

# Got a secret? Pass it on . . .

## Recruiting new librarians

by Lynn Chmelir

What a pleasant surprise to be greeted as I boarded an ALA bus last winter by the 30-year-old version of a person I once knew as an 18-year-old first-year student. I sat beside her and we renewed our acquaintance as the bus made the rounds of the hotels. I had been her advisor many years ago when she entered college as an undeclared major. As I worked with her that year, she struggled to find the right niche in academe in order to declare a major. Like many students, she arrived at college with a keen intellect, many interests, and little notion of what career path she might pursue. Although I had no recollection, she told me that I once mentioned that she was exactly the right kind of person to consider a career as an academic librarian. I also told her it was challenging and interesting work that I personally enjoyed every day. She filed the conversation away, declared creative writing as her major, moved on to an advisor in the English department, became an excellent library user, graduated, got her MFA in creative writing, and eventually taught English. The upshot of the story, of course, is that after several years of teaching, she changed her mind and went to graduate library school. She now is happily employed as an instruction/reference librarian at a community college library in California! As the bus pulled up to my hotel stop, she thanked me for planting a seed that eventually led to a fulfilling career.

I relate this story because it is clear that we are reaching a staffing crisis in our profession. Many of us with gray hair will be retiring in the next decade and new librarians are needed to lead and staff academic libraries. Mary Jo Lynch noted recently that over 15 percent of librarians will reach

the traditional retirement age of 65 between 2005 and 2009, with another 20 percent retiring between 2010 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> John Berry,<sup>2</sup> Larry Hardesty,<sup>3</sup> and Paula Kaufman<sup>4</sup> have all written recently about the recruiting crisis and ACRL has drafted a white paper on the topic.<sup>5</sup> Helen Spalding, our ACRL president, has chosen recruitment to the profession as an important aspect of her presidential year theme, "New Realities, New Relationships." Although the work that librarians do is challenging and creative, the profession lacks a high profile. The general public hasn't a clue what librarians do and that makes recruiting difficult. Many of us who found our way into librarianship did it by an accident of some sort—we worked in our college library or had a relative who was a librarian—so we were privileged to gain some real insight into the fascinating aspects of the work.

### How to influence new librarians

That conversation on the bus reminded me of the many ways that academic librarians can, in the course of their daily work, be influential in mentoring new librarians into the profession. We interact daily with our best source of new recruits—our undergraduate students. Many of them work in the library and others are frequent library users. Some of our paraprofessional staff members may be working in the library to try out library work as a professional career. We need to become more intentional in making sure that likely prospects understand what librarians do and why they might be interested in a library career. Here are some of the strategies my colleagues and I

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#### About the author

Lynn Chmelir is assistant director for collections at the Washington State University Libraries, e-mail: lchmelir@wsu.edu

have employed—sometimes intentionally and sometimes not—to encourage our students and paraprofessional colleagues to attend graduate school and pursue library careers.

Almost every college or university has a career services department that helps undergraduates to explore career options, to secure employment, or to attend graduate school. Getting to know the people who administer these programs is important so that they understand that academic librarianship, with its myriad of specialties, can be a logical career choice for students from almost any undergraduate major. Keep them supplied with information about graduate programs and scholarship opportunities. (See the sidebar below for resources.) Career services often hold job fairs and graduate school fairs that can feature information about library schools and librarianship along with the other typical offerings. Vibrant and enthusiastic librarians should be on hand to promote librarianship and answer questions. Career services may also sponsor a program series with speakers from various occupations. Articulate colleagues from nearby libraries are good speakers to feature in the line-up every year.

At many institutions, librarians may serve as advisors for undergraduate students, as I once did.

### Recruiting for librarianship

- ACRL Recruiting Brochure: <http://www.acrl.org>, click on "Issues & Advocacy," then "Recruiting to the Profession."
- ALA Office for Diversity Resources for New Recruits: <http://www.ala.org/diversity>, click on "Student Resources."
- A Career in Reference Services: <http://www.ala.org/RUSA>, click on "Careers in Reference."
- Careers in Libraries: <http://www.ala.org/hrdr/>, click on "Careers in Libraries."
- Directory of Library and Information Science Programs: <http://www.ala.org/>, click on "Education & Careers," then "Accredited Programs."
- ALA Accredited LIS Programs that Provide Distance Education Opportunities: <http://www.ala.org/>, click on "Education & Careers," then "Accredited Programs."
- ALA Scholarship Program: <http://www.ala.org/hrdr/>, click on "ALA Scholarship Programs."
- Spectrum Scholarships: <http://www.ala.org/spectrum/>

This presents another opportunity to spread the word about librarianship as a career possibility. Often the students that are assigned to librarians have not declared a major. They are generalists by nature and often exactly the kind of people that would enjoy working as a librarian if they understood more about the nature of the profession. Faculty colleagues in the disciplines who understand that librarianship is an excellent career path for some of their majors are excellent allies in recruiting.

Most students work in the library by accident, not intention, since it is one of the large campus employers. As student workers become acclimated to their work, it becomes clear that some of them develop a special affinity for the library. As they learn more about what the library is and how it works, they become enthusiastic and begin to talk with their supervisors about more than just the details of their assigned tasks. When this happens, they can be encouraged to learn more if offered challenging new responsibilities that give them broader insight. Students are quite capable of performing high level work that often is assigned to staff, such as copy cataloging, systems support, interlibrary lending and borrowing, communicating with library vendors, working with serials and acquisitions systems, maintaining Web pages, and supervising the work of other students at service points. They can be trained to do triage at the reference desk and are wonderful floaters to offer hands-on assistance in library instruction classes. Providing student workers with these special opportunities to learn about libraries means an investment in training, to be sure, but usually these students remain as valued employees for their entire undergraduate careers. And some go on to become librarians.

Talking with these students about the work we do—the "why" as well as the "what"—helps them understand more about professional work. Let them know the options as decisions are being made. Ask them to help with literature searches, statistics gathering, planning, and report writing. Invite them to attend staff meetings, to take minutes perhaps. Let them help with professional tasks like organizing registration for a local conference and then attending to help on-site. Let them help organize the annual Job Shadow Day in conjunction with the local high school or other programs where you plan to encourage even younger people to become librarians. Be prepared with information about library schools, scholarships and financial aid, and various career options. Put them in touch with librarians at other institutions if they have a special interest.

Your colleagues at public and special libraries can help them learn about children's services or law and medical librarianship. Elaine Yontz suggests hosting a pizza dinner occasionally for student workers with a program that promotes librarianship as a career opportunity.<sup>6</sup> Consider creating a brochure and developing a Web page on library careers for your library site that has links to some of the resources listed in the sidebar. Use exhibit space to promote librarianship as one answer to the question: "What do I do with a major in Spanish?" (and any other major).

Many of the same strategies can be used to encourage paraprofessional staff members who are interested in librarianship. Opportunities for cross training in a variety of departments help them to view different aspects of the work and to interact with a wide variety of library professionals. Help them to learn about different libraries by assigning them to participate in consortium and cooperative activities. Encourage membership in professional organizations and attendance at local conferences. Since many paraprofessionals are place bound, talk with them about the advantages of the excellent new graduate library programs that are offered for distance learners. They can often take advantage of these programs while still employed. If they enroll in a distance program, are there ways to support their studies with release time or other benefits? Give them added professional responsibilities as they complete their graduate school program and help them in their search for a professional job.

Encouraging students and paraprofessionals to attend graduate library school is often an informal process, but at some institutions it is becoming a programmatic initiative. At my own institution, the library faculty has recently appointed an ad-hoc committee to foster mentoring. ACRL and other ALA divisions provide help to stay abreast of current information on the ALA Web site, including some excellent recruiting brochures.

Academic librarianship is exciting and challenging work. Pass the word!

## Notes

1. Mary Jo Lynch, "Reaching 65: Lots of Librarians Will Be There Soon," *American Libraries* (March 2002): 55–56.

2. John W. Berry, "Addressing the Recruitment and Diversity Crisis," *American Libraries* (February 2002): 7.

3. Larry Hardesty, "Future of Academic/Research Librarians: A Period of Transitions—To

What?" *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 1 (2002): 79–97.

4. Paula T. Kaufman, "Where Do the Next 'We' Come From? Recruiting, Retaining, and Developing our Successors," *ARL: A Bimonthly Report on Research Library Issues and Actions from ARL, CNI, and SPARC* 221 (April 2002): 1–5.

5. "Recruitment, Retention and Restructuring: Human Resources in Academic Libraries," a white paper by the Ad Hoc Task Force on Recruitment and Retention Issues, a subcommittee of the ACRL Personnel Administrators and Staff Development Officers Discussion Group. Final draft May 20, 2002, available at <http://www.acrl.org/>, click on "Issues & Advocacy," then "Recruiting to the Profession."

6. Elaine Yontz, "On My Mind: How You Can Help Save Library Education," *American Libraries* (January 2003): 42. ■

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(*"Crisis in foreign . . ." continued from page 392*)

3. Mary Jo Lynch, "Reaching 65: Lots of librarians will be there soon," *American Libraries* (March 2002): 55–56.

4. Communication by Heidi Lee Hoerman at the WESS Research and Planning Committee and Cataloging Discussion Group joint program at the ALA Annual Conference, June 16, 2001.

5. Richard Brod and Elizabeth B. Welles, "Foreign language enrollments in United States institutions of higher education, Fall 1998," *ADFL Bulletin* 31, 2 (2000), p. 26, Table 4.

6. See the section "Strategies for Major Stakeholders" p. 5 of 12 in ACRL Ad Hoc Task Force on Recruitment and Retention Issues. "Recruitment, retention and restructuring: Human resources in academic libraries: a white paper (final draft). <http://www.acrl.org/>, go to "Issues & Advocacy," then "Recruiting to the Profession."

7. Randa J. Duvick, "Sustaining foreign language enrollments through collaboration and interdisciplinary major," *ADFL Bulletin* 33, 2 (2002), p. 78.

8. Julie De Galan and Stephen Lambert, *Great jobs for foreign language majors* (Lincolnwood, IL.: VGM Career Horizons, 1994), 128.

9. For a summary of the program, see Charlene Kelsey, "ACRL WESS discusses cataloging issues," *ALCTS Newsletter Online* 12, 3 (2001): [http://www.ala.org/alcts/alcts\\_news/news\\_wess.html](http://www.ala.org/alcts/alcts_news/news_wess.html). ■