

Educational Requirements for Law Library Directors

by Laurie Langland

Is an MLS Necessary for JDs Seeking Library Jobs?

When I started taking library science classes through the University of Arizona, I was not convinced that I needed a Master's degree in Library and Information Science in addition to my law degree to get a professional job at a law library. After all, I was working at the Idaho State Law Library at the time, and no one there had both degrees. The director (who has since retired) had a law degree, as did the succession of people who have held the position of computer-assisted legal research librarian. Two people who held the reference librarian position before it was eliminated had Master's degrees in library science, as does the cataloger/deputy law librarian. Nevertheless, I was not getting anywhere with just my law degree, so I continued with the program.

As part of my degree program, I wanted to do an independent study. With the approval of my major professor, I chose to research the educational requirements for law library directors. It had to be a scholarly work, but I wanted it to be practical as well and reflect the reality of the job market.

First, I read *Reflections on Law Librarianship: A Collection of Interviews*, by Marjorie A. Garson, et al. (AALL Publications Series No. 29, Littleton, CO: Fred B. Rothman & Co., 1988), which contained interviews with prominent and respected law librarians, including Marian G. Gallagher, Robert C. Berring, and Morris L.

Cohen. Those who discussed the merits of the JD versus the MLS generally agreed that the library degree was more essential than the JD but that both were required of academic law librarians so they could have faculty status.

Additional research revealed that the percentage of law librarians with only a JD has decreased while the percentage of those with both a JD and an MLS has increased over the years (Kathleen Carrick, "Silk v. Corduroy: The Status of Men and Women in Law Librarianship," *Law Library Journal* 78 [1986], 428). Nevertheless, I wanted to know specifically which degrees were being required by employers of directors for different types of law libraries.

AALL Job Listings Provide Core Data

For an overview of the job market for law library directors, I examined the job listings in the 72 issues of *American Association of Law Libraries Newsletter* (May 1989 through July 1996) that were available to me. (When the newsletter became *AALL Spectrum* in September 1996, policies on job postings changed, so I did not include those listings in my study.)

First, I tallied the number of jobs in each issue, then the number of director jobs. I categorized each director job listing as *academic*, *corporate*, *court*, *government*, *law firm*, or *other* and noted the educational requirements for each director position: *JD required*, *MLS required*, *both JD and MLS required*, or whatever accurately described the educational requirements.

I disregarded salaries because the American Association of Law Libraries' policy on job listings for the time studied included a minimum salary requirement for jobs to be posted in the *Newsletter*. I also disregarded geographic location and the size of the library and the population served.

I watched for duplicate listings of a given job but did not eliminate them for the following reasons:

- duplicate listings of non-director jobs would have had to be eliminated, which would have been very time-consuming;
- if a job was posted in consecutive issues, it tended to be repeated only once or twice;
- occasional older issues of the *Newsletter* were missing, thus reducing the possibility of duplicate postings;
- a job may have been re-opened, necessitating a subsequent job listing.

Requirements Vary with Library Type, Position

In the 72 issues of the *Newsletter* examined, there were 1208 jobs listed. Of that total, 261 (21.6%) were for law library directors. The rest were for public services librarians, technical services librarians, computer systems managers, consultants, and associate or assistant directors.

The results of this analysis are summarized in the table on the next page.

The JD/MLS combination was the overwhelming requirement for academic law library directors. Three listings required "relevant academic credentials" but did not specify what those would be.

The MLS was the main degree requirement for directors of corporate law libraries. Only one job listing even mentioned the JD.

The requirements for directors of court and government law libraries were not so heavily weighted in favor of either degree. The variation among the types of government law libraries was interesting—listings were for city, county, state, and federal law libraries and included a municipal law office, a county law library, several state law libraries, a federal agency, a territorial law library, a public defender's office, a county jail law library, and a law library for the Navajo Nation.

Law firm listings emphasized the MLS degree. Two listings did not specify educational requirements.



Educational Degree(s) Required/Preferred

Type of Law Library	JD and MLS	JD or MLS	JD only	MLS only	Not Specified	Total
Academic	86	0	1	0	3	90
Corporate	1	0	0	10	0	11
Court	7	5	0	6	0	18
Government	12	2	1	15	0	30
Law Firm	9	1	0	92	2	104
Other	1	0	0	7	0	8
Total	116	8	2	130	5	261

Unfortunately, eight listings for directors had to be placed in the *Other* category because they did not fit into any of the five specified categories. Four listings were for bar associations; two were for the American Association of Law Libraries (one was a repeat posting in a consecutive issue); and one was for the New England Law Library Consortium. One listing was so vague that the type of law library could not be discerned. The MLS degree was the primary educational requirement for these *Other* listings.

This analysis did not indicate the educational backgrounds of the successful applicants, who may have possessed degrees and qualifications beyond those stated in the job listings or who may have lacked the degrees required but were chosen as the most qualified among the applicants.

Based on the results of this study, an applicant with only a JD would meet the educational requirements of 10 (3.8%) listings, and an applicant with only an MLS would meet the educational requirements of 138 (52.9%) listings. However, an applicant with both a JD and an MLS would meet or exceed the educational requirements of at least 256 (98.1%) of the 261 jobs listed. (Five listings did not specify any educational degrees.) Clearly it is ideal—at least from a job applicant’s perspective—to have both degrees, particularly so for directors of academic law libraries. This is also true for directors of court and government law libraries to a lesser degree.

However, if one is to possess just one of the degrees, the MLS is preferred overwhelmingly to the JD. This is particularly true for corporate and law firm libraries.

Law Firms Choose MLS

It is interesting that law firms and corporations are more likely to require just an MLS rather than both an MLS and a JD. From the employer’s perspective, the JD degree should represent additional skills and knowledge advantageous to the law firm or corporation and its library users. Perhaps there is a concern that such skills and knowledge will cost more than the employers are willing to spend and that the library users are capable of fending for themselves. Nevertheless, from the librarian’s perspective, possession of a law degree, in addition to the MLS, would put him or her on equal footing with the law firm’s attorneys and the corporation’s attorneys and professional staff.

In *Reflections on Law Librarianship* (cited above), Morris L. Cohen, a respected academic law librarian, noted the strengths and weaknesses of academic law librarians versus private sector law librarians:

Law librarians in the private sector are very skilled in the use of new technology. But they are less skilled, perhaps, in the scholarly and humanistic side of law, which has been the strength of the academic law librarian. To the extent that law firm and private sector librarians lack that training in the subject matter of their work, they become just technicians of information, and that would be a loss.

The new generation of leaders in academic law librarianship are also more skilled in the managerial and technological aspects of librarianship than their predecessors, and that strengthens the profession. The academics, however, can still learn from their private sector colleagues about efficiency, dealing with time pressure, and how the new technology can help us supply information more efficiently, more effectively. On the other hand, the private section can get from us a concern with the research process; that is, how is this material being used? What do the lawyers do with it? What is law all about? What changes are going on within the legal system? I think that knowledge is more likely to come from the academic sector. (p. 49–50)

Court and governmental law libraries vary greatly in many respects—the level of government (city, county, state, or federal), the size of the library, the size of the jurisdiction, the governmental entity’s budget, and whether they are open to the public. A comparison of the Los Angeles County Law Library with the Ada County Courthouse collection of legal materials in Boise, Idaho, illustrates the contrast. Laura N. Gasaway and Michael G. Chiorazzi describe the Los Angeles County Law Library in *Law Librarianship: Historical Perspectives* (AALL Publications Series No. 52, Littleton, CO: Fred B. Rothman & Co., 1996):

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The Los Angeles County Law Library is the largest law library west of the Mississippi River, the largest public law library in the world, and among the seven largest law libraries in the United States....[T]he library and its branches serve the judiciary, state and county officials, members of the state bar, and all county residents....Nine professional staff members have Master's degrees in library science, while five have both a law degree and an MLS. (p. 163–164, 178, footnotes omitted)

In comparison, the collection of legal materials in the Ada County Courthouse in Boise, Idaho, is used primarily by judges and their law clerks. The remote location of the collection prevents most public access. Furthermore, no one is employed to take care of the collection; shelving and looseleaf filing is done by the users—i.e., the law clerks, who have law degrees but not library degrees.

"The greatest challenge facing a law library that serves the judiciary, the bar, and the public is to satisfy three diverse constituencies with wide-ranging information needs." (Patrick E. Kehoe, et al., *Law Librarianship: A Handbook for the Electronic Age*, AALL Publications Series No. 47, Littleton, CO: Fred B. Rothman & Co., 1995, 553.) A related issue of particular concern for law librarians who work directly with the public is the dilemma of where to draw the line between appropriate guidance and unauthorized practice of law. (*Ibid.*, p. 558) Perhaps these concerns are why 66.7% of the job listings for court law library directors and 50% of the listings for governmental law library directors mentioned the JD, although it may not have been required. Certainly a JD would be useful, in addition to the MLS, in distinguishing between what constitutes guidance versus the practice of law.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study and the relevant literature, it appears that a law library director should have an MLS to be considered qualified to run any type of law library. Possession of a JD, in addition to the MLS, is essential for directors of academic law libraries and many court and government law libraries. Law firms and corporations are less likely to require a JD in addition to an MLS; nevertheless, a JD provides a library school graduate with skills and knowledge which will make him or her an asset to any type of law library.

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