Significantly Different?
Reference Services Competencies in Public and Academic Libraries

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There is a widely held belief in the library profession that public and academic libraries are substantially different from one another, with regard to patron base, collection emphases, and overall service goals. These differences in focus and collection suggest that reference librarians will need a different set of skills and competencies in each setting. As a result, library students are often encouraged to choose a career path and plan a curriculum that focuses on one setting, and professional librarians may encounter resistance when they try to move from one setting after several years of experience in the other. Yet, there is very little research to confirm these popular beliefs that reference services in the two settings are significantly different. Based on a nationwide survey of practicing reference librarians in public and academic libraries, this study explores the extent to which professional competencies and expectations for reference librarians vary between academic and public library settings.

There is a widely held belief in the library profession that public and academic libraries are substantially different from one another. Indeed at least superficially, the two types of libraries do seem to be more different than alike. Academic library collections traditionally focus on supporting the curricular and research needs of the students and faculty who make up their patron base, with fewer resources going to the leisure and entertainment materials that usually make up a substantial portion of public library collections. The public library patron base is inherently more diverse, with public libraries offering collections, programs, and services for patrons from infants to seniors and of many different ethnic, educational, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds from affluent to homeless. Academic libraries also have diverse patrons, but the bulk of the community is made up of patrons in their late teens and older, all of whom have at least a high school diploma and a generally good grasp of English, making the population somewhat more homogenous.

These differences in focus and collection suggest that reference librarians will need a different set of skills and competencies in each setting. Accordingly, library students are often encouraged to choose a career path and plan a curriculum that focuses on one setting, and professional librarians may encounter resistance when they try to move from one setting after several years of experience in the other.

But is the work of a reference librarian in a public library really that different from the same job in an academic

library? Despite the popularity of this notion, there is little evidence to support this idea. Virtually no research has been done to compare reference services, and the skills and competencies required to perform those services, in public and academic libraries. This study addresses the gap in the literature by providing results from a nation-wide survey of reference librarians, from both academic and public libraries, who were asked about competencies most important and relevant to their job. Public and academic reference librarians were surveyed separately, with nearly identical surveys, about their views on the work they do. The results of these surveys provide insight into aspects of the job that are similar or different depending on the work setting and the skills and competencies important in each type of library. These data will be of interest to professional librarians who are considering a change in setting and to hiring managers interviewing such candidates, as well as to library students who are in the process of planning their program and choosing a career path. The ideas shared here could also inform revisions or changes to reference courses and related areas of the library science curriculum and as such should be of interest to library science faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of resources describe competencies for reference librarians, but very little literature exists comparing job descriptions or expectations between academic and public libraries. As a result, this literature review will look at current overviews of competencies for reference librarians across the literature. One of the most universal set of standards is published by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association. RUSA offers a set of professional competencies for reference librarians and a set of guidelines for behavioral performance, both of which detail qualities and competencies expected of reference librarians to perform their jobs effectively. According to these behavioral guidelines, librarians should be approachable, show interest in their patrons without judging them or their information requests, be able to use information sources effectively, and communicate well with their patrons.[1] The professional competencies further elaborate on the qualifications of reference librarians and include accessibility to the patron, knowledge of sources, ability to collaborate, ability to engage in marketing and outreach, and the ability to assess and evaluate the service.[2]

Technology has had a major impact on reference services and competencies, and that is reflected in the literature. The RUSA behavioral guidelines, for instance, were revised in 2004 to address competencies for remote reference services. As an example, RUSA describes approachability in the online environment as providing prominent and jargon-free links to remote reference services. Related to the shift to online provision of reference services, Luo identified online communication skills, including facility with chat culture and etiquette,

as an essential competency for reference librarians.[3] Similarly, librarians working online will need to be familiar with and adept at using the related technology and online resources. They need to be adept at online searching and understand how to use sophisticated information retrieval techniques, able to work across different platforms and software systems, and be familiar with online sources.[4] Other areas of importance include understanding and using learning objects and data sets, creation of products such as websites and subject portals, and development of access systems.[5] Indeed, the list of required competencies appears to be growing, as "new technologies, such as virtual worlds, are appearing in addition to rather than replacing older technologies such as the telephone in reference service provision."[6] Rapid technological change also implies the need for continuous learning and professional development of reference librarians, as even more than a decade ago, Nofsinger noted that it was no longer possible for library schools to prepare professionals for their entire career.[7] Since then, a comparative review of job ads reveals a large increase in the demand for technological skills for librarians.[8]

While a focus on technology requires a new set of skills, it does not in any way diminish the need for interpersonal skills. An analysis of job ads for medical reference librarians indicates that oral and written communication skills are the most frequently requested.[9] As a part of communication skills, librarians have to be good listeners to fully understand their patron's information needs.[10] Reference librarians also emphasize the need for certain personal traits such as empathy, creativity, and a customer service orientation.[11] Pellack points out that these personal and interpersonal traits are important not only for interacting with customers, but also for building strong relationships with colleagues.[12] Nor are these interpersonal skills limited to interactions in the face-to-face environment. In an online or chat reference interaction, librarians must master the intricacies of the traditional reference interview.[13] Indeed, a review of reference job postings between 1974 and 2004 finds that the demand for interpersonal skills and behavioral characteristics nearly tripled in that time, appearing in more than 60 percent of job postings in 2004.[14]

Another important competency area for reference librarians is the ability to engage in instruction. In fact, teaching has been an integral part of the reference service for decades, and an increased emphasis on information literacy has in turn increased responsibilities for instruction as reflected in job titles and even the creation of separate positions for instruction.[15] Instruction can and does take place in a variety of formats, both formal and informal. In addition to workshops, in-class sessions, and courses, librarians aim to incorporate guidance in the location, selection, and use of materials into the reference transaction, rather than just providing an answer.[16] The instructional role extends to the online environment as well, where reference librarians are expected to integrate instruction into synchronous and asynchronous remote reference interactions.[17] As a result, some reference

librarians are beginning to identify themselves more through their teaching role.[18]

The resources reviewed here enumerate and elaborate on many skills, qualifications, and competencies for reference librarians. However, each article or set of standards either does not specify a type of library setting, as is the case with the RUSA guidelines which are meant to be general enough to apply to all settings, or they focus on one very specific setting such as public, academic, or medical libraries. The question remains, are these competencies equally applicable to both academic and public libraries? This study attempts to fill the gap in the literature by addressing this question.

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to gather feedback from current reference librarians in both academic and public libraries to determine whether there are correlations or significant differences in the expected competencies for reference librarians by type of library. Specifically, this study examines the following questions:

- What competencies do current reference librarians believe to be most important in the field today?
- Are there differences between the skills and qualifications sought by public librarians and academic librarians? If so, what are they?

To get a broad view of professional opinion, and one that might be generalizable to the larger population, the authors chose to conduct a nationwide study. A list of all academic and public libraries in the United States arranged by state was accessed from LibWeb (http://lists.webjunction.org/libweb).

From this list, a random sample of up to twenty public and ten academic institutions from each state was drawn. The final study sample consisted of 457 academic libraries, and 567 public libraries. The authors searched the website of each institution to locate contact names and emails for each library. Every effort was made to identify the reference librarian or reference department manager at each library, but in some cases the invitation was sent to the library director, assistant director, or a public services librarian, asking them to forward it to the appropriate person. Each librarian received an email explaining the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate by following an embedded link to a web-based survey. The survey was anonymous, but participants were offered a chance to enter a drawing for a $25 Amazon.com gift card. The initial invitation was followed up two weeks later by a second invitation, to increase response rate. Two weeks after that the survey was closed and the results analyzed.

In addition to basic demographic information, librarians were asked to review a list of thirty-seven competencies in three categories and choose those they consider the most important. The list of competencies for the survey was drawn largely from the professional competencies and behavioral guidelines provided by RUSA but was supplemented by competencies identified in the literature. Table 1 lists the competencies, categorized as General, Technology, and Personal, that appeared in the survey. A copy of the survey itself can be found at http://tinyurl.com/8barxhx.

FINDINGS

The results of this study reveal some interesting and somewhat contradictory findings about reference work in public and academic libraries. The response rates were good, with

Table 1. Competencies Used in Both Surveys

General	Technology	Personal/Interpersonal
Second masters degree	Online searching	Verbal communication
Budgeting	Programming	Written communication
Foreign language	Web design	Listening
Marketing	Web maintenance	Working in teams
Supervisory experience	Social media	Approachability
Ability to conduct research/publish	Hardware troubleshooting	Comfort with instruction/teaching
Knowledge of cataloging	Software troubleshooting	Self-motivated
Assessment/evaluation	Chat/IM	Stress management
Customer service		Building relationships with coworkers
Familiarity with paper sources		Building relationships with other professional colleagues
Familiarity with online sources		Conflict management
Search skills		Adaptability/flexibility
Negotiating		Sense of humor
Current events awareness		Organizational awareness
Traditional reference interview		

a 46.4 percent response rate from the academic librarians; the public library survey was anonymous but 567 libraries were contacted across the country and 463 people returned surveys (likely multiple people at some libraries responded). The responses were overwhelmingly from women with at least an MLS degree: public library respondents are 81 percent female and 82.2 percent hold an MLS, while academic respondents are 76.4 percent female and 96.8 percent hold an MLS. Respondents ranged in age from under 25 to over 71, with the bulk of respondents having between 8 and 15 years of experience.

Participants in each group were asked to select important competencies for reference librarians from three different categories: general skills, technology skills, and interpersonal skills. Many competencies traditionally associated with reference work, such as facility with the traditional reference interview, familiarity with important reference sources, communication skills, and search skills, were highly rated overall. Tables 2, 3, and 4 list the five most frequently selected competencies for each group of skills, for each type of library—those most highly valued by the respondents.

As is shown in table 2, the general skills identified as important by both academic and public library directors are essentially the same, with only slight variations in the importance placed on each of the top five. Customer service, search skills, and familiarity with online reference sources were by far the most important to these respondents.

Likewise, in table 3 there is much similarity between the two library types, though not such a perfect duplication as in table 2. Both selected online searching as the skill most needed, with nearly every respondent identifying this as important. Academic libraries included web design in their top five, while public libraries indicated hardware troubleshooting skills would be most valuable for successful work at the reference desk.

As illustrated in table 2, listening, verbal communication, approachability, and adaptability/flexibility are among the top five competencies for both academic and public libraries. However, while academic librarians also rate comfort with instruction in the top five, public librarians include sense of humor instead.

The least necessary skills in each type of library show variation, as shown in table 5. There are no personal skills selected by either library type, and none are selected by fewer than 55 percent of the respondents. For each type of library, there are more general skills chosen, but in public libraries there are two technology skills chosen and only one technology skill made the lowest list for academic libraries—though

Table 2. Most Frequently Selected General Skills

Academic Library	Public Library
Search skills (95.6%)	Customer service (97.1%)
Customer service (94.0%)	Search skills (95.6%)
Familiarity with online reference sources (93.4%)	Familiarity with online reference sources (92.7%)
Traditional reference interview (75.5%)	Traditional reference interview (77.8%)
Familiarity with paper reference sources (67.1%)	Familiarity with paper reference sources (70.3%)

Table 3. Most Frequently Selected Technology Skills

Academic Library	Public Library
Online searching (98.4%)	Online searching (98.2%)
Software troubleshooting (71.2%)	Software troubleshooting (77.8%)
Chat/IM (65.8%)	Hardware troubleshooting (64.4%)
Social media (65.5%)	Social media (64.1%)
Web design (53.0%)	Chat/IM (38.8%)

Table 4. Most Frequently Selected Personal Skills

Academic Library	Public Library
Verbal communication (97.8%)	Verbal communication (97.8%)
Listening (96.6%)	Listening (97.1%)
Approachability (95.3%)	Approachability (94.8%)
Comfort with instruction/teaching (92.5%)	Adaptability/flexibility (88.9%)
Adaptability/flexibility (91.8%)	Sense of humor (87.2%)

Table 5. Five Least Selected Skills for Academic and Public libraries

Academic	Public
Programming 8.5% (Technology)	Second Master's degree 5% (General)
Foreign Language 11.9% (General)	Research/publishing 12.5% (General)
Budgeting 24.8% (General)	Programming 13.1% (Technology)
Second Master's degree 28.2% (General)	Web design 22.4% (Technology)
Research/publishing 33.5% (General)	Foreign Language 28.3% (General)

it is their lowest rated skill.

As noted, in each of the categories there is some overlap between what is considered most or least important, as well as some unique elements. To explore these differences further, the researchers ran a series of tests to check for correlations and statistically significant differences between academic and public librarians' responses. These tests revealed some subtle distinctions in library responses by type, beyond simple rankings of competencies. For instance, both academic and public librarians rate interpersonal, or what might be called "soft" skills, very highly, while their opinions tend to vary more on the question of "hard" skills, or areas of specific knowledge or technical abilities. For instance, both groups agreed that customer service and related competencies such as the ability to listen, verbal communication, and approachability, are essential, while web design abilities or familiarity with assessment and evaluation were more important for academic librarians than public. Even where there is agreement between the two types of librarians, there is often a difference of intensity or the amount of emphasis on those areas. The next two sections examine interpersonal skills and content knowledge areas separately to distinguish the patterns and variance between the responses to each for the two types of libraries.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Both public and academic librarians rated interpersonal and customer service skills as very important overall. There is even some consistency in how the skills are ranked in each setting. For instance, customer service is one of the highest rated general skills for both types of librarians, while listening, verbal communication, and approachability are the top three interpersonal skills for each. In fact, all of the fourteen interpersonal skills are chosen as important by more than half of the librarians from both settings. This suggests that even those skills that are not in the top five are considered very important for reference librarians to master, regardless of the setting in which they work. Further, these results indicate that an understanding of and ability to interact with the patron, whether in a face-to-face meeting or in a virtual synchronous or asynchronous interaction, is an integral part of the reference librarian's job. Indeed, this supposition is supported by the fact that the traditional reference interview was one of the top five general skills for public librarians (selected by

77.8 percent); and, while not in the top five, was still chosen as important by more than half (56.8 percent) of academic reference librarians. The importance of understanding how to get to the heart of what a patron wants seems to be evident across these skills.

While these results underscore the similarities between academic and public libraries, other tests uncovered subtle but important differences. Interestingly, while both public and academic librarians rate customer service as one of the most important general skills, they choose this competency at different rates. A chi-square test showed $p < .0001$, indicating a statistically significant difference between the percentages of librarians of each type choosing this competency. Thus, though both academic and public librarians find customer service extremely important, public librarians put even more emphasis on this skill than do academic librarians. Similar results are found with verbal communication ($p = .0002$), sense of humor ($p = .0029$), and conflict management ($p < .0001$). In each of these cases, public librarians choose these skills as important at a significantly higher rate than did academic librarians, although both groups consider them important. These findings suggest that, while both academic and public librarians value interpersonal skills and believe them to be important, public librarians seem to put more emphasis on these skills.

CONTENT KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNICAL SKILLS

In addition to interpersonal and customer service skills, reference librarians need content and technical knowledge to effectively use the information tools and resources at their disposal. In some cases, librarians might be expected to have broad and general knowledge of a variety of topics and areas, and in other cases they might be hired as a specialist in a particular subject area. Finally, some librarians are expected to engage in other professional and supervisory activities, from hiring and training new employees to conducting research and publishing papers. These areas of knowledge and responsibility might be referred to as the "hard" skills to complement the "soft" skills of interacting and communicating with patrons and colleagues. Once again, survey responses show some overlap and some variation in what public and academic librarians consider important.

As with the soft skills, there are several "hard" skills that show no correlation to type of library. Knowledge of a foreign language ranked in the bottom five for both types of library. In fact, it is the lowest ranked general skill for academic libraries and is third from the bottom for public libraries. Although the rankings were a little different for each type of library, tests revealed no correlation or statistically significant difference, suggesting that overall importance of knowing a foreign language does not depend on setting. Similarly, no correlation exists between setting and knowledge/understanding of cataloging. Finally, there is no correlation or statistically significant difference in responses between academic and public libraries with regard to having supervisory experience or familiarity with the related areas of budgeting or marketing library services.

On the other hand, some substantial differences exist in some of the other hard skills areas, often in areas that seem on the surface to be overlapping. For instance, although a second Master's degree ranks in the bottom five competencies for both types of libraries, the proportion of respondents from public libraries choosing this competency as important was much lower than academic libraries (5 percent and 33.8 percent respectively). A chi-square test gave a p score of less than .0001, and a test of statistical significance confirmed that this is a statistically significant difference. Here, as with foreign language or customer service, while both types of librarians seem to agree that a second master's degree is not essential, one type appears to be much more likely than the other to hold this opinion. Similar results occur with computer programming, knowledge of print sources, and knowledge of online sources. Computer programming is listed in the bottom ranked skills for both settings, but public librarians choose this skill in significantly lower proportions than academic librarians. On the other hand, while both public and academic librarians list knowledge of print and online sources as important, they vary in emphasis. There exists a strong correlation between setting and knowledge of online sources (p < .0001) and a somewhat strong correlation between setting and knowledge of print sources (p = .03), with significantly larger percentages of public librarians choosing these as important. Likewise, both assessment and evaluation and research and publishing are highly correlated with setting (p < .0001), but in this case academic librarians are much more likely to find them important.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal some similarities between public and academic librarians, as well as areas of substantial differences in their expectations of the skills a reference librarian should bring to the job. In fact, it is worth noting that all skills and competencies got at least some votes from both types of librarians, indicating that all of these competencies are considered at least somewhat important for both settings. It is a matter of degree as to how important they are

to each. With that said, the findings indicate that academic libraries appear more likely to seek certain "hard" skills or areas of content and technological knowledge. In terms of interpersonal or "soft" skills, however, the differences appear to be more a matter of intensity, or how much emphasis one type of library puts on a certain skill or competency, rather than a dichotomous situation in which a competency either is or is not important depending on setting.

That both types of libraries highly value interpersonal and customer service skills, as well as knowledge of resources and the ability to effectively search those resources, reinforces the idea that reference is a service profession regardless of setting. The fact that knowledge of the traditional reference interview is not correlated with setting further supports this notion. No matter the type of library, type of question, or the breadth and depth of the collection she has at her disposal, the librarian's ability to interact and communicate with her patrons is paramount.

What is less clear is why public libraries seem to emphasize some of these interpersonal skills at significantly higher rates than academic librarians. One possible explanation is that the greater diversity of patrons in public libraries requires a broader set of interpersonal and communication skills from the librarian. While academic libraries do have a reasonably diverse group of patrons to serve, the environment of higher education lends some homogeneity to the population. For instance, virtually all patrons in an academic library will have at least a high school education and be about seventeen years old or older. Even international students, who may not have mastered English completely, will have to have a certain level of speaking and reading ability to be admitted into the program. Faculty will be likely to be associated with the library for years, if not decades, providing a continuity of patron needs. Public librarians, on the other hand, will have patrons of all ages, education levels, reading abilities, and language abilities, and this could entail greater use of their interpersonal and communication skills to work effectively with these patrons. The diversity of needs and skills, and the ability to elicit those needs and skills from the patrons in a public library, may lend itself to an emphasis on personal skills over those necessary in an average academic library. Nevertheless, it would take further research to confirm these conjectures.

The fact that academic libraries emphasize certain hard skills seems somewhat easier to explain. It makes sense, for instance, that academic librarians would value research and publishing, as they work in institutions and with faculty members who value, and possibly even require, such activities. By engaging in original research and perhaps publishing results in academic journals, academic librarians can align their activities with the goals and missions of their institutions and establish themselves as peers with their colleagues on the faculty. Further, some academic librarians are afforded faculty status, with the opportunity to apply for tenure. Such positions generally require a certain amount of research and publication as part of the tenure application, making such activities essentially required for these librarians. Likewise,

because academic librarians support faculty and students doing in-depth research, and are sometimes hired as subject liaisons or specialists, it makes sense that having a second Master's degree would be more important in that setting than in a public library. Public librarians may be better served by learning a second language or becoming fluent in the needs of ESL patrons and low-literacy patrons before they would find a need for a second Master's degree.

The difference in response to assessment and evaluation is harder to explain. All libraries are finding it necessary to collect and analyze data to promote their services and justify their existence. Academic libraries are feeling this pressure keenly. Not only do they have to compete with other departments on campus for scarce funds, but stakeholders in higher education, including accreditation organizations, are demanding that institutions provide evidence of their impact on student outcomes and student learning outcomes. Academic libraries, in turn, are feeling pressure to demonstrate their contributions in these areas to their parent institutions. As such, it is not surprising that academic librarians support an understanding of assessment and evaluation. However, public libraries also must compete with other city or district departments for their share of the increasingly small shares of resources available, and the ability to collect and present data demonstrating contributions to the community will be equally valuable to public libraries. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the necessity and value of assessment and evaluation has not permeated the public library environment to the extent it has in academic libraries.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that while differences exist between public and academic libraries, they may not be as pronounced as previously thought. Communication and interpersonal skills, as well as knowledge of and ability to use both print and electronic resources, are essential to both settings. In fact, a number of the competencies surveyed in this study showed no significant difference between settings, and where there was a significant difference, it was often a matter of how strongly the type of library emphasized the skill. The clearest difference seems to be in certain "hard" skills such as research and publishing, assessment and evaluation, or having a second master's degree. As such, librarians seeking to move from one setting to another may need to restructure their resumes and interview answers to emphasize the skills that are most highly valued in the setting to which they are applying. For instance, an academic librarian looking to move to a public library might highlight her experience with diverse patrons and overall approachability and communication skills over her research record. Public librarians hoping to switch to an academic setting might need to focus on projects that demonstrate their ability to engage in assessment and present data. Even if public librarians have not published in peer-reviewed journals, they might have contributed to

newsletters or written reports for their local government or board of trustees which might include statistics or other research-oriented data.

Library students hoping for a reference career in either setting should develop a solid understanding of the resources and technologies necessary to answer questions and solve problems. Likewise, a clear path of developing the "softer" interpersonal skills would make them more employable and more successful in their jobs. However, students who envision a career in an academic library would do well to choose writing-intensive courses and courses that focus on evaluation research. Those students hoping to work in a public library might take courses that explore diversity, including planning services and communication with diverse populations. Further, library students should be aware that most reference positions are multifunctional, meaning that they require additional responsibilities and duties beyond the traditional question-answering services. In many cases, these positions are not even advertised as reference positions, but use titles such as Public Services, Adult Services, Reader's Advisory, or Instruction Librarian.

All librarians, and those who teach library science, should focus on developing and continuously improving their interpersonal and customer service skills, regardless of the type of library in which they hope to work. At the heart of the results of this study is the emphasis on reference work as a service profession, and the need to connect with patrons—regardless of the tools employed—is at the heart of that skill set.

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