

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

**by Julie Beth Todaro, Pat Hawthorne, Joan Kaplowitz,
and Leslie McMichael**

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

The five student participants, recruited on a voluntary basis to participate in the focus group, are currently enrolled in the Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) program in the Department of Information Studies, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA.

Here are some demographics facts about the group:

- The participants included four women and one male.
- Four of the students were in the second year of the program and one was in the first year of the master's program.
- All of the students worked in libraries or in related fields such as museums and publishing prior to entering their graduate program in information studies.
- All are interested in working in some type of academic library - research, academic, four-year, liberal arts in particular. One student mentioned special libraries as a possibility.
- All of the students mentioned interests in technology and career options provided by technology in library settings, i.e., electronic resources, etc.
- All were Millennials born after 1980 - ages of the students were 23 (2 participants), 24, 26, and 27.
- In terms of ethnicity and race, the group included Caucasians and multi-racial individuals.
- All of the participants are currently working part-time in an academic library setting while completing their degree.

**The first question posed to the group was: Why did you choose librarianship?
Did you consider other professions and which ones?**

Three of the participants noted that working in libraries is a more "altruistic" and "exalted profession" and provides a way to "benefit society by giving back" and expressed a sentiment that librarianship is a "calling, not a job" and requires a certain personality and attracts individuals with certain characteristics who are drawn to the work by its nature and the opportunity to connect people with the information they need. Two of the participants noted that librarianship speaks to individuals with diverse interests and provides opportunities to bring those interests together. All of the students had worked in libraries or related professions prior to entering their graduate program - some worked as undergraduates in academic libraries in reference and interlibrary loan while others worked or interned in related fields including publishing, editing, and museums/visual arts. One student stated: "As an undergrad, it dawned on me, I could be a librarian." Another stated: "I was a history major and I took Intro to everything as a way to pick a career. I liked working with students and research. Librarianship seemed to unite several of my interests. After a pre-LIS residency at my undergraduate institution, I knew I wanted to be a librarian." One focus group participant expressed an interest in museums and indicated that a friend encouraged her to consider what museums and libraries do and to also consider librarianship as a profession and that she found libraries to "be a better fit" because she "likes the idea of providing information and providing services" and libraries have more job opportunities. One student noted that teaching was suggested and that librarianship has parallels with teaching that are complementary. Two of participants expressed a desire to meld librarianship with interests in museums and publishing/news. Another had a parent who works in the library profession and has "always known I would be a librarian."

In response to a question related to **additional education**, one participant received a master's in a subject area prior to coming to library school. One student indicated that they were "done for awhile, but might be interested in another master's or going for a Ph.D. someday" while another said "I would like another master's, but the debt load is daunting."

Two questions focused on whether or not the individuals felt committed to the profession and if they would recommend it to others.

Four of the five participants expressed a strong commitment, while the fifth participant expressed some interest in knowing more about alternatives or related professions so as to know what opportunities exist to combine a number of

interests into a future job. Two of the students indicated that they have already recommended the profession to others, and another indicated they would provide information about the field if asked and might recommend the profession depending on the person.

Another question probed for areas of interest in academic libraries and limitations the students might face in a job search.

The discussion started with one student noting that the job market is a reality and that market pressures or the "seller's market" must be acknowledged. The students seemed to agree that new graduates need to be practical and broaden their search and ensure that they can seek out multiple opportunities by being as marketable as possible. One student articulated this as being able to apply for any job that seems interesting. One student explained that initially they were very interested in e-resources, but realized that their view of this area was very narrow. That view was much expanded by an internship opportunity to work with professionals in this area which allowed the student to see that there were many more opportunities if one considered collection development, reference, instruction, etc. in relation to e-resources. One student noted that elective classes taken in various areas of librarianship along with work experience and internships help students to explore and/or confirm interests in professional specializations. While core courses within a curriculum cover intellectual foundations and provide students with a broad perspective valuable to professionals, it is the elective courses that allow students to explore specific areas of professional practice such as collection development, cataloging, instruction and to prepare themselves for the job market, according to this student.

In terms of location for that first job, one participant noted "I know my dream job won't happen right out of the gate" and explained that they will need to look at their criteria in terms of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd tier and decide which are deal-breakers when they face the decision on which job to accept. The majority indicated they were tied to or geographically limited to California or the West Coast (California, Oregon, Washington). Another noted they wanted to work in "big cities where I know people."

In response to Todaro's follow-up question "What is your dream job title?" the responses were: Arts/Social Sciences Librarian, Outreach Librarian, Emerging Technologies/Humanities Librarian, First Year Experience and/or

Reference/Instruction Librarian. All expressed interests in doing a variety of work including public service and collection development as well as outreach.

The next question was: How well is the program preparing you for your first job?

One student stated: "I won't know until I get my first job and have been in it for awhile." Another said: "Yes. And no." One student expressed "concern about what I will need to know on Day One." Others concurred with these diverse comments while acknowledging that graduate programs focuses on imparting abstract, conceptual, and theoretical knowledge about the profession and field in the classroom and encourages students to do practicums and internships to gain practical skills and experience. Among the noteworthy comments from participants were "I would have been a little lost without the work experience," and "just taking classes would not prepare me," and the "internships and professional association involvement are helping to prepare me." Another student noted that the requirement to take the core courses prior to completing any internships makes it "challenging to figure out if the field is right for you without that practical experience." One student commented that the library work they did as an undergraduate was NOT enjoyable, but that the internships and part-time work in the academic setting as a graduate student was enlightening and "got me to see academic library work as a possibility." Others noted that the program with extras like internships allowed an expanded view of "what libraries are" and made "academic library jobs more viable and believable" and "working in an academic library fills in the blanks from the coursework."

Students were generally positive about the up-to-date curriculum (and noted it is difficult to keep up to date), the focus in coursework on how the field is organized, the number of core courses which impart information on how resources and tools are developed and managed and controlled, the emphasis on community service, and the focus on diversity in the UCLA program.

In the discussion, several students noted that the classes taught by adjunct professionals who are practicing librarians are the most meaningful as these instructors have practical skills and experience. One student expressed concern about the number of available electives and availability of practitioners to teach elective courses.

One student noted that she had completed her undergraduate degree and been out of school for two years before applying to graduate school and stated "You need to know why you are there for grad school. I can see the difference between someone right out of undergrad versus waiting like I did. The program can do what it can with the focus/target, but students need to do the best they can do."

In relation to the job hunt, Todaro asked the participants what phrase or phrases get their attention in job ads?

Students quickly noted jobs that focus on "evolving" or "emerging" trends and technology were attractive as were jobs that are NOT traditional roles. Other key phrases that attracted the participants were jobs that emphasized "innovation" and "student-centered" libraries and services and "outreach" in non-traditional ways while another indicated interest in positions that emphasized "cultural heritage" or opportunities to work with "underserved communities." Some of the focus group participants noted they were drawn to specific disciplines, particularly arts, humanities, social sciences disciplines, while others were drawn to the functional work like reference or collection development. The students noted that they are interested in what skills employers are seeking.

The counterpart question posed by Todaro was "what phrases are turnoffs in job ads?"

Students were less specific in response to this question. Some comments were lack of uniqueness, vague descriptions, or job ads where nothing stands out about that library. Participants seemed to agree that they "want to know what makes a library special." One student noted that they like online application processes which make it easier to apply.

One student indicated that jobs with lots of requirements drew their attention. Todaro probed this comment with a question: **What about a job with a long list of qualifications, okay or not?**

Three of the students indicated that long lists of qualifications are okay and one stated "it's helpful because it actually shows the expectations of the kind of person they want" and another noted "long descriptions help (you) to understand up front about the job." One student referred to the job description as "the tip of

the iceberg" indicating that students read these in detail for information and clues about what is being sought.

Students also cited other things they seek in job postings including: Is it a long hiring process? Do they need me to start yesterday? Will they train me? What are they looking for - an introvert or extrovert?

The students also noted the importance of networking to learn more about the library and institution so that they will know if it is a fit or not for them.

In response to the question **What factors will attract you?**, students noted a wide variety of factors including the opportunity "to do different jobs all day and not just the same job every day" and "a supportive management and lots of give and take and willingness to try new things" and "a smaller institution to allow for a diverse day to day functions." Some specifics mentioned were opportunities to network with supervisors and funding support for travel and conferences.

The discussion moved to another topic - What about workload?

The students were very much in agreement here - clearly wanting a 40-hour work week and expressing a desire for work-life balance. Some of the specific comments were:

- "I know there are weekend and night hours and flexibility is needed, but I do not want to work more than 40 hours."
- "I am different since I know I want to work part-time as a career choice. I have other interests and want the time for them. I'd like to work 30 hours and leave! I want to be a part-time professional."
- "At this stage I know I need to front load the career, be more established and sacrifice, and I'm willing to do it, but I'm not thrilled about it."
- "I am not thrilled about sitting at my desk for more than 40 hours a week, but I am willing to do professional reading and thinking outside of work. I am concerned about taking on way more than I can accomplish and want to learn to say no to things I can't commit to. I want to really pursue a few things and do those better."
- "I need to balance work and family. I need time to devote to my family and I need to plan for this in my career."

During the discussion, the focus group participants illustrated the issues central to their generation, specifically that just getting started in a career is challenging

and students often enter the workforce with more debt to worry about than previous generations. Concerns about the economy and finding a balance between work and family were evident as were more specific questions about what it will take in terms of networking and hard work to build competencies and a career path. Some essential questions were posed by one participant: How much time do we commit? Do I take an academic path?

In response to Todaro's query about interest in management, three of the students quickly responded in the affirmative. Another said "eventually" but indicated mixed feeling due to their diverse interests. In terms of what levels of management they aspire to, it was varied - Assistant Head, middle management, University Librarian or the person at the top. There was a general consensus that they would need experience to prepare for management, but all seemed to indicate it would be a part of their professional future.

Does your program prepare you for management? In response to this questions, the students noted that the theory and concept covered in management classes coupled with experience would constitute preparation. Students expressed a clear feeling that work experience would prepare them along with mentoring and opportunities to develop managerial and leadership skills.

Todaro wrapped up the focus group with one final question: What question or questions didn't I ask that you think I should have?

This produced diverse responses from the participants.

- One student said they expected questions about the librarian shortage and recruitment. One participant noted that getting to junior high and high school students interested in libraries is good, but that the profession "can still get us at the undergrad level, particularly if we are working in the library."
- Another noted that there is a glut of entry-level librarians while the openings seem to be at the middle management level, but new graduates are not ready for those positions yet.
- Another stated they thought there would questions about what is professional work today, what librarians do versus what paraprofessionals do, and the trend to move away from requiring the MLS/MLIS degree.
- One student indicated that they expected the questions to focus on formal programs of recruitment and retention, how to promote outreach to

students "like us" to steer students to librarianship, how to get the first job and be supportive in that job, how to know become knowledgeable about the organizational culture, and about factors about why librarians stay or leave.

- Finally one student noted the disconnect in society about what librarians really do.

This focus group is one of several being held around the country during Julie Beth Todaro's ACRL Presidential Term. We invite your comments and hope this summary encourages and fosters discussion within the profession about issues related to recruitment and retention and diversity.

###

Julie Todaro facilitated this focus group. 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, faculty, and students of the Department of Information Studies, particularly the assistance of Anne Gilliland, Beverly Lynch, and Sarah Lehmann in setting up the focus group.