

THE NEED FOR BETTER LIBRARY GRADUATES: A DEMAND FROM MEXICAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES*

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by

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ABSTRACT

Mexican academic libraries are in search of excellence to meet information demands of university communities, which aim to compete in the world markets. However, supply of library professionals is short and the caliber of their education is usually limited, especially in management competencies and technology-oriented skills. This presentation will discuss the need to change the library school curriculum, and the professional competencies of librarians needed by university libraries, as well as the UACJ Libraries experience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries face the challenge to serve in innovative ways their university communities that currently undergo structural changes. Their parent organizations, that are universities, face challenges to define themselves in the new social, economic and technological changes taking place in Mexico. The country has gone through a democratization period and political stability, paired with fairly good economic growth and new open market-oriented changes. National industrial production has changed from inward looking to export-oriented, transforming Mexico into the eight world's exporting economy in less than a decade. Federal and state governments are, in general, investing important resources in education seen as the best way to improve living conditions of society, and as a source of forming the new cadres of graduates needed by national development. The young Mexican population's demand for higher education increases annually. The pressure for better education is great and universities do their best to get the means to improve facilities, technology, academic quality, and to meet the increasing need for more professors. On the other hand, life-long learning trends, distant learning and Internet challenge the structure and way higher education is delivered to Mexican society.

As part of universities, libraries are also pressured to find new ways to serve their academic communities that require more efficient and more relevant information services. Although not all academic libraries excel in development, it can be said that those who do also face the challenge of current library trends: changing information formats, new speeds of information delivery, growing instant-satisfaction demands from users, increasing cost of information, and the potential growth of distant users from different geographical settings. The myriad challenges libraries face or will potentially face requires them to have highly qualified personnel. Library human resources are the key factor in user services provision. Therefore, library schools have the important responsibility of creating relevant programs to provide the professionals needed by libraries who serve academia. In this paper, the type of academic librarian required by university libraries and the education role of library schools will be discussed, along with a description of the challenges faced by Mexican libraries and their parent organizations. The literature on the subject is limited. A search done in INFOBILA, the major library science database in Latin America, yielded few references on the subject. Therefore, several statements given in this paper are based on the individual experience of the authors as academic librarians.

2. ACADEMIC LIBRARIES' LEADING ROLE

Academic libraries are among the most developed information centers in Mexico. As is the case in other countries, their numbers are smaller than any other type of libraries, due to centralization of services, a normal trend in this library sector.

Mexico has about 1,187 libraries, out of the approximate 11,226 centers of all types [5]. Despite the smaller number of university libraries, they account for the largest budgets, the fastest growing information collections and the most innovative provision of services. They are also the main customers of international vendors, the leaders in acquisition of technological equipment and the libraries with the best Internet infrastructure among other libraries. Academic libraries are, therefore, the institutions that are likely to demand the highest professional competencies of graduates from library schools, a demand that normally represents what other libraries may need in the near future. Moreover, University libraries attract most of the graduates educated in Mexican library schools. Graduating students usually look first for job opportunities in this type of library, because opportunities for professional growth, salaries and status are usually higher than elsewhere. Academic librarians are normally the representatives of Mexico at international conferences; and they are professionals who shape national information policies in those areas where library progress is found. They also hold leadership positions in library associations and are the instructors in most training programs for other type of librarians.

There are two types of academic libraries; those that belong to state financed universities and those that are run by the private sector. Big libraries usually belong to older and larger universities. Public universities have larger library collections, hold rare, special, and historical collections, and usually have more professional librarians. Private university libraries, on the other hand, tend to be more demanding in terms of professional qualifications. At the other end of the scale, smaller academic libraries have more differences among them. Private small universities tend to have rather small libraries and, in some cases, no library at all. They seldom hire a librarian, because these academic institutions focus their activities on teaching and generally do no research at all.

As stated, the information demand on Mexican academic libraries comes from the largest social strata of society: the young population that predominates in size and growth in Mexico. This is a social sector that is eager to prosper and, excel and is pushing for more socio-economic and political gains. Professors and university lecturers, the second user group, normally joined faculty ranks with no postgraduate degrees and no teaching experience, making them poor library users. Those with older tenure started working with limited resources, including among them libraries. Some professors from this generation, unlike their students, are conservative and less prone to change their information use attitudes.

Information demand from both groups is quantitatively good but often undefined, vague and without clear direction for universities and their libraries. Academic users focus their information demand on textbooks, that is reserve collections, because their research activity is limited. Serials and electronic sources are still to be discovered and used. As stated, most professors graduated from teaching

oriented institutions, where libraries were misplaced or non-existent. However, change is taking effect in leading universities. Some institutions are engaged or starting to transform their structures to focus education on learning, where libraries and other academic service providers certainly have a great and well-defined role, such as computer centers and laboratories, among other support services.

Regardless of their parent organization, university libraries do not have an even development. Those located in larger cities are bigger, while some of their provincial counterparts struggle to offer basic information services to their patrons with little or no resources at all. Another factor that plays an important role in shaping libraries is age. Older universities tend to have a wide-spread departmental libraries, because of their large size and because of the scattered distribution of their faculties in cities, regions and sometimes even in several provinces of the country. Library departmentalization, as library literature reports, reduces efficiency, because it is difficult to optimize all type of resources, such as personnel, facilities and information resources. Consequently, universities with centralized services in one or few branches have a better chance to develop.

It can be estimated that academic libraries with fair to good development are about 250, that is 20% of the total number of centers that approximately exist in Mexico. These libraries are starting to get involved in reorganizing their staff to make their organizations flatter, reducing management hierarchies and placing more emphasis on communication and valuing individual talents, expertise and differences [9]. Libraries of this kind demand better graduates from library schools. The type of librarian required does not differ too much from that demanded in the developed regions of the world. Mexican libraries need staff to lead and excel them in university communities where academic skills are the norm and knowledge the matter of everyday work. Academic libraries require librarians that can take their presence into the higher management levels of universities, if they are to play a key role in the provision of high quality education demanded by Mexico, a country that is set to compete in world markets were creativity; innovation and information skills are a must.

Academic libraries need library professionals who can take advantage of development opportunities that often last just for a few years, opportunities that are frequently created by chancellors who are library minded. This can be an advantage to libraries in the short run, because they can receive great temporal support and all the means to grow while the presidential term last, a period that stretches from four to eight years in most public universities. Chancellor-driven growth is rather limiting in the long run, because depending on a top university official means a hectic and an unpredictable budget. However, here is where a good library professional can set the groundwork and provide the services his users demand, and consequently put libraries on the road to permanent development. A good library manager is a key element in keeping sustainable

development, because he/she has to build an organization to market information services to future university presidents, and, if possible, create information demand in academia, so that the library is essential to the process of education.

3. THE HIRING PROCESS

Hiring professional librarians is a tricky issue in academic libraries around the country. There are two types of libraries: those who can recruit and hire librarians for themselves, and those whose hiring process is carried out by another department of the university, and sometimes by the labor union. Obviously, those with the empowerment to integrate their library team have a great deal to say to library schools about how their curriculum could be improved so that graduates meet their employment expectations. These library managers' criticism is aimed at the limited work skills, and to some extent, at work values taught at library schools. However, libraries where personnel is hired or assigned by outside departments have a biased, and perhaps a less clear input, because they do not have full management control of their human resources. Library directors from these libraries usually expect to get perfect graduates who will remain perfect for years under poor or highly unionized working environments. A limitation of this kind in libraries is serious because professionals and support staff often lose or fail to develop the skills, knowledge and values required by libraries. Some heads of these academic libraries are themselves assigned to their posts without the proper screening of their library professional qualifications. Fortunately, some changes seem to be in the horizon. A handful of universities are creating the legal foundations to hire personnel based more on professional qualifications rather than on personal contacts.

Libraries are usually unable to fill all their vacancies with information professionals. Therefore, libraries create training schemes or provide library education to attract potential candidates. ITESM, a private leading higher education institution with 26 campuses in the country, has recently created their own master's degree program in library science primarily to train their own librarians. The scheme is a joint distant program with the University of Texas at Austin and offers few lectures and lots of tutorial time relying on their excellent Internet and teleconferencing facilities. It promises to be an *avant garde* library school based on independent learning. The University of Guadalajara, with the second largest library system in the country, has announced that it will create a graduate program to prepare its own librarians and fill several internal vacancies. The program aims to attract candidates with self-motivation and self-growth, according to Pastora Rodríguez [12]. Another academic institution from the same city, the Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara is seriously evaluating the possibility of opening a library program to educate the librarians needed on their own campuses. The University of San Luis Potosi with a leading library system also relies on its own library school to fill internal vacancies. The center was

originally created a couple decades ago with this goal in mind. The library school basically serves the region and has the potential for providing graduates to Northwestern Mexico, which covers one third of the total Mexican territory. It is assumed that these “in-house” library programs have tailored curricula to satisfy the needs of the institutional libraries. Other universities that lack a library school in the institution or in the region normally end up hiring one librarian for the whole library system, and the less lucky fill all their library posts with non-library professionals. Consequently and even without a proper assessment, it can be said that there is a market for the creation of library and information programs that could meet the demands of provincial universities.

4. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

Most articles written about library education in Mexico fail to fully describe the competencies that librarians ought to have to satisfy current library needs. A few describe some of the skills and knowledge but not all components [4, 7, 11]. However, it could be said, the overall knowledge, skills and values demanded of academic librarians in Mexico do not basically differ from those of the developed world. Mexican library organizations, it could be assumed, demand a set of skills that would be similar to those identified by international literature [13, 14], such as the core competencies identified by the Special Libraries Association (SLA) [8]. The basic SLA professional skills of having knowledge in a specialized subject, being able to develop and manage cost-effective information services to users, providing excellent support and instruction to users, and to being able to effectively utilize information technology might be relevant to any Mexican academic library. On the personal skills side, the SLA qualifications are also relevant. South of the border, librarians should be committed to service excellence, have effective oral and written skills, business skills, be able to work in teams, demonstrate leadership skills, be committed to lifelong learning, and be flexible and positive at change.

However, there are some professional requirements for Mexican librarians that differ from those from the highly developed nations. Mexican professionals need additional leadership skills because the majority become directors or chief librarians or department heads as soon as they graduate. The job market demand is normally higher than the schools output. Mexican librarians have to deal with tougher management conditions than their counterparts in highly developed countries, while simultaneously organizing and creating services, fostering information needs. Both processes have to be pursued under limited financing conditions and the often lack of understanding from university management whose library knowledge tends to be limited.

Professional requirements vary according to the level or development of the academic library. Libraries that lead in growth and change need librarians that can understand the new learning environments that universities have or are

about to adopt. Professionals with the ability to function in a continuous state of innovation and technological development are valued in higher education. The impact of technology is becoming evident in most universities. Internet is increasingly becoming part of the curricula and is making vast amounts of information available to university students, professors and managers. Graduates are needed to push propel information literacy programs and the organization and provision of services forward simultaneously. User education programs in the new learning methods to be adopted by some universities are essential. Mexican students are in the early stages of information user education, a learning process that, as in other parts of the world, should involve the ability to learn in dynamic situations where information is constantly changing. Future Mexican university graduates need the ability of life long learning in order to cope with social, economic and scientific change. Information skills are a must and librarians are needed to teach them, however information professionals with these skills are scarce in the university campuses.

Although not all libraries, as mentioned, are in the quest of excellence, they require new ways of organization and horizontal and more participative management is needed. As part of the learning processes that takes place in universities, libraries have to make short term changes and their professional staff needs to do more independent work and be able to interact in the shrinking world generated as the web and Internet expands across continents.

Another requirement that is also important is mastering English as a second language. University librarians need to read and write in this language if they are to really make good use of information resources available through the Internet or in printed materials. Most of the scientific literature is in English, as are many of the library tools used for cataloguing, such as the LC schedules, OCLC shared cataloguing services, and many electronic information repertories. The graduates' lack of English command is due to the fact that library professors seldom read in this language, and do not require their students to study international literature. As a consequence, students do not have the incentive to develop their foreign language skills, a factor that limits students' exposure to up-to-date literature because library literature is also predominantly in English.

5. LIBRARY SCHOOLS' DAUNTING TASK

Library schools have a real challenge to educate library professionals with the SLA or the more specific competencies defined by Evers for all types of university graduates [2]. Although not all the skill components are the schools' responsibilities, they have to change their curricula and be aware of what the market demands of them. The most important change to be undertaken by Mexican library schools is the learning-oriented educational method, which continues to be heavily teaching-oriented. Library education should be more of the constructivist type, so that students develop skills and above all learn to learn

for the rest of their professional life and to adapt to the changing academic library environment. Graduates need, in a few words: skills, knowledge and values on how to live, learn and work. Library schools, therefore, have to introduce the initiatives of experiential learning, lifelong learning, project-based team learning and the use of new instructional technology to replace traditional classroom instruction. Additionally, new approaches have to be taken to information record management and information resources management to utilize networked environments in Mexican universities. Schools also need to include into the curriculum business courses, Internet resource organization, web portal creation, telecommunications, database management, and electronic repertory creation, and social awareness of the role of education in the curriculum.

Mexico has seven library schools: two in Mexico City and one in the outskirts of this metropolitan area, another in San Luis Potosi, a city also located the central part of the country, two in Monterrey, and one in South Western Mexico, in Chiapas. There is no even distribution according to universities' geographical location. Academic libraries far from library schools face difficulties in recruiting suitable candidates. Mobility of most library school graduates is normally low, new graduates usually prefer to stay in their hometowns and avoid moving away, following the close-tied Mexican family traditions, especially among women, who predominate in the field of librarianship. Library schools also lack programs tailored to academic libraries, despite the fact that they are the main employers of their graduates. However, there are some management courses within the general curricula related to academic library work [1, 3, 10, 11]. Academic library skills, therefore, have to be developed by graduates at work or by taking continuing education courses. Short workshops and even some diploma-type long-term courses have been organized in the past to train academic library staff by the Ministry of Public Education, library associations and university consortia during the last three decades [6]. The National University (UNAM) historically has had played an important role in supporting academic library training at other state universities.

The professional competencies listed for librarians are difficult to teach in library schools because they work with limited resources. These institutions normally lack proper budgets and full time professors. Consequently, research is almost non-existent in many of the schools, since part time professors do not have the time to work on these endeavors. They seldom have good computer or telecommunication technologies or a good library science collection. Such factors make the training of the ideal academic librarian a daunting task for most library schools. Despite all these adverse conditions, schools perform well in teaching basic bibliographic skills. Graduates normally excel in cataloguing and in all bibliographic-oriented subjects as well as in theoretical concepts of service.

Finally, schools also need to attract more competent students. It seems that some candidates who enroll in library schools could not register in harder university programs, such as science and engineering. This trend is probably

due to the low enrollment of most schools, with the exception of Mexico City where registration is higher.

6. UACJ: A UNIVERSITY CASE

The University of Juarez is a good case to illustrate the needs of librarians required by a reform-minded organization. The three-library system evolved rapidly in the last six years thanks to the excellent support from the university in providing the largest library budget in Northwestern Mexico. Libraries moved from small and adapted-classroom facilities to especially built premises with world-class furniture and excellent telecommunications equipment. Collections rapidly increased to reach a five-fold growth and electronic services were contracted for the first time to create the largest information offering of full-text serials, E-books, web pages (metadata) and databases in the region. A normal need from a user-oriented management was to attract librarians with the will and the skills to offer excellent services to the institutional community. Professionals were needed to manage the newly created information services, such as an active user education program, OCLC cataloguing, user counseling and the fast growing computer - and telecommunication - based information services. There were twelve professional posts to fill, although more librarians could have been hired for other non-library professional positions such as general management, and public relations, among others, if graduates have been available. The task of hiring proved to be difficult, because there were no candidates in the region. Thus they had to be recruited from the major three Mexican cities and at library schools. The nearest library school was 1,000 miles away. Candidates were invited with expenses paid to participate in the personnel selection process that included interviews with peers and the university and deputy university librarians, a written examination and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

The recruiting aim was to have three candidates for the selection process of each vacancy. However, this policy was changed, because it was difficult to have even one candidate for some posts. In addition to the required general library knowledge, English and management skills, job descriptions also included command of office software, vision and self-motivation, as well as solid personal and working values. The successfully hired professionals included both senior librarians with previous experience and recent graduates with no experience. In the nearly 30 cases processed, all except two, lacked most of the skills required in the job during the six-year period, 1995-2000. Most entrants had good library knowledge, but had limited management skills, little or no experience with word processing, E-mail, and Internet navigation, and lacked rather basic management skills, such as use of a personal agenda. To fill the competencies' gap, a training scheme was set up for the new staff. The program included time management, how to participate in meetings, the whole Microsoft office suite, self-motivation, communication and other management and Internet related skills. In addition to librarians, other professionals entering the library workforce were required to

master the same workshops, plus five basic library courses: cataloguing, LC Classification, public services, serials and reference work. Recently, other type of software such as web creation, editing software and miscellaneous office software have been taught to enhance previous acquired skills, along with specialized subject training such as metadata cataloguing, Internet-based reference service and other more specific management courses. The majority did not master English and were required to study this language and master it to receive tenure. Among other professional performance factors, the TOEFL score of 500 points was required before they were offered what in Mexican terms is called "permanent contract".

Training was not, unfortunately, the main crucial aspect for job proficiency, new colleagues required time to develop computing and organizational culture. Time needed normally went from one to two years depending on the person's attitude towards change and his/her personal character. Most took more than a year to significantly change their personal paradigms on how to manage their office work as well as attitudes toward the new type of computer based information services. Reference service was probably the most difficult area to hire staff for. Qualifications required were teaching, service attitudes/skills and some research skills. However, it took more than three years to find suitable reference candidates. Before then, electronic services, Internet, email and networked resources were hardly used in this department.

After training, and time to assimilate it, had the expected impact, librarians who became part of the UACJ team played a key role in creating a strong library organization. They, besides being the driving force in the institution with the day-to-day management of the libraries, devoted about 20% of their semester time in user instruction. Their gain was that they received faculty status and began being assessed annually along with the rest of the university professors. This evaluation process evaluates four aspects of their annual performance: teaching, management, research, extension activities and professional development, among other components. As a consequence, librarians have now to engage in what other academic members of the university do: write papers and attend conferences, among other academic chores.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Leading universities demand a stronger role of libraries in order to provide the cadre of professionals needed by Mexico, which endures globalization of its economy, a democratic political transition, and higher social demands. To meet university demands, academic libraries need more than ever excellent graduates from library schools. Graduates in demand are those who know not only how to organize bibliographic materials but know how to manage people and tasks, how to communicate, have academic skills and have self-management. These competences are essential in librarians in order to better serve information

university patrons. Librarians also need a clear understanding of social needs and academic politics, so that they lead libraries through the ladders of university progress. Library schools need to change their instructional methods to learning-oriented education that favors skills development and self-learning in order to satisfy the present and future demands of academic libraries.

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