

PARTNERSHIP

The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

vol. 13, no. 1 (2018)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v13i1.3971>

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Academic Librarians and the PhD

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Abstract

The appropriate credentials for academic librarians have always been contentious. Is the MLS/MLIS adequate? Are additional subject master's degrees required? The increasing importance of teaching and research as part of the obligations and responsibilities of academic librarianship suggest that advanced degrees are more significant than ever. If academic librarians are faculty, should their preparation and qualifications not match those of their colleagues? The author explores the role of the PhD as a key credential for academic librarians.

Keywords

academic librarians; PhD; credentials; training; faculty status

Introduction

Should the PhD be a requirement for academic librarians working at universities? While the PhD may be important and valuable for the individual, establishing it as a requirement seems premature and even unwanted. Drawing from the literature, a survey of Canadian LIS PhD recipients, and the outcomes of a forum at the 2017 Ontario Library Association SuperConference, the case for the PhD as the new terminal degree for academic librarians will be explored.

While faculty status is not universal across Canada, it is a hard-won recognition (and obligation) for many academic librarians. As "scholar-practitioners," we have a valued tradition of service (practitioner) but increasingly we also teach full-time and undertake extensive research (scholar); closely following the model of our faculty colleagues.

And yet the “terminal degree” in our field remains the MIS/MLS/MLIS (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1975). Are we fully prepared for the new roles academic librarians are encouraged to undertake? Is the PhD credential less an “academic ticket” and more essential training (Nicholson, Sloniowski, & Ridley, 2017a; Ridley, 2017b)? While it is true that not all disciplines within the university require a PhD (e.g. Law, Fine Arts, Creative Writing), the LIS field is more closely aligned with those that do (e.g. social sciences, humanities, natural sciences) because of its focus on research as well as practice.

The recent emphasis on librarians as researchers, as evidenced by the establishment of the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) and the Librarians’ Research Institutes from the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL), is encouraging and supportive of the profession’s role in scholarship. CAPAL’s new peer-reviewed journal and their alignment with the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences demonstrate a commitment to research by academic librarians. It also suggests that preparing librarians for these roles could occur “on the job” as well as part of preparatory training. There are many paths to obtaining a PhD. This paper will focus on the possible requirement for such a qualification, not on the process or timeline for achieving one.

Professional Education and Training

The necessary qualifications for academic librarianship have been contentious for many years. Critiquing the inadequacies of the master’s program is common among librarians. Some would do away with the degree entirely as an “overreliance on an expensive and unnecessarily exclusionary credential” and move to an apprenticeship system (Kelley, 2013), while others view it as necessary but insufficient training requiring augmentation through additional subject master’s degrees. Ferguson found that in the US one-third of all academic librarian job postings required a second master’s degree (Ferguson, 2016, p. 732). In the end, however, the data was inconclusive about the value of those additional credentials: “the only real answer may be that dual degrees are valuable to some and not to others, are required for some areas of academic librarianship and not for others” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 734).

The role of the master’s, as a professional degree, is to provide “acculturation” to the professional rather than advanced training or exploration (Herubel, 2006). Preparation for academic librarianship has become more broad and complex. However, the answer cannot be to include more into the MLIS or to simply contest what is there. Whether through additional master’s degrees or a PhD, academic librarians have sought, and will continue to seek, options to expand their expertise and skills.

A key question is whether these qualifications should be a condition of hire or something obtained post-employment.

Changing Personnel in Academic Libraries

Data from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) indicates that academic librarian hires in 1986 without a library degree represented 7% of new staff; in 2015 this had grown to 24% (Wilder, 2016). Represented in these numbers are professionals with various, non-library qualifications, including PhDs. The need for a diversity of experts from many backgrounds suggests to some commentators that while academic librarians don't necessarily need PhDs, PhDs are needed in the library (Marcum, 2012; Neal, 2006).

The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowships in Academic Libraries program (Council on Library and Information Resources, 2017), particularly its application at McMaster University (Bell, 2011), responded to that perceived need and, at the same time, created a controversy about the role of academic librarians. While Jeffery Trzeciak, the University Librarian at McMaster, saw this as a reason not to hire any more librarians, the experience of many CLIR post-docs was to seek library credentials to secure permanent library positions.

The case being presented here is not for non-librarian PhDs to assume librarian roles. The LIS master's degree is still relevant and required (it is still the terminal degree for librarians generally). The question, however, is whether an additional qualification (the PhD) is now also necessary for those in academic librarianship.

Academic Status

Academic status for librarians in Canada was achieved only through diligence and persistence (Jacobs, 2014). The conditions of this status vary widely and come with differing responsibilities and obligations (Harrington & Gerolami, 2014; Winter, 2015). However, at the core is an understanding that academic librarians are key partners in the academy. It is clear librarians highly value this:

“When asked if faculty status increases the opportunity to participate in university governance, faculty librarians gave an average response of 5.71 and nonfaculty librarians gave an average response of 5.02 [on a scale of 1-7]. These are the highest averages either group reported in the study, meaning they strongly believe that administrators listen more attentively to faculty librarians ... Many commented that perhaps having a PhD would be an additional factor in strengthening these relationships” (Galbraith, Garrison, & Hales, 2016, pp. 590–591).

If librarians have academic responsibilities shouldn't they also have the requisite academic credentials; not for the sake of the degree but for the experience and expertise that comes with it? This question is important because academic status for librarians is not uncontested.

A cautionary tale from the University of Virginia (UVA) is a reminder that academic status must be continually earned and defended. In 2013 UVA, an otherwise

progressive institution and library system, moved its librarians from faculty to staff positions thereby eliminating academic status (Dunn, 2013). Leadership at the UVA library no longer viewed librarians as distinct from other library staff positions with advanced qualifications and not sufficiently aligned with faculty to support academic status. Maintaining academic status requires librarians to visibly and demonstrably align themselves with academic work and the most rigorous academic standards relevant to the field. Observations of the scholarship and teaching of librarians as “academic lite” only serve to undermine that case (Gilman & Lindquist, 2011, p. 404).

The PhD is more than the “academic ticket” (although importantly it is symbolic of entry into the academy), it is evidence of scholarship at a level commensurate with academic responsibilities and obligations.

The PhD and Librarians

Writing in 1986, Bates clearly positions a PhD as preparation almost exclusively for LIS teaching (library administration is the main exception): “The purpose of a doctorate is to prepare you to become a scholar” (Bates, 1986, p. 158). A 1978 survey of LIS PhDs (those granted from 1930 to 1975) reinforces this. Of the respondents, 51.3% were in LIS teaching, 33.8% were in library administration, with the remaining 14.9% in library operations or other unrelated fields (White & Momenee, 1978, p. 209). The doctorate was a path to a teaching or an administrative role, it was not preparation for library practitioners.

While the scholar-practitioner model for academic librarians is now widely accepted, librarians with doctorates are still a minority. According to the 2016 census of Canadian academic librarians conducted by the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL), 53.6% of respondents had another professional degree, a second or even a third master’s degree, but only 4.5% held a doctorate (Revitt, Schrader, & Kaufman, 2016, pp. 20–21).

Of the 34 respondents who held doctorates, only 8 studied in an LIS field (Revitt et al., 2016, p. 24). This underlines the perceived importance of subject expertise in advanced qualifications rather than contributing to the LIS discipline. It aligns with earlier findings that 72% of those holding PhDs in libraries came to librarianship after, not before, their doctoral studies (Lindquist & Gilman, 2008).

When asked about the advantages of having a doctorate, respondents to a 2011 survey of US and Canadian librarians with PhDs noted “credibility with teaching faculty” 36.1% (the most frequent response), “subject expertise” 34.5%, “ability to relate to academic users” 26.7%, and an “in-depth understanding of the research process” 26.3% (Gilman & Lindquist, 2011, pp. 402–403). The benefits of doctoral studies largely centered on improved credibility and relationships with faculty (something that echoes why librarians feel faculty status is important). The opportunity to contribute new knowledge to the field was not identified by the respondents.

Also reported in the study by Gilman and Lindquist, was the list of challenges of having a PhD since one response dominated the findings: 32.3% identified “library colleagues’ perceptions” as a challenge (2011, p. 404). The uncertain position of the doctorate within the profession has led to tensions among librarians with different qualifications that include viewing those with PhDs as over-qualified, undervalued for their experience and expertise, and as failed academics.

The Scholar-Practitioner

The scholar-practitioner model, as it pertains to doctoral studies, can be detrimental to the research agenda of librarians. Nicholson is concerned that the emphasis on “action research,” as exemplified by ACRL’s *Assessment in Action* program from the *Value of Academic Libraries* initiative (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016, 2017), limits the scope of research by librarians and potentially discounts areas such as critical librarianship (Nicholson, 2017).

Like Nicholson, Sloniowski views the PhD as a means for social change not as a tool for improved status within the academy or relationship building with faculty. The PhD is preparation for critical thought and action:

“It is not my view that all academic librarians need to get a PhD to participate in these conversations [about “knowledge, memory, cultural heritage, labour, historical consciousness, equality, and so much more”]. It is however my view that some of us need support and deeper training to develop meaningful research agendas, to speak the language of scholars, and to use new knowledge to push libraries in new directions which are not merely complicit with neoliberal agendas” (Sloniowski, 2017).

Higher education is expensive and student debt loads can be crippling. The master’s degree is already viewed by some as an insurmountable barrier to entry into the profession (Kelley, 2013). With existing concern over the imbalance between educational requirements and compensation (Ferguson, 2016, p. 733), won’t the requirement for a PhD exacerbate this problem? Without adjustments to the PhD programs and support from academic libraries and their institutions, the answer must be yes. The challenge is to create new pathways or to leverage existing options to make an advanced degree more achievable.

Some academic libraries have effective sabbatical and research leave programs which enable librarians, over time, to pursue a doctorate. However, part-time studies are not easy and not even recommended (Bates, 1986). A 2005 report from England found that only one in three part-time students submitted their thesis, describing this approach to doctoral studies as “a high risk venture” (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005, p. 32).

Encouraging is a recent report from the Modern Language Association (MLA) that recommends substantial changes to the PhD including shorter times to completion, more flexible programs, a reimagined dissertation, and broader career preparation

options (Modern Language Association, 2014). If implemented in other disciplines, these recommendations would maintain the rigor of the PhD while making it more relevant and accessible to librarians.

The PhD as Terminal Degree

As part of a Special Issue of *Open Shelf*, 13 academic librarians, each either holding a PhD or currently pursuing one, were asked a number of questions about their doctoral experience and outcomes:

Why did you pursue a PhD?

How did the PhD advance or impact your career?

What are the personal costs and gains of further graduate education?

What advice would you give to a librarian considering a PhD program?

Four of the respondents were library directors; the other nine performed various roles in libraries. Six held LIS PhDs, five held doctorates in a variety of disciplines (higher education, art, business, political science, and education), and two were still in process (communications studies, humanities). Summaries of the responses to these questions are available at Nicholson, K., Sloniowski, L., & Ridley, M. (2017a).

The final question of the *Open Shelf* survey was: “Should the PhD be the new terminal degree for academic librarians?” (Ridley, 2017a). Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1			
<i>Should the PhD be the new Terminal Degree for Academic Librarians?</i>			
	Yes	No	“It Depends”
Library Directors	1	2	1
Other Librarians	3	5	1
TOTAL	4	7	2

A sample of the comments illustrates the differing perspectives.

“For those seeking a career within professional practice with a focus on academic librarianship, it should be a requirement before tenure is approved; as opposed to at initial recruitment. If you are serious about being part of The Academy, then a doctorate comes with that territory.”

“No, I don’t think so. I do however think that librarians should individually and collectively consider what knowledge, education, and experience that we feel would contribute to stronger individual researchers and a stronger research culture within our profession.”

“No, but I think that there is a place for a doctorate, particularly if you want to go into administration.”

“No. We should first be stressing a second Masters perhaps over a PhD. I don’t really see how this would add to the work of many people. And would possibly place an unnecessary financial and personal burden on folks keeping many people from joining the profession.”

“It’s more important that we understand the forthcoming needs of academic libraries and find people who have those skills and talents, whether they have a PhD or not.”

“I don’t think that it should be ‘the’ terminal degree, but I think and hope that it is recognized as ‘a’ terminal degree.”

“In an ideal world, yes, all academic librarians would have a PhD. One is simply better equipped to work in a university environment as a member of the academic staff with a PhD than without a PhD.”

This mixed response was echoed at a session held at the 2017 Ontario Library Association SuperConference attended by approximately 40 people. Through small group discussions participants identified a number of key issues. Common concerns and observations were the nature of the institutional context (i.e. were library administrators supportive and did collective agreements enable and reward doctorates?), personal recognition (both from a financial and career perspective), and evidence that PhD holders would be actively engaged for their expertise and skills.

Some saw the PhD as a “corrective” for the shortcomings of the MLIS but wondered if some sort of research certificate program might fill the gap instead. There was specific concern about the impact on diversity, access to the profession, and the service philosophy of librarianship. As one discussion group noted (and reflected the overall sentiment of the session): “Should the PhD be the new terminal degree? Probably not” (Nicholson, Sloniowski, & Ridley, 2017b).

Conclusion

Faculty status for academic librarians at universities has resulted in significant opportunities and obligations for their work. While librarians and their academic colleagues differ in terms of specific roles, expectations, and assessment, there is a commonality that supports librarians as academics. This has led to a discussion about the role, value, and possible requirement of the PhD for academic librarians. Does it not follow that if librarians are academics that they should have the same academic training (i.e. the PhD) as their faculty colleagues? The consensus from librarians (both those who hold a doctorate and those who do not) is that, while the PhD might be important to the individual, it should not be a requirement of the position.

Given the general lack of support for the PhD as the new terminal degree, the clear costs (both personal and financial) to obtaining a doctorate, and the ambivalence about its professional or career value, the obvious question is: Why pursue a PhD?

As the research illustrates there are many reasons and motivations. There is no one answer and no one outcome in terms of professional advantage. When one PhD student, nearing the completion of their program, was asked about the impact of their experience, they responded by saying “I think differently.” For some, me included, that may be both sufficient and primary.

Acknowledgement

The author would would like to thank the reviewers who provided valuable comments to improve this paper.

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