

# Academic Library Support Staff Competencies: What Should Support Staff Know and Be Able to Do?

*Rachel Applegate*

Over half of all non-student employees of academic libraries are support staff. What competencies should these workers possess? To what extent are these competencies similar across library departments and across library types—in what ways do they differ from those considered valuable for public library support staff?

## **Background**

Competencies for various levels of library employees have been the subject of a wide range of commentary and research articles, from the extensive academic study of Oberg et al. in 1992<sup>1</sup> to the commentary by John Berry in *Library Journal* on the “vanishing librarian” where he criticizes the emergence of a “self-service,” retail-oriented view of a library, which can be staffed with non-librarians.<sup>2</sup>

Recent work illustrates the themes that often appear in formal and informal discussions: what to do about public / reference services, the impact of information technology competency needs, and the situation of smaller academic unit libraries.

Reference staffing, whether in a sole-MLS, parallel (support staff and MLS) or tiered (referral) ap-

proach, is and will continue to be a hot topic, though direct-MLS staffing is more widespread than is sometimes realized.<sup>3</sup> Mozenter, Sanders, and Belamy studied what was needed for an initial-contact service point, the “combined services desk” at UNC-Charlotte; extensive training on reference sources was provided to paraprofessionals.<sup>4</sup> Eells and Jaguszewski reported on an initiative at the University of Minnesota to develop IT skills across all library departments.<sup>5</sup> McCleskey produced a careful study of a specialized issue—but one with wide applicability on campuses with multiple departmental libraries—competencies for staff in art and architectural libraries.<sup>6</sup> Similar to previous support staff research, respondents to her survey reported that support staff provided a significant share of public services, partly because MLS librarian time was taken up with administrative tasks.

What staffing decisions academic libraries *should* take is intimately bound up with what staffing capabilities are available. The desired roles of professional (MLS) and support staff depend on what each is perceived to be able to contribute to the library.

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## Method

In the spring of 2008, the Library Support Staff Certification Project (LSSCP), an initiative of the American Library Association, conducted an e-mail survey on the subject of competencies for library support staff (LSS) in academic and public libraries. LSS was defined as people working in a library who do not possess an MLS degree. The competencies were grouped in areas that included functions such as reference and components of technical services, as well as the cross-cutting concepts of "foundations," supervision and management, communication and teamwork, and technology.

The survey link was widely distributed through association and other listservs, and received 3,591 responses: 1,579 from academic and 1,526 from public librarians (486 other); among academic library respondents, there were 572 responses from MLS-level librarians, 658 from support staff themselves, and 210 from directors (139 other).

Because the distribution method was by listserv rather than by random identification and solicitation of individuals from a defined population/ frame (thus a "response rate" is not applicable), it is not possible to use the results to statistically infer the opinions of "all" public or academic library personnel. However, it is possible to report what *these* people thought, and to do some comparisons between sub-groups.

There were eleven areas, each consisting of 8 to 17 competencies, things that an LSS should *know* or *be able to do*: a total of 157 items rated by respondents from three library types (public, academic and other) and four personnel types (LSS, , MLS librarians, library directors, and other). Survey ratings across all respondent groups are available upon request. The LSSCP advisory board, comprised of representatives of functional (e.g. RUSA) and library type (e.g. ACRL) organizations used this feedback and discussions to refine the eventual set of competencies for certification—those eventual competencies are not the same as the ones reported here.

This paper draws up on this large pool of information to highlight several areas: a) what areas of library work (LSS-specific) are of most interest or are the most highly or lowest-rated; b) in what areas are there the greatest differences in perceived importance between support staff respondents and MLS or director respondents; and c) what areas (other than the obvious ones) are most different when comparing public library to academic library respondents.

## Results

### *Overall: Areas of Interest and Perceived Importance*

Three areas covered by the survey will not be discussed here. Few academic library respondents chose to review youth services, reader's advisory, programming, and marketing. Table 1 shows these least-selected areas, with from 5 to 40% of respondents selecting.

	LSS	MLS	Director
Youth services	5	6	10
Readers' Advisory	17	12	22
Programming	20	21	37
Marketing	18	22	40

The unimportance of youth services and readers' advisory is uncontroversial in academic library life. The relative lack of interest, particularly by MLS respondents, in "programming" and "marketing" are different. Do academic libraries do "programming"? Are speakers' series, displays of faculty research, or artistic exhibitions the same as summer reading programs and craft workshops at the public library? It is not possible to say whether the comparatively low level of interest is a result of a dismissal of these functions as irrelevant to academic libraries, or that they are conceived of as more of a campus-level than library-specific activity, or that LSS are not primarily involved in them.

These four areas omitted, seven remain: three functional (technical services, access services, and reference) and four general (supervision-management, communication-teamwork, technology, and foundations). Table 2 presents information on the relative interest in respondents in those areas with overall ratings of the importance of the areas' competencies. "Choosing to review" percentages are those who rated at least the first specific competency in each area, out of all survey respondents of that type. The average rating of importance is across the pool of specific competencies listed for that area. The scale was 1 = not important, 2 = important and 3 = very important.

The cross-cutting area of communication and teamwork skills was thought most important. Aspects of technical services, although it was the functional area with the most interest for academic LSS respondents, were rated the lowest in this group, falling below

half-way between "very" and only "important." (Note that people who truly considered an area unimportant were unlikely to provide any ratings at all).

Each area consisted of a set of statements about *knowledge* or *skills*. Across the 111 competencies in the seven groups, the four most highly-rated competencies, with scores above 2.90 (2.92 to 2.93), were interpersonal:

- 2.93 Foundations: Practice quality customer service.
- 2.93 Communication-Teamwork: Treat others with respect, fairness and consistency.
- 2.93 Access Services: Represent the library through high-quality customer service.
- 2.92 Communication-Teamwork: Treat users in a welcoming, professional manner and provide other staff with an example of positive customer service.

The least valued items, with ratings just at or below 2.0, seem to fall into two groups. One has to do with *budgeting* and *planning*, and may reflect a judgment that these are not support staff functions. The other seems to be the issue of *metadata*.

- 2.06 Supervision-Management: The value of *planning* library services based on community demographics and needs.
- 2.04 Supervision- Management: Identify community and user demographics and assist in *planning* library services based on those demographics and needs.

- 2.01 Cataloging: Basic concepts of *metadata* schemes.
- 2.01 Acquisitions: Monitor spending from *budget* lines; adjust spending patterns as appropriate.
- 1.95 Cataloging: Apply basic *metadata* schemes.
- 1.92 Collection Development: Recommend *procedures* for acquisition, circulation and weeding of library materials.
- 1.91 Supervision- Management: Request and *defend funding* for library activities.
- 1.86 Supervision- Management: The basic purposes and concepts of *budgeting*, grant writing and fundraising.

The planning and budgeting theme also showed up in the scores that generated the most disagreement, measured by standard deviation. A standard deviation (SD) is a measure of the spread of scores in a set. That is, if six people give something ratings of 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, and 2, those scores have a smaller "spread" than a group that rated the item 1, 2, 3, 3, 2 and 1, even though both groups of scores have the same average (2). In this situation, "spread" reflects the degree of agreement among raters. Among all items, considering all raters (of whatever position), the most disagreed-upon items were related to budget matters. Where the average SD score across all items was .59, these items were at .87 and .93:

- Supervision-Mgt: Request and defend funding for library activities.

- Acquisitions: Monitor spending from budget lines; adjust spending patterns as appropriate.

As far as metadata goes, it is useful to compare its scores to those of other competencies in the cataloging set. Within cataloging, there was high importance assigned to the most general, basic and classic elements, with a distinct falling-off for metadata (Table 3).

#### *Differences in Importance Perceptions by Respondent Type*

There were three primary groups of respondents who identified themselves with academic librarianship: library support staff (LSS), MLS librarians (LSS), and library directors. There was

**TABLE 2**  
**Interest Level and Importance Ratings**

	Percent Choosing to Review			Average Importance
	LSS	MLS	Director	
Access Services	48	38	78	2.58
Reference	48	58	78	2.52
Technical Services	50	51	73	
Cataloging				2.50
Acquisitions				2.40
Collection Development				2.23
Technology	59	64	81	2.53
Communication-Teamwork	59	60	74	2.68
Supervision-Management	46	47	70	2.43
Foundations	46	52	69	2.58

**TABLE 3**  
**Cataloging Item Importance**

Highest to lowest ratings	
Be able to: Use the cataloging functions of a library's integrated library system.	2.75
Be able to: Perform basic copy cataloging, including reviewing and editing cataloging records.	2.73
Know: Basic tools, both print and online, for cataloging.	2.68
Know: Basic MARC format, cataloging rules, subject headings, classification and organization schemes.	2.64
Be able to: Use bibliographic utilities.	2.62
Know: The functionality of integrated library systems.	2.60
Know: Basic concepts of metadata schemes.	2.01

an "other" category which was comparatively unimportant, at only 9% of respondents, compared to almost 15% for those from public libraries, perhaps indicating that those staff explicitly rejected the "library support staff" classification (Table 4).

Across all individual competencies and across both public and academic library respondents, LSS gave importance ratings that were approximately one tenth of a point higher than those assigned by MLS and directors: an average of 2.43 compared to 2.32 (MLS) and 2.35 (library directors).

Therefore, this analysis highlights areas in which differences between groups are not only statistically significantly different (a measure reflecting a variance between groups that outweighs variation among group members) but are also larger than the general trend of importance assigned by each group. This was not a random sample so "statistically significant" does not refer to an inference about the population as a whole but is used as a measure comparing the variability of scores within groups (e.g. all LSS) to the differences between groups (e.g. LSS vs. MLS).

Three areas stand out for the high degree of disagreement between respondent types. In the collec-

tion development area of technical services, only two out of ten items, "understanding the functions of the integrated library system" and "perform basic repair" elicited widespread agreement. In reference, only three of fourteen, ethical issues, using locally developed tools, and assisting users in information evaluation, received similar importance scores. In supervision and management, all twenty items except "the value of written policies" "uphold policies" and "follow an approved budget" saw significant disagreement in scoring.

Foundations, access services and communications-teamwork were areas of comparative agreement; eight of eleven foundations, thirteen of seventeen access, and fourteen of twenty communication-teamwork competencies saw agreement among types of respondents. For technology, seven of the twelve areas were in agreement.

**Areas LSS Valued More than MLS and Director Respondents**

There were some competencies where LSS saw an importance for their role that was not, on average, reciprocated by others in the library. There is one group that seems very distinct, and consists of managerial activities (Table 5); another group concerns broad library roles; a small set involves collection development (Table 6).

The competencies with the greatest gap in valuation between LSS and MLS respondents, at a fifth to a half of a point, with MLS ratings often averaging below 2.00/important, are a cluster which appears to address functions that perhaps MLS view as part of library management or professional level duties—planning funding, spending, and evaluation. The very general "concepts of effective decision-making" and "make decisions...realistic goals" were valued, just not as much by MLS respondents as LSS responsibilities (Table 5).

In the second, more diverse group (Table 6), are several very broad items, but also some items pertaining to collection development activities, which also seem not to be considered by MLS respondents to be part of LSS responsibilities. In contrast to several of the management-related items, almost all of the items in this group had

**TABLE 4**  
**Survey Respondents**

	LSS	MLS	Directors	Other	Total
Academic Library	658	572	210	139	1,579
Public Library	438	560	298	230	1,526
Other library types	114	181	67	124	486

In order of greatest difference	LSS	MLS	Library Director	LSS-MLS Difference
S-Mgt: Request and defend funding for library activities.	2.20	1.71	1.58	0.49
S-Mgt: The value of planning library services based on community demographics and needs.	2.22	1.92	1.92	0.30
Acq: Monitor spending from budget lines; adjust spending patterns as appropriate.	2.18	1.88	1.98	0.29
S-Mgt: Develop and implement recommendations for new services and programs based on analysis and interpretation of data about various aspects of library operations.	2.37	2.11	2.13	0.26
S-Mgt: The basic purposes and concepts of budgeting, grant writing and fundraising.	2.02	1.76	1.63	0.26
S-Mgt: Identify community and user demographics and assist in planning library services based on those demographics and needs.	2.18	1.94	1.92	0.24
Comm-TW: Basic concepts of effective decision-making.	2.60	2.40	2.44	0.20
Comm-TW: Make decisions that reflect realistic goals and careful consideration of benefits, risks and impact on the library.	2.60	2.40	2.39	0.20
Areas: S-Mgt: Supervision and Management; Acq: Acquisitions (Technical Services); Comm-TW: Communications and Teamwork				

In order of greatest difference	LSS	MLS	Library Director	LSS-MLS Difference
Tech: The role and responsibilities of libraries for introducing relevant applications of technology to the public, including assistive technology.	2.28	2.05	2.11	0.23
S-Mgt: Principles and the value of cooperation and collaborating with other libraries, agencies and organizations.	2.42	2.19	2.18	0.23
Tech: General trends and developments of appropriate technology in all library functions and services.	2.39	2.17	2.15	0.22
Found: The value of cooperating with other libraries to enhance services.	2.49	2.29	2.41	0.20
Collection Development				
CD: Basic organization of the publishing industry and familiarity with vendors of materials, supplies, equipment and services.	2.27	2.07	2.03	0.20
CD: Use standard sources for collection development and procurement.	2.22	2.02	1.99	0.20
Areas: Tech: Technology; S-Mgt: Supervision-Management; Found: Foundations; CD: Collection Development (Technical Services).				

importance ratings by MLS and director respondents above 2.00 ("important"), just as high as the importance assigned by LSS respondents.

Overall, library directors tended to give ratings similar to MLS respondents. They were even more adamant that funding or budgeting is not an important LSS activity, scoring "request and defend funding for library activities" .62 points lower and "the basic purposes and concepts of budgeting, grant writing and fundraising" .39 points lower.

### *Areas MLS Considered More Valuable than LSS Respondents*

Because LSS rated items on average higher than MLS respondents did, the few cases in which MLS considered a competency more essential than the LSS themselves did require special attention. These competencies may represent unfilled expectations about LSS roles. There were eighteen specific competencies in which MLS importance ratings were higher than LSS ratings. Technically, only two of these differences were statistically significant, but that test does not take into account the overall upward bias of LSS scores.

One group of these MLS-higher scores can be noted and set aside. These were seven items which received high marks from all respondents: LSS averages were above 2.80 and MLS and director ratings were only slightly higher. Five of the seven involve interpersonal relations: customer service (two items), welcoming users, giving and accepting feedback, and treating others with respect. The other two also address key aspects of modern libraries: "basic computer operations needed to access library applications" and "transfer information gained from training." That is, politeness, technology, and lifelong learning are considered essential.

What competencies were above 2.80 for either directors or MLS but not LSS? There are three, each of which concerns a very important issue for academic librarians.

Library directors highly valued the communications-teamwork competence, "provide timely, accurate, and candid information to supervisors," at 2.80. This was scored only at 2.72 by MLS librarians and 2.68 by LSS themselves. High, but here directors are tuned to their own specific interests.

MLS and library directors jointly were insistent upon two other competencies:

- Access Services—Know: Principles, policies and procedures regarding protecting user privacy.

- Reference Services—Be able to: Judge when referrals are necessary and use appropriate referral procedures.

They rated them at 2.82-2.85, where the scores for LSS fell at 2.70 and 2.73. Certainly high, but not as high. Patron privacy is a core value for librarians; it is positive to see it so highly rated by support staff.

The discrepancy in ratings for reference referrals is something that could reflect real tensions in the organization of reference services at academic libraries. This appears to be especially acute for academic librarians. MLS respondents from public libraries rated this competency at 2.72—not different from public library LSS respondents (Table 7).

	LSS	MLS
Academic Library	2.70	2.85
Public Library	2.71	2.73

Academic MLS librarians may be reluctant to involve support staff in reference if they believe that referrals will not take place appropriately.

### *Public Compared to Academic: Differences Between Library Types*

A final area of interest is to note where the lives of academic librarians seem to differ most from public libraries—beyond the above-noted perspectives on youth services, programming, readers' advisory, and marketing.

There are three main groupings of items with significant differences between respondents from public vs. academic libraries—technical services items, competencies valued more by academic libraries, and competencies valued more by public libraries. "Difference" here is defined by two rules: each is statistically significant (subject to the limitations in interpretation due to this not being a random sample), and each is greater than .10, which is the average difference between position types (MLS compared to LSS).

Fifteen items in the Technical Services area were different and in all cases, academic library respondents valued the items more than public library respondents did (Table 8). This may reflect more complex cataloging, acquisitions, and collection management duties in academic libraries.

**TABLE 8**  
**Technical Services Competencies Academic Compared to Public Ratings**

In order of greatest difference. Scores below 2.0/"important" are in bold.	Academic	Public	Difference
Cat: Basic concepts of metadata schemes.	2.01	1.72	0.29
Acq: Monitor spending from budget lines; adjust spending patterns as appropriate.	2.04	1.78	0.26
Cat: The functionality of integrated library systems.	2.62	2.38	0.25
Cat: Apply basic metadata schemes.	1.95	1.73	0.22
Acq: The functionality of integrated library systems.	2.60	2.38	0.22
Acq: Basic principles for acquisition and management of special materials, such as serials, periodicals, electronic media and other formats.	2.57	2.37	0.21
CollDev: Maintain the collection using standard preservation techniques.	2.20	2.00	0.20
CollDev: Use standard methods for material retention, replacement, re-binding, weeding, storage and preservation.	2.39	2.21	0.17
Cat: Use bibliographic utilities.	2.63	2.46	0.17
CollDev: The functionality of the integrated library system.	2.49	2.34	0.15
Acq: Basic organization of the publishing industry and familiarity with vendors of materials, supplies, equipment and services.	2.18	2.03	0.15
CollDev: Use standard sources for collection development and procurement.	2.12	1.98	0.15
CollDev: The general purpose of collection development and management in libraries, and the value of consortial partnerships.	2.26	2.11	0.15
Acq: Apply effective procedures for verifying, ordering, receiving orders, resolving problems and accounting for expenditures.	2.65	2.51	0.14
CollDev: Basic principles of ordering, receiving and claiming for text and electronic resources.	2.71	2.57	0.13
Areas: CollDev: Collection Development; Acq: Acquisitions; Cat: Cataloging			

Not only were the differences between academic and public significant and large, in four cases (in bold), public library respondents rated items as below-important, something that happened with only one item (applying metadata) for academic library respondents. The other items were understanding metadata, and items about collection development and budgeting that seems to parallel observations from MLS-LSS comparisons that those two areas are not seen (strongly) as LSS responsibilities.

Table 9 shows the second group, non-technical service items rated more highly by academic library respondents. This includes a number of access services items. Given that many access services tasks in academic libraries are performed by student rather than support staff, this might be surprising. The other competencies mentioned seem more understandable—copyright, a role in policies and in personnel management, and some technical assistance for users.

The final group is those competencies which academic respondents valued less than those in public libraries (Table 10). Consistent with the observation about the hesitation academic library MLS respondents had in valuing reference competencies for LSS, the public library respondents were more likely to give "reference interviews" a higher score. Several other items pertain to the nature of the "public" which the public library serves: understanding demographics and how libraries are funded. Public libraries also value providing direct instruction on equipment.

### Discussion

Do people who work in libraries—directors, MLS, and support staff, public and academic—inhabit different worlds? Not when it comes to the values of effective teamwork and customer service. Ethical items throughout the survey received high and uniform ratings.

**TABLE 9**  
**Competencies Other than Technical Services Valued More by Academic Libraries**

In order of greatest difference	Academic	Public	Difference
Access: Copyright issues pertaining to access functions such as reserves, document delivery and interlibrary loan.	2.39	1.98	0.42
Access: Collect and report data on collections and services.	2.33	2.05	0.28
Access: Apply policies and procedures to select the most appropriate source to meet resource-sharing needs.	2.34	2.07	0.27
Access: Manage appropriate technologies and equipment for resource sharing, reserves and user services.	2.49	2.29	0.20
S-Mgt: Review existing and develop new policies and procedures.	2.47	2.28	0.19
Access: Policies and procedures for resource sharing among libraries.	2.48	2.29	0.19
S-Mgt: Participate in recruiting, hiring, training, evaluating and promoting library staff.	2.61	2.42	0.19
Access: Classification and organization schemes for collections.	2.57	2.44	0.14
Access: Principles of library security.	2.62	2.48	0.13
Access: Troubleshoot and solve problems related to circulation and resource sharing processes.	2.59	2.46	0.13
Ref: Copyright issues pertaining to reference and information services.	2.22	2.09	0.13
Access: Propose and explain library policies and procedures regarding access services.	2.67	2.54	0.13
Access: Identify materials for preservation or replacement.	2.32	2.21	0.11
Tech: Technology's role in creating, retrieving and delivering library resources, function and services.	2.40	2.29	0.11
Tech: Perform triage to identify technical problems and perform basic troubleshooting.	2.36	2.26	0.10
Areas: Access: Access Services; Ref: Reference; S-Mgt: Supervision-Management; Tech: Technology			

Certainly, library types differ, when it comes to youth services and readers' advisory. These are not academic library roles. But what about programming and marketing? The lack of interest from academic library respondents might mean that they are effectively working with others on campus—public libraries do not have that larger organizational context. Or, it may mean that academic librarians are missing an opportunity to take responsibility for their image and public activities. LSS activities in technical services are seen as more important in academic than in public libraries; and academic MLS librarians have an acute concern over reference services.

Library position makes a difference, sometimes. Even though most of the competency items were written to reflect a "supporting" role, MLS and director respondents disagreed with the importance that LSS placed on some areas. In particular, collection development, budgeting, and some broad roles of the

library in its context are not seen (by MLS or directors) as particularly important for support staff.

Clarity in expectations is an important goal for all participants. It is especially important for MLS librarians and directors to understand how LSS perceive their roles.

### Notes

1. Larry R. Oberg, Mark E. Mentges, P.N. McDermott, and Vitoon Harusadangkul, "The Role, Status, and Working Conditions of Paraprofessionals: A National Survey of Academic Libraries." *College & Research Libraries* 53, no. 5 (1992): 215-38; see also: Terry Rogers, *The Library Paraprofessional: Notes from the Underground* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997).

2. John N. Berry, "The Vanishing Librarians," *Library Journal*, Feb. 15 2008, 10.

3. Marlys Brunsting, "Reference Staffing: Common Practices of Medium-Sized Academic Libraries." *Journal*



**TABLE 10**  
**Competencies Valued More by Public Libraries**

In order of greatest difference	Academic	Public	Difference
S-Mgt: The value of planning library services based on community demographics and needs.	2.08	2.28	-0.21
Ref: Conduct effective reference interviews, helping users define their information needs.	2.55	2.73	-0.18
Access: Perform applicable financial transactions and record keeping.	2.37	2.52	-0.15
Found: How libraries are governed and funded and the place of libraries within organizations or government structures.	2.06	2.20	-0.14
Tech: Assist users with the operation of public equipment.	2.63	2.75	-0.13
S-Mgt: Identify community and user demographics and assist in planning library services based on those demographics and needs.	2.07	2.16	-0.10
Tech: Train users in the function of computing hardware and library software applications.	2.27	2.37	
Areas: S-Mgt: Supervision-Management; Ref: Reference; Access: Access Services; Found: Foundations; Tech: Technology			

of *Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery, and Electronic Reserve* 18, no. 2 (2008): 153-80; a review of models is in: Soo Young Rieh, "Changing Reference Service Environment: A Review of Perspectives from Managers, Librarians, and Users," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 3 (1999): 178-86.

4. Frada L. Mozenter, Bridgette T. Sanders, and Carol Bellamy, "Perspectives On: Cross-Training Public Service Staff in the Electronic Age: I Have to Learn to Do What?" *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29, no. 6 (2003): 399-404.

5. Linda L. Eells and Janice M. Jaguszewski, "IT Competence for All: Propel Your Staff to New Heights," *Technical Services Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17-35.

6. Sarah E. McCleskey, "Staffing Standards and Core Competencies in Academic Art and Architecture Departmental Libraries: A Preliminary Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 39, no. 1 (2003): 1-21.