing Member any of the said books. (Gray, 1936, p. 12)

As time went on, additional rules were added. Sleeping in the library room was considered a loud and offensive noise and the librarian was instructed that, "if any Person hath to be awakened Twice, he shall be requested to leave" (Gray, 1936, p. 12).

Several years later, when Timothee resigned, Franklin himself served as the one-person librarian for several months. In 1746, Robert Greenway was appointed librarian serving in this position for seventeen years. Relations between the librarian and the directors became somewhat strained when the directors passed a bylaw that the cost of all books lost from the library should be taken from the librarian's salary. As might be expected, Greenway protested volubly, pointing out that it was the directors themselves who were most to blame for loss of books by failure to return them (Gray, 1936, p. 13).

By the late 1800s, the concept of library work as a service profession developed and the hiring of several librarians with specialized tasks began to be an accepted form of librarianship in cities. However, schools, small academic institutions, special libraries, and numerous rural communities continued (and continue) to be served by the one-person librarian.

Skipping ahead a century, it was in the early 1970s that Guy St. Clair was asked to lead a roundtable discussion on the "one-man" library at a Special Libraries Association conference in Boston. St. Clair disclaimed use of the term in a profession where the vast majority of members were women. He suggested that the discussion concern the "one-person" library and at that point brought into the professional vocabulary a term for a concept that had been historically in operation for many years. In 1984, St. Clair began publishing, with Andrew Berner, *The One-Person Library: A Newsletter for Librarians and Management (OPL)*. In 1991, the board of directors of the Special Libraries Association approved division status for SLA's Solo Librarians Caucus. By their action, one-person librarianship was recognized as an official branch of SLA. It was at this point that the organization defined the solo librarian as "the isolated librarian...who has no professional peers within the immediate organization" (St. Clair & Berner, p. 4, 1991). It was estimated that between one-third and one-half of SLA's membership was made up

of solo librarians. St. Clair broadens the concept beyond the special libraries milieu when he asks:

Isn't one-person librarianship a subject, a branch of the library and information profession that crosses all boundaries? I think it is. It seems to me that when we are talking about the concerns and interests of one-person librarians, we are pretty much talking about ideas that are not limited to one type of library or even to libraries specializing in the same subject." (St. Clair, 1989, p. 4)

PERCEPTIONS

One-person librarianship has long suffered with misconceptions about its role, not only from the layperson but also within its own profession as well. More resources, more staff, and large collections often translate into bigger must be better. Berry (1990) wrote that the persistent suggestion that something is inherently wrong with small libraries is like a "self-inflicted wound" (p. 6). He adds that we know enough about big and small now to finally bury the notion in our profession that small is bad or big is better (p. 6). McCabe (1989) tells us that the smaller library is not a microcosm of a larger organization; it is an entity in its own right. The larger library should not be used as a role model because small libraries have their own unique needs and objectives (p. vi). An optimal benefit of smallness is the option to create an organization that encourages workers to act independently. Theorists contend that the most flexible organizations are those where decisions are made closest to the level of impact. Because the one-person librarian is close to this point of impact, small libraries tend to be more flexible and democratic in their approach (Williams, 1988, p. 57).

Often questions arise as to what level of professional duties a one-person librarian can perform along with the myriad of necessary clerical functions. Herbert White (1988) wrote:

Libraries in the common perception, are defined by clerical functions and there is enough reality to validate the generalization. I am sufficiently radicalized on this issue so that I even have trouble with the phrase, "one-person libraries" as contrasted to one-professional library. I am sure there are exceptions, but I harbor the suspicion that some of the "one-person libraries" are not really libraries at all; they are clerical centers for buying, lending, and recalling. That, of course, is what a stockroom clerk does. Perhaps we need to postulate that "one-person library" is an oxymoron. (p. 56)

Needless to say, one-person librarians took exception to this statement. St. Clair suggests that it is better for a dedicated professional to take on the duties of a one-person library because such an individual

can provide a level of professional excellence while dealing with clerical routines in the most efficient and effective manner. He points out that one-person libraries which fall into the nonprofessional, clerical category are the exceptions (St. Clair, 1988, p. 2). Additional data will be provided on professional status of one-person library directors in the profile study.

PROFILE: AN OVERVIEW

It has already been pointed out that little has been written about the one-person library directors themselves. They are basically an unknown group. Two major studies on job characteristics in librarianship which involve one-person librarians were both conducted in Great Britain. Of these two, the one conducted by Janet Shuter and Judith Collins for the British Library Reference Division in 1984 had a response rate of 47 percent or seventy-six employees in one-person libraries. The content of the study dealt with aspects of the job, working conditions, qualifications, and career history. The results were compiled in groups of "extremely satisfied," "very dissatisfied," and "average." Of the job factors that most met expectations, all groups listed organizing one's own time at the top of the list. The "extremely satisfied" group also gave interest in the work as a top priority. The dissatisfied group felt that not delegating skilled tasks was the main factor that did not meet their expectations. Overall, the most positive aspects of the job for the satisfied group related to the content of the work while those for the dissatisfied group related more to working conditions. For all of the one-person librarians who answered the survey, lack of training was considered the number one problem (St. Clair & Williamson, 1986, p. 10).

Authors St. Clair and Williamson (1986) conducted their own informal survey which yielded additional profile information including the following data:

1. More than 80 percent of one-person librarians have the title of librarian.
2. Approximately 25 percent of one-person librarians work in public libraries (in the United States), and another 25 percent work in special libraries.
3. About 70 percent of one-person libraries have between 1,000 and 15,000 volume collections. Rarely did any have less than 1,000 or more than 25,000 volumes.
4. Almost 60 percent reported that they supervise a clerk, student, or volunteer.
5. Approximately 70 percent of these libraries participate in formal or informal networks (p. 12).

The one overwhelming distinguishing characteristic of this type of director is that the individual works professionally alone and is required to direct his or her energies to a total picture of service. These individuals do not have the luxury of limiting themselves to only one area of library service. As such, these directors are very much generalists in an age of specialists. Brooks places total responsibility clearly on the shoulders of the one-person library director. He says, "the requirement to set up an atmosphere falls on the librarian. He can make it hum or plunge it into static silence. In a small public library, the librarian *is* the library" (quoted in Hart, 1988, p. 3).

In the one-person library setting, duties may include everything from administrative work to the most menial of tasks. In the course of a day, the director may draft a policy for use of the library by outside groups, help a patron locate information for a report, edit catalog records, select new titles as well as placing the order for them, and handle the circulation desk in the absence of a volunteer or clerk. As verified by the British study, this variety of duties or the content of the job is singled out as the most positive aspect of work in a one-person library by the individuals who work there. Other advantages of working in a one-person library include independence, flexibility, and personal knowledge of library users. Common dissatisfactions were isolation, lack of training, low pay, lack of support by the parent organization, and physical surroundings (St. Clair & Williamson, 1986, p. 10).

Certain traits of one-person library directors have been identified as factors for success. These include analytical intelligence, self-confidence, flexibility, a sense of humor, patience, and a high frustration threshold (Weinsoft, 1990, p. 30). St. Clair (1987) adds that the single-staff librarian must be a visionary, an idealist—one who can see the big picture (p. 267). Safford stresses the importance of administrative duties and points out that even in one-professional college libraries some significant part of the director's time should be devoted to administrative responsibilities. A common error is that such individuals cannot afford the time for "administrivia" (Safford, 1988, p. 20).

PROFILE SURVEY METHOD

The review of studies summarized earlier in this discussion suggests that one-person librarianship has no small impact on library service in this country. As a unique blend of type of library and type of management, one-person librarianship has survived the bigger-is-better wars and has emerged as a voice with strong advocates in SLA, in school libraries, and in the public library arena. Still,

little definitive new information on these directors exists, specially that which is pertinent to U. S. libraries. In light of this, a survey was formulated to increase available data and help build a profile of these individuals. Who are these one-person library directors? What is their role and in what environments do they work? What career paths led them to solo librarianship, and what impact does isolation have on their effectiveness? What traits and skills are significant to a one-person library setting? Are the concerns of one-person library directors markedly different from concerns of larger organizations? Are these directors involved in professional organizations, and do they make use of continuing education or networking possibilities? What advantages or disadvantages exist in one-person library environments?

In an effort to obtain necessary data for this profile study, a number of considerations guided the choice of a research strategy. First, since no list of one-person libraries exists, a respondent pool had to be built from a variety of existing sources. Second, the decision was made not to include school librarians in the survey. This decision was based on the overwhelming number of school librarians nationwide and the fact that school librarianship is one area where librarians normally expect to be in a one-person library setting and probably receive the most appropriate training for such a setting. Also, through state education agencies and the efforts of the American Association of School Librarians, some profile data already exists on the school librarian. This then left three types of one-person libraries on which to build the respondent pool—special libraries, public libraries, and academic libraries. Two information bases were used to build the list to which the survey would be mailed. Sixty libraries were identified as having one professional staff member in the *American Library Directory* (1992/93 edition). Thirty additional names were randomly supplied by Guy St. Clair from the mailing list of *The One-Person Library: A Newsletter for Librarians and Management*.

Data were gathered using a questionnaire consisting of twenty questions. Five questions on the survey were open-ended and the remaining items were multiple choice. Once the potential pool had been established, letters were sent to each individual at their library explaining the nature of the project and a request for their participation. They were told that individuals and libraries would not be identified. Of the ninety surveys mailed, seventy individuals responded for a return rate of 77 percent. Two of these were eliminated because they did not meet the study's definition of a one-person library—i.e., there was more than one professional librarian on the staff. One survey was returned unanswered because the position was

currently vacant. Thus the profile was dealing with surveys from sixty-seven respondents—forty-five were from public and academic libraries, and twenty-two were from special libraries.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Respondents by type of library included twenty-four public libraries, twenty-two academic libraries, and twenty-one special libraries. Those respondents answering the survey represented thirty-one states and the District of Columbia.

The majority of one-person library directors (79 percent) surveyed were women. Of the respondents ($n = 67$), fifty-three were female and fourteen were male. No males were listed as directors of one-person special libraries. The number of male one-person library directors was equally divided between public and academic libraries. All twenty-two of the one-person library directors for special libraries were female. In the public/academic libraries, thirty-one of the library directors were female.

The age factor of these one-person library directors was somewhat surprising. In St. Clair's work in 1986, many of the one-person librarians were in entry-level positions (St. Clair & Williamson, 1986, p. 170). The majority of the respondents to the survey (twenty-five or 37 percent) were in the forty to forty-nine age category. Their answers to career path questions and number of years in present position did not indicate that they were in entry-level positions. The next largest pool of respondents was equally divided between thirty-five to thirty-nine years of age and fifty to fifty-nine years of age (twelve each). There were eight respondents in the thirty to thirty-four age grouping. The least number of all respondents (three) fell in the less than thirty age category.

Environment

Respondents were asked to choose the statement that best described their position. These choices included:

- one-person library director with no staff
- one-person library director with paid clerical staff
- one-person library director with students or volunteers
- library director with one professional librarian
- other. Please specify:

One-person librarians in special libraries were most likely to be directors with no staff with nine individuals selecting that option. Almost an equal number in special libraries (ten) had paid clerical staff. In public and academic libraries, thirty-seven respondents

(n = 45) were in the one-person library director with paid clerical staff category, clearly indicating that while most one-person library directors were the only professional librarian on staff, they do not work alone. However, their sense of isolation from other professional librarians comes through in their responses to the open-ended questions on advantages and disadvantages of the one-person library environment. The number of paid staff reporting to the director varies considerably. Respondents were asked to indicate the number of staff supervised. Again, special libraries were the most likely to have no staff available to them. Seven of these indicated they supervised one staff member and only one supervised six or more. In academic and public libraries, most one-person library directors (sixteen) supervised one to three individuals. However, almost an equal number (fifteen) supervised six or more.

What is surprising in the statistics gathered is the size of collections and the number of titles added annually. For public and academic one-person libraries (n = 45), thirty-seven had 20,000 volumes or more and thirty-one added 700 or more titles annually. Of special libraries respondents (n = 22), eighteen indicated collections under 10,000 volumes. St. Clair and Williamson's (1986) earlier figures indicated that 70 percent of one-person libraries have between 1,000 and 15,000 volumes (p. 12).

Education and Training

Of the sixty-seven respondents, fifty-three (79 percent) hold a master's degree in library science. The degrees came from thirty-three institutions with twenty-four of that number being ALA-accredited library education programs. Interestingly, Simmons College was represented most often with four M.L.S. degrees coming from that institution. Those fourteen individuals without M.L.S. degrees held either undergraduate degrees in library science or degrees in other fields. In the case of special libraries, these degrees often related to the libraries served, as in the case of a law librarian with a JD. Several respondents held second master's degrees, and one held a Ph.D. in higher education. Only two marked non-degree status, and both of these individuals indicated that they had extensive on-the-job training. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they had attended staff development or continuing education courses within the last two years. Of the public and academic personnel (n = 45), ten indicated they had not done so. In the special libraries group (n = 22), three had not attended such training. Respondents' involvement in professional organizations was also sought.

Overwhelmingly, the greatest number of individuals were involved with state or regional professional associations. Some of these overlapped with membership in the American Library Association and the Special Libraries Association.

Issues of Concern

Are the concerns of one-person library directors markedly different from concerns of larger organizations? At an informal gathering of five library directors, a brief list was drawn up of a number of broad areas of concern. These included automation, time management, budget issues, staffing, and reference service. These topics were listed on the survey, and respondents were asked to rank in order those issues which concerned them the most with number one being the area of most concern. Blanks were provided so that respondents could add their own areas of concern and rank these appropriately. Automation and budget issues were top priorities for one-person librarians followed by time management, reference service, and staffing. The issues the respondents raised were collection development, long-range planning, keeping up with technology, outreach programs, building expansion, pay equity, technical services, copyright, relationship with management, and isolation. With the exception of concern over isolation, results appear to confirm the hypothesis that the issues facing one-person library directors are not so very different from those facing their colleagues in larger institutions.

Job Duties

When one-person library directors were asked to rank in order of importance the duties they perform regularly, there was a clear division of thought between special libraries and public/academic libraries. Again respondents were given a list of duties which a one-person library director might be expected to perform. Blanks were left so individuals could add their own duties and rank them accordingly. The list of tasks included:

Administrative duties	Reference service
Using electronic resources	Circulation of materials
Bibliographic instruction	Ordering materials
Materials selection	Cataloging/technical services
Budget preparation	

For special libraries, fifteen directors ranked reference service as the number one duty they perform. On the other hand, public and academic directors placed administrative duties at the top of their list with twenty-nine ranking it number one. Eight public/academic individuals ranked reference service number one. Additional tasks the directors added to this list involved public relations, retrospective conversion, community involvement, and building maintenance.

Career Paths

Of the sixty-seven original respondents, fifty-nine chose to respond to the request to describe briefly the career path or set of circumstances that led to their position as a one-person library director. The one-person library directors were refreshingly vocal on this and all the open-ended questions. After reviewing the comments, it was possible to group the career paths of these individuals into a number of broad areas for discussion.

Geographic location. At least ten one-person library directors mentioned location, job availability in the area, a desire to be close to family, or husband's/wife's job which took them to the area as reasons which led them to seek a one-person library setting. Several mentioned that they felt it was safer and less expensive to live and work in a smaller city or rural area.

Special concentration. Several individuals specifically chose areas of specialization, such as community college or small academic colleges, and set their careers for such institutions. Others who chose concentrations in art history or law or medical librarianship became involved in special libraries because of these interests.

Career changes. Seven or more respondents wanted career changes which led them to one-person libraries. Accountants, lawyers, social workers, a number of high school librarians—all wanted something different and appeared to find it in their gradual move to a new environment.

Promotion. A number of one-person library directors who had been volunteers, part-time employees, or part-time librarians in the organization took over when the previous director retired or resigned.

Not all career path reasoning can be neatly categorized. Some directors attributed their positions to fate or strictly chance or just being in the right place at the right time.

A corollary question to the career path response asked the respondents if they had had a career or profession other than as a librarian. Thirty-nine answered this negatively, indicating that librarianship was the only profession in which they had been engaged. Of the twenty-eight who replied yes, twelve had been teachers. Others had been lawyers, journalists, archaeologists, accountants, social workers, consultants, in retail sales, or members of the military.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The survey sought to answer the question of what advantages and disadvantages exist in one-person library environments. Of the sixty-seven original respondents, sixty-one chose to reply to this

question. Autonomy and control of one's work was considered the number one perk with twenty-three directors naming it as an advantage. Variety of duties was also considered of high value. Eighteen directors listed it among the advantages. Other advantages in order of importance were knowledge of the collection and patrons, many challenges and no boredom, opportunity to set administrative polices in place, and less red tape. One director pointed out that he does not have to give up the pleasure of serving the public in order to be an administrator. An academic director liked the sense of connection to many aspects of the work rather than the narrow view of over-specialization. One librarian said simply, "I am the show."

The comments on the disadvantages of a one-person library director position were more scattered. Eleven directors noted the need for more staff and delegation of clerical duties as a major dissatisfier. Other negative aspects receiving an equal number of comments included heavy work load, no time to complete projects, isolation, no other professional expertise to call on, little chance for advancement, and lack of support and resources. One director described herself as being on an island with no one to talk things over with. Another had one statement under disadvantages—"lonesome job." An academic director says, "the day-to-day activities of keeping the place running overwhelms even the most workaholic of us in time." Still another adds, "the heat's on you when things fall apart—from bathrooms to budget."

There is some corollary to the British study mentioned earlier on job satisfiers and dissatisfiers. The British study noted organizing one's own time and variety as the top advantages. This still holds true in the current profile survey. Isolation and lack of support are still among the disadvantages, but little mention was made of low pay, lack of training, or physical surroundings as it was in the earlier study.

Characteristics for Success

What special traits and skills are necessary for a one-person library director to be successful? This open-ended question was posed to the one-person library directors, and sixty-two of the original sixty-seven respondents chose to provide answers.

Taking each of the respondents' suggestions, a list of twenty-three different traits and skills was compiled. Of all traits, flexibility was most often listed as a necessity for success in a one-person library operation. This was followed by resourcefulness, communication skills, management skills, and organizational skills. Also on the

desired traits list were a sense of humor, patience, teaching abilities, computer skills, good time management skills, and a high threshold for frustration.

One academic librarian commented on what he felt was a necessary skill—"be meaner than a mad dog when dealing with administrators." A special librarian added that willingness to accept poverty level pay could be a necessity.

Job Satisfaction

In spite of the heavy work loads and high frustration levels, one-person library directors are amazingly satisfied with their jobs. Directors were asked to rate their job satisfaction by marking one of the following:

very satisfied	disappointed
mostly satisfied	very disappointed
somewhat satisfied	

Of the sixty-seven respondents, twenty (30 percent) indicated that they were very satisfied with their work. Thirty-four were "mostly satisfied" and seven were "somewhat satisfied." Three individuals indicated they were disappointed and only one library director was very disappointed. One respondent chose to add her own rating code, "frequently frustrated." It is interesting to note that two of the "disappointed" directors had had recent cutbacks in staff. The "very disappointed" directors indicated concern with weak administrative support and poor budgets.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to define the role of the one-person library director and to define some of the unknown qualities about the individuals who occupy these positions. The profile survey has provided data that both supports and enlarges the literature available on this topic.

One-person library directors, or one-professional library directors, are clearly on the front lines of librarianship. On their shoulders rest all the duties of what makes a library run. It is a challenge they appear to embrace with high spirits and a positive attitude. A true sense of concern for their patrons and a desire to improve service is evident in the profile surveys.

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