

**Voices of the Future:  
Next Generation Professionals Talk  
with ACRL President Julie Beth Todaro**

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Association of College and Research Libraries President Julie Beth Todaro conducted a focus group with librarians on the UCLA campus on March 10, 2008 in Los Angeles, California.

The eleven participants, recruited on a voluntary basis to participate in the focus group, all work in libraries on the UCLA campus and are members of the Librarians Association of the University of California—Los Angeles (LAUC—LA) Division. The discussion was designed to focus on early-career librarians and professionals new to librarianship; volunteers had to have less than 10 years of professional experience as librarians.

Here are some demographics facts about the group:

- The group included nine female and two male participants
- Ages of the participants ranged from late 20s to 40s.
- In terms of ethnicity and race, the group self-identified as follows: 7 Caucasians, 2 Mexican-Americans, 1 Latina/o, 1 South Asian.
- Participants earned their MLS/MLIS degrees in 2007 (3 participants), 2006 (2 participants), 2005 (1 participant), 2004 (2 participants), 2003 (1 participant), 1998 (1 participant). One participant did not hold the MLS/MLIS but earned a Ph.D. in the humanities.
- Nine of the participants have worked less than 3 years as a professional and 2 have worked as librarians for more than 4 years.
- The majority of participants earned their MLS/MLIS degrees from one of the two programs in California - UCLA or San Jose State University. One participant earned their degree from a Midwestern university.
- All participants would recommend the profession to others.
- Five worked as paraprofessionals in academic libraries prior to earning their degree.
- Four have additional graduate degrees other than the MLS/MLIS degree.

**Todaro posed the first questions to the group: Why did you choose librarianship? Did you consider other professions?**

One participant opened the discussion with "I did not expect to be here today. I fell in love with doing research and being in a library" so it seemed to be a natural progression. She expected to work in special libraries but hated it and found herself pulled towards academia. "I like educating people, supporting the educational process, and helping as well."

Some described interests in related fields. One participant was studying to be a mathematics teacher when she got a student assistant job in the library working in the rare books area and in interlibrary loan as an undergraduate. After graduation, a paraprofessional position led to graduate school and she now works as a medical librarian. Another wanted to pursue a career as a university professor, but found interests in technology and libraries drew her to the field. Another worked as an online journalist and found the work "too ephemeral" and entered librarianship due to interests, at the time, in research and writing and "in academic, special libraries, and competitive intelligence." One participant did not know that librarianship was "an option" but entered the profession after earning a Ph.D. and teaching for several years; a fellowship program provided entry into academic librarianship.

Other participants noted the encouragement of a librarian was key to their decision to enter librarianship. One characterized it as an "accident of fate," as they were working in catering and delivered food to the UCLA campus and started talking to the librarians; the result was that they were "converted." Another was working as an undergraduate in the library and was encouraged by her boss. She then got a research grant to assist 1<sup>st</sup> generation college students to do research at another university and knew "I wanted to be around libraries." One participant worked in a library while in high school and had a family member who was a librarian and "realized I needed a career and looked at librarianship" after working in another field.

Two participants described uniquely Los Angeles career paths. "I thought I would be the next Steven Spielberg, but . . . While in school, I got a job as a student assistant in libraries. It was an appealing career choice," said the individual, who pursued a degree online. Another student noted, "It chose me. It fit in to what I was doing. I was trying to start my own entertainment company. I was in the libraries all the time doing research for this business. I got a job as a staff member. I continued to use the library as a resource for my research. I liked the people in library school better than those the entertainment industry."

**All participants would recommend the profession to others.**

In relation to job searches, participants were asked: **What phrase or phrases get your attention in job postings or are turn-offs?**

Some of the "likes" or attractive phrases in postings noted by the group participants included: "or equivalent experience," "exciting work environment," "supports professional development," "team-based environment," "flat hierarchy," "ability to work independently," "research environment." They also liked seeing signs of flexibility, collaboration, progressive environment, and an attractive geographic location. At least a quarter of the participants noted they look for evidence that support and mentoring will be offered in some fashion.

Long lists of requirements in job postings were not necessarily bad, but one participant noted "if it is a laundry list of required qualifications, I think micro-management" while another thinks a long list of requirements is a sign that the library has someone already picked out for the job.

One participant noted that often required qualifications in most postings are the basic skills required of any librarian in any job and stated, "I look mostly at the desired (qualifications) to see whether I want the job or not." Another noted, "If these are the skills I want to learn, it might persuade me to apply." Others noted that the number of required qualifications compared to desired qualification is a signal for them. One participant noted, "I know that job descriptions are generic, like for staff positions. There are stock phrases, but I'm not sure how important these qualifications are."

Some turn-offs: "conflict resolution skills required," or "pastoral setting." Another noted that vague statements indicate to them that the institution is not sure of what they want. One participant noted: "I want a clear vision of what the job is and if it's not there then the institution does not have a clear vision." Another noted, "I look at the organization, the faculty, who I will be working for/with. My own education and background must be a fit for who I am working for." Another noted it is important to know the "student demographic" and that the "name of the institution is not enough."

Salary is also a serious consideration, and several noted that posted salary ranges are something they do consider and that they look for positions that base the salary on both experience and education. Another noted that salary scale is important as is the local housing market and moving/relocation offerings. One participant noted "I do look at the salary scale as I have obligations." Another participant noted that they are aware that application processes differ and take note of directions related to application processes.

This part of the conversation led to a discussion about how the participants' current jobs have met expectations. Todaro posed the following question: **Has the reality of your job played out according to what you expected?**

One participant opened the discussion with: "It's better than expected. I have access to resources. I have the freedom to explore other things. Job and management allow me to write, teach, and be involved with committees."

Other comments included:

- "The librarians I work with are great and very talented, but I wish I had more guidance. I am constantly reminded I am only in a temporary position, so they do not involve me. I wanted/expected mentoring and guidance, if I seek it out it is there. But it's not built in."
- "Going from a paraprofessional to a professional was not clearly spelled out for me. There are degrees of acceptance."
- "I was told a library degree was not worth anything."
- "When I first started I was the cute 20-something librarian and got the age barrier thing. I have earned my stripes, but still there is the arrogance of the profession over time, particularly older more senior professionals. I worked at a private institution, but I think UCLA is more arrogant."
- "The hierarchy here in some instances does not allow me to stand out."
- "Even as a paraprofessional, I was treated as a professional colleague. It was a seamless transition from paraprofessional to professional. It was expected since I was already doing the work," said one librarian who works in a small unit with minimal staff.
- "Sometimes it seems that it's a matter of how long you've been here instead of having your skills recognized."
- "Yes and no. I am flattered since I am being treated as a professional. Mentoring is a weak point. If I seek it out, I can find it. Dealing with the bureaucratic ship of state that is UCLA is challenging. There seems to be a desire for more innovation and entrepreneurship while there is also the reality of layers and layers of bureaucracy. There are task forces here investigating 10-year-old technology. It (bureaucracy) has already chased away a friend from the profession already."
- "Being highly innovative in a bureaucratic environment is very difficult."
- "There seems to be a cultural fear of failure so we don't put anything forward."
- "My last institution was small so change was rapid. I was a UC undergrad and graduate. I never understood how they got it all up and running. Now I'm here and my loyalty is to UC. So I feel disloyal being angry about the system."

**What about work conditions? Work environment?**

This discussion focused for a bit on access to technology. One participant noted, "In my previous 2 different jobs, I had 2 different locations so I got a laptop easily. Not the case here." Another participant noted "Software installs seem difficult. There are different departments - who installs, who buys, where to install is a bit of mystery." The

comments of some participants relate to affiliated libraries (libraries on the campus that do not report to the University Librarian). One person from an affiliated library noted a very different experience: "Our software installs happen in a few days."

Other issues focused on communication with the large library system that exists at UCLA. "I would like to see centralized areas for staff to meet, away from their work areas." Another noted, "I would like to have more communication with selectors. This would foster a real exchange of ideas."

Others noted they like "flexibility" and telecommuting arrangements that are supportive of employees with families. Some noted this was critical, but is limited based on what is accessible from home. Other noted they like the "involvement of management."

Professional development was a topic of discussion. "I want support and time off for conferences," stated one participant. Another participant echoed this sentiment: "I am appalled at the professional development (funding) here at UCLA. I almost did not come (for the job)." One participant (from an affiliated unit) noted they receive \$1,500 annually (the 125 UCLA librarians receive \$705 annually; departments may supplement this amount with additional funds as available). Another participant expressed interest in tenure for librarians, similar to what is offered by the California State University system.

### **How well did your MLS prepare you for the work force?**

Participants were in agreement that work experience as library paraprofessionals and library internships as well as work in related fields were better preparation than MLS degree programs. "Internships were not required, but they should be," noted one participant.

Another noted, "I had some incredible professors, but there were others who should retire. My advisor was one of them as he did not know how to support me when I wanted to look at other options in the field." One participant noted that library science programs have many new professors "who are not really interested in libraries." One participant commented that not having library science-specific professors gave her a broader perspective of the profession and what can be changed. One participant indicated that adjunct professors who are practitioner were good instructors.

In a brief discussion about MLS programs, participants talked about program focus, i.e., practitioner-oriented programs vs. theoretical programs. Most agree that they did not expect a graduate MLS program to teach them day-to-day tasks, but did expect to gain "a better understanding of what I could do or how I can change."

One participant indicated they would have liked to have had actual leadership classes, not management classes, with a particular focus on learning how to "influence without authority."

Six of the 11 participants expressed clear interest in moving into management.

Participants responded to the query: **What is the title of your dream job?** Responses included: my current job, project manager, technology coordinator, Assistant/Associate University Librarian for Collections and Scholarly Communication.

**In discussing career paths and job searches, the following question was posed: How long do you see yourself in a position?**

Participants indicated the length of time in a particular position was reflective of the individual as well as the position and the opportunities it provides. Another indicated that the size of the institution may play a role in that one might leave a smaller institution after a shorter time, but that one might stay at a larger institution for a longer period of time because it takes so much time to orient and learn a larger institution. One person noted that search committees and hiring officers do look at job history and "less time in each job, more jobs" might be questionable. Another participant noted that a desirable opportunity might lead them to leave. One participant closed the discussion with the following: "Staying in the same job or place for 25 years, now that's scary!"

Todaro posed a related question: **What will keep you in the profession?**

Salary was an important consideration as was professional development support. This group of professionals also mentioned: open communication, a willingness to listen to new professionals, involvement and guidance by senior professionals and managers, the opportunity to learn and keep learning, the chance to build a solid foundation for a career and to learn from senior librarians, work-life balance, openness to new professionals ("allow us in" said one person), and challenging work.

A related discussion focused on **what might force them to consider leaving librarianship.** This question centered very seriously on "unsustainable pay" and the high and rising cost of living in major urban areas such as Los Angeles.

A related question focused on **workload expectations.** This question highlighted the experiences and perspectives of this group of new professionals. Several mentioned balance and the desire to work 40 hours and no more. One person wanted balance in the workplace, "I want balance among the team, not have everything just assigned to me but to the team. I want balance within the team." Another wants the pace of the organization to mirror the time it takes to get things done. Based on their experience to date, some

indicated no desire to move into management while others indicated they would be willing to manage librarians, but not staff.

**Todaro posed this question: What kind of supervisor/manager do you want?**

Participants reflected consistency with responses to related questions and clearly expressed desire for supportive and mentoring managers or supervisors who are open and honest and will provide guidance, be advocates for staff, and "ask how I need help" or "what tools do I need." One participant noted that they wanted a "manager that is able to hold me accountable" while another stated "I want a manager that wants me to succeed." The participants were also clear that they did not want supervisors or managers who are "looking over my shoulder" or "micromanaging." One person expressed an interest in having more formal mentorship programs in libraries and having a mentor who can "offer a broad picture of the library."

*Julie Todaro facilitated this focus group. Jenifer Abramson, Pat Hawthorne, Joan Kaplowitz, and Leslie McMichael served as notetakers and collaborated on compiling this summary. This focus group at UCLA was conducted in compliance with UCLA's Institutional Review Board protocols. The focus group planners gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the leadership of LAUC-LA in setting up this focus group.*