

Credentialing: The Solution for the Salary and Status Crisis in Law Librarianship?

by Richard Leiter

The issue of credentials and certification for law librarians continually appears in personal and professional venues. Everyone has a point of view. Readers are encouraged to re-read the April 1998 AALL Spectrum www.aallnet.org/products/pub_sp9804.pdf. That issue contains a lot of information on the topic as well as excerpts from a study of the members produced by a nationally recognized credentialing organization. The AALL response to the issue was based on this study.

Readers are also encouraged to carefully examine the most recent AALL Strategic Plan (see www.aallnet.org/about/strategic_plan.asp), where some of the issues addressed in conjunction with credentialing have been identified for priority AALL action.

Where's the money? It's in the hands of our administrators. I believe our handling of the credentialing or certification issue has placed us in a nearly indefensible position vis-à-vis our administrators. After all, if anyone who claims to be a law librarian can be one, why should administrators care about hiring qualifications? Bob Berring raised the issue in his provocative article "Show Us the Money!" in *Law Librarians in the New Millennium*. Westgroup. Fall 2000 Vol 2. No. 3. He dreams about calling all law librarians together to discuss the issue. I ask, "Who would show up?" If we were to rise up with one voice, what would that voice sound like? With no credentials or certification and with no standards for training to define who we are, is it any wonder that employers treat us as little more than clerical workers, on the level with paralegals?

It is clearly time to talk about ways that we, as law librarians, can not only enhance our futures, but secure them. It is my belief that law librarians (indeed librarians generally) have skills that are special. Anyone with Internet access and basic "Internet searching skills" is not the equivalent of a law librarian. Just because someone knows how to use LEXIS

and WESTLAW or any of the other online services and knows how to pay bills and neatly arrange books on a shelf does not make him or her a law librarian. In this article, I am proposing a system whereby law librarians can be objectively certified as possessing a requisite set of skills. By using the following scheme, I believe that our Association can establish itself as a body with authority over who is called a law librarian and set standards for who can be hired as a librarian.

Before you scoff and dismiss this article and my proposal as something that has already been tried, discussed, and failed in the past, please read on. I think that I am proposing something different. Something that will work. My proposal is not a threat to any professional currently practicing. The scheme can be an improvement in librarian education and training and possibly a significant improvement in professional librarian status.

I have been bothered for years by the loose definition of what it means to be a law librarian. I am not of a mind to be exclusive; I simply want to be able to point to a definition and say what a librarian is, and who qualifies to be called one. This will not only help my own sense of self but will also be a benefit to employers who are confused about exactly who we are. The scheme outlined below helps define who we are and helps to ensure that we are properly trained. We are who we say we are.

The Premise. This proposal is based on the basic notion that law librarianship is more than a learned profession. I believe that it is a skill, that good librarians can become good librarians in many different ways, and that a large part of the craft of

law librarianship is something that can be learned by doing. If a person enters a law library with no formal education at all, I believe that she or he can become great with no more than the benefit of rigorous experience and

a good mentor. But I also believe that there is much to be learned from a formal library school education and from law school, and so I won't discount that training. However, degrees alone are not the only credentials

that can make one a law librarian.

The Process.

I propose three stages in the development of a law librarian.

For purposes of discussion, I shall refer to the stages as Apprentice, Associate, and Master Librarian. A Master Librarian is a person who has served as a librarian for at least ten years; an Associate, for five years, and an Apprentice for five years under the supervision of a mentor, or Master Librarian. (I prefer *Journeyman to Associate*, but in the interest of sensitivity to gender issues, I changed it to a more gender-neutral term. "Journeyman" just didn't sound right. I am not sure how I feel about *Master*, either. There are too many obvious negative connotations to the term; however, *master* in the sense of one who has mastered the profession is appropriate. I welcome suggestions on a term that would be better.)

The process of training and certification would have to be overseen by a committee or full time staff at AALL. Various smaller committees or regional chapters could also be charged with some of the regular administration and evaluation of candidates. But, the process for becoming certified at each level would be very straightforward.

Apprenticeship: At the beginning of his or her career, the new law librarian would register with AALL headquarters, announcing an intention to become a certified law librarian. The Apprentice will also name a mentor—either a Master Librarian who is a direct supervisor or someone in another library who has agreed to take the responsibility for overseeing the training and experience of the new librarian.

The role of mentor would involve two levels of responsibility. A mentor would have to file an annual evaluation of the apprentice's performance. A mentor would also have to sign off and/or comment on the apprentice's own self-evaluation/annual report. Presumably, the mentor and apprentice would meet at the beginning of each year and would

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establish goals for the year. Examples of goals might be to produce a research guide, attend a conference or continuing education program, attend a class or classes, accomplish a particular library administrative project, etc. All goals would be set to develop the apprentice-level law librarian into an experienced one.

New law librarians would remain at this level for five years. I think that education should be credited toward this time. A person with a JD or MLS should get one or two year's credit, thus shortening the apprenticing time period.

At the end of the prescribed period, the apprentice law librarian would file an extensive report requesting certification at the Associate level. The report would include supporting documents from that person's mentor and patrons or supervisors, as appropriate. Perhaps a major project, article, presentation, or some other activity may be required in order to go from Apprentice to Associate level. The reports and evaluation of projects should be filed with the offices of the regional Chapters or with AALL Headquarters. Headquarters would not be responsible for evaluating the material submitted in support of a candidate's application throughout the process. Rather, Headquarters would keep the records, and oversee the timetables and submission of paperwork. It could also serve as a clearinghouse for new law librarians seeking mentors.

Associate Librarians. As mentioned above, this level could be called "journeyman." In a way I prefer the connotations of this term. After a new law librarian has obtained basic training at the apprenticeship level, he or she is now ready to move on to practice as a full-fledged law librarian. At this level, the need for a mentor as a guide in initial professional education and training would decrease. Associate law librarians would be certified as having enough basic training. Employers could confidently hire a law librarian at this level to manage a law library or assume administrative responsibilities.

During this stage in the development and training of a law librarian, the associate librarian would continue to file annual reports of progress and development. It would probably be desirable at this stage to have the associate's supervisor—be it a library director, judge, dean, managing partner, board of trustees, office manager, or publisher—also file reports of the associate's professional activities, or at least this person could sign off on the

associate's. This period would be approximately five years.

It is important to note that it is my opinion that a law librarian at this level need never progress to the next level. A person may remain an associate for the rest of his or her career with no negative ramifications, and gain in experience and stature within the profession.

However, if one were to seek to rise to the level of Master Law Librarian, at least one very special project, presentation, or accomplishment that would have to be recognized by his or her peers as excellent and representing professionalism of the highest level would be required. At this level, performance would be evaluated by a committee of peers. The committees could be formed from a pool of mentors or master librarians kept at Headquarters or at regional Chapter offices. The committees would be charged with evaluating the annual reports filed by associates and any projects or work product submitted as evidence of outstanding professional accomplishment for progress to the next level. Another criterion for elevation to the master/mentor level would be a demonstrated ability.

Master/Mentor Law Librarian.

At this level, the person would be presumed to have achieved a very high level of professional performance and experience. A person could be a master librarian and serve in a variety of roles, not just as a library director. Master librarians could be found in reference departments, cataloging, acquisitions, heads of departments, foreign law departments, etc. Librarians working in the publishing field as representatives, customer support, etc., would also be held to the same standards as the rest of the professional community. Employers could hire a master librarian with confidence knowing that the individual will represent the highest professional standards. The person would have a minimum of ten years' experience and would presumably have achieved an outstanding level of professionalism. (If provision is made to credit graduate degrees, this time may be less than 10 years. For example, should the Association credit JD holders with two years and MLS holders with one year, then a double degree candidate could become a master/mentor librarian in seven years.)

The professionalism demonstrated should be different for the various disciplines within the field. Administrators should have certain skills to demonstrate that catalogers wouldn't and vice versa. Academics would

presumably have to demonstrate some scholarship or expert bibliographic or teaching skills. Evaluating committees should include a majority of practitioners from the person's field.

People at this level of professional development would serve on certification committees and be willing to serve as mentors to newer law librarians. There should also be some provision for periodic renewal or maintenance of credentials. Possibly a process of sabbatical reviews could be established.

Some Details

Grandfathering. One of the first questions that people have after hearing my soliloquy about this program, is "How would you begin the program?" If the program were to be adopted, persons would be immediately credentialed at the level that their experience dictates under the standards adopted. For example, a person with 20 years' experience as head of technical services could opt for classification as associate or master/mentor law librarian. Someone with two years' experience would be an apprentice. The process of grandfathering people into the various classifications wouldn't be perfect, and an overseeing committee would have to make some judgment calls. I would urge them to be generous at the outset, within reason. Once the system is in place, it will take a few years for it to function properly. In the meantime, one would expect the system to grow and evolve.

How Would the System Support Itself? Fees, of course. Although taxation goes against the grain of my political sensibilities, I think that dues and fees could easily support the infrastructure needed to administer the credentialing process. They may need to be increased as the program expands and becomes more institutionalized, but initially it will be able to sustain itself largely on a voluntary basis.

How Would the Standards Be Developed? A committee would need to be formed and broad guidelines would have to be written to describe the minimum competencies of law librarians at various classifications. The standards cannot be rigidly enforced initially, because there will be unforeseen details yet to be worked out over the course of the program's first few years.

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What about Vendors? The credentialing program that I am proposing could easily accommodate anyone who is practicing as a librarian in any field. Independent contractors, vendor representatives, etc., would be held to the same standards. They would need to find a mentor to supervise their training, and demonstrate that they are growing in their skills and experience, and they would be qualified. The review committees would be charged to ensure that persons are certified as law librarians only with appropriate knowledge and experience. Reports from employers and supervisors would give annual committees (comprised of peers) enough information to determine whether the candidate is actually practicing as a law librarian.

How Would Review Committees Be Selected? The Association would select a certain number (perhaps two or three) of mentor/master librarians from a pool of volunteers. The candidate would be able to select one or two as well. A committee should be no more than five persons, with one designated as chair. Of the five members, at least three should be practicing in the field that the candidate practices in, and two can be from other fields or types of libraries.

Can this process work? I think so. Would it be easy? No way. But I believe that with a commitment on the part of AALL leadership and the profession as a whole, a process could be put in place in two years' time. It would involve lots of discussion over standards and particulars, but if we are willing to compromise for a cause and act professional, I think it would work ... and could work well at that.

An advantage of this type of program is that it would place the emphasis on individual skills and experience, not on where someone works or what type of educational background a person has earned. The system would rely on the evaluations of peers and has a built-in system of cross checking so that as long as people are professional, the system should have the integrity needed for it to be accepted by our employers.

I hold this out for discussion and hope that it may ultimately grow into a program of self-regulation and credentialing that will help clarify in our minds and the minds of our employers, just who we are. Once we figure that out, when someone says "Show us the money," we know who us is!

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