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Library and Information Science Careers
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Kathleen De la Peña McCook
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CONTENTS

Preface vii
Acknowledgments ix

1. Evolution of Libraries 1

2. Information Professionals on the Job 15
3. **Education for the Information Professions**  
   High school. Choosing a college. Selecting a library and information science program. Library and information center technical assistant programs. College courses in library and information science. Master’s degree for the information professions. Education beyond the master’s degree.

4. **Placement of Information Professionals**  

5. **Future of the Information Professions**  
   Intellectual freedom. Social responsibility and information equity. Opportunities in the future.

   Appendix A: Library and Information Science Professional Organizations  
   151
   Appendix B: Educational Programs in Librarianship and Information Science  
   163
   Suggested Reading  
   185
Ours is an age of information. Each and every day, more and more information becomes available, and the management of this information—from its accumulation to its categorization to its storage to its dissemination—becomes more and more challenging. Imagine manipulating the data not only of days, weeks, or decades past, but of centuries—to the beginning of recorded history and beyond! The task is mammoth, yet librarians and information professionals do it all the time.

To help people get the variety of information they need quickly and easily, today’s librarians and information specialists must be both knowledgeable about where and how to find the desired information and proficient in the ways of accessing it. This means that in many instances they will need prior knowledge about the information being looked for, and they will have to have the expertise necessary to locate it in whatever forms it exists, be it book, tape, microfiche, CD-ROM, journals, the Internet, and so on.
The choices are many. You can choose to be a generalist or specialist, work with children or doctoral candidates, deal with rare books or musical compilations. The disciplines in which you can work are limited only in the kind and variety of information that exists.

Because of its very nature, library and information science is a field that will continue to grow and evolve. Consequently, it will need talented, intelligent, innovative, and determined individuals to keep pace with it and to adapt to new ways of managing and organizing information. For such individuals, the rewards of this profession are great.
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Evolution of Libraries

As stewards of information, librarians and information science professionals preserve, organize, and disseminate information. Today, the ways they accomplish this vary more and more as technology, education, and information expand while the computer and communications industries grow more complex. Careers in information science and librarianship are based on skills in the organization and retrieval of recorded knowledge. Professionals design and implement systems of categorizing and classifying documents to facilitate their use.

The variety of career opportunities for the individual educated in the library and information sciences expands every day. Typical careers include the following:

- Information specialist in the petrochemical industry
- Director of a multicounty library system
- Archivist in a governmental agency or museum
- Database searcher for a nuclear regulatory agency

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• Coordinator of children’s services for an urban library
• Media specialist at an elementary or secondary school
• Systems analyst for a bibliographic utility
• Cataloger of classical language material at an academic library

Any work that requires organizing, analyzing, and disseminating information falls into the domain of the librarian and information scientist. Traditionally, this work has been with printed materials, but these organizational skills are increasingly being applied to electronic, visual, audio, and digital formats. In addition to assembling the material, information professionals manipulate it for diverse and specialized audiences.

Information Professionals and What They Do

The term information professional is broader than either librarian or information scientist: it designates individuals who have been educated to organize, retrieve, and disseminate information. This education typically consists of a bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts or sciences and a master’s degree in library and information science. Similar to education for law, the professional credential for information work builds upon undergraduate specialization. For example, an undergraduate degree in history or literature, coupled with the master’s degree in library and information science, is ideal for public service work in an academic or public library; and an undergraduate degree in biology or chemical engineering, coupled with the master’s degree in library and information science, is appropriate for technical information work in an industrial research center.

Librarians who work with young children—generally called media specialists—in elementary or secondary school settings may
have undergraduate preparation in education or social welfare. Those who work with special language collections may have prepared by taking linguistic studies at the undergraduate level. Generally, any undergraduate study complemented with master’s level work in library and information science can be tailored to a unique specialty.

Information professionals work in every kind of organization. Public institutions such as colleges and universities, public libraries, schools, and government agencies all require individuals skilled in organizing information. Corporations, advertising agencies, trade associations, and nonprofit institutions such as museums and zoos require the talents of professionals who can manage their records, retrieve data, and assemble facts for analysis.

Salaries of information professionals vary depending upon specialization, geographical region, and size and type of organization. While small public libraries may start new graduates with annual salaries in the low twenties, corporate headquarters or pharmaceutical firms often offer beginning salaries in the mid-thirties or higher. Directors of large academic libraries or technical information centers can earn more than $100,000 per year. The information professions are so diverse that broad generalizations are difficult to make. Suffice it to say that individual ability and initiative can result in salary levels comparable to those in any field. (See Chapter 4 for additional salary information.)

Careers in information science often require mobility. Most positions are advertised nationally, and advancement can take place either within one institution or from one to another. The director of information services at a medium-sized public library can become its director or move on to departmental duties at an urban library. The database searcher at an agricultural library may move on to coordinate online information services for a large system. A
media specialist at a high school library may become a state consultant for media and instructional technology.

Typical affiliations with professional associations include the American Association of Law Librarians, American Library Association, American Society for Information Science, Medical Library Association, Society of American Archivists, or the Special Libraries Association. These organizations provide placement services and hold frequent conferences for continuing education.

**Historical Note**

The profession of library and information science has strong traditions. The discipline works with cultural records and thought and should be examined against this background. Perhaps the first individual in ancient times who had the idea of sorting, collecting, and making the Mesopotamian clay tablets or Egyptian papyrus scrolls more accessible should be recognized as the first librarian. By scanning many centuries, we can see that the status of the librarian—that is, the person responsible for maintaining a collection of information materials for use by others—rose when the need for records became recognized as important. The librarian was probably first seen as an organizer of materials—not of books as we know them today but of bulky rolls or tablets that had to be preserved if they were to be useful to others.

**The Middle Ages**

The value of the materials varied at different times because of their relative availability. For example, in the Middle Ages, when links with earlier cultures were few, the people concerned with records preservation attached an exceptionally great value to their work.
Today their work remains essential to our understanding of those early times, although it still has received little recognition. The determination and the development of skills for the preservation of materials remain the significant work of librarians.

Centuries before anyone dreamed of special education for librarians, it was customary for leaders of church and state to appoint a few well-read, well-organized individuals to collect materials and arrange them so that the leaders and their colleagues could find what they wanted. These individuals were probably the first people who consciously thought of themselves as librarians. In almost every Indo-European language, the words for library and librarian are closely related to those for books. In French, Danish, German, and other European languages, the root biblio is found in words for libraries and librarians. The same letter combination appears in ancient terms for books and in such English words as bibliography and bible. The English word librarian derives from the Latin word for book, liber. In many languages, the term designating the people who work with these materials is similar to the term for the materials themselves.

The 1600s and 1700s

In the mid-1600s, Gabriel Naudé, librarian to Cardinal Mazarin of France, wrote his now-famous book Advice on Establishing a Library as a practical guide for others to use in organizing collections of materials and encouraging their use. He may be considered the first known professional librarian.

Libraries became more essential as universities and colleges developed. The technological development of printing encouraged the proliferation of new works and new copies of materials, which increased the number of literate people. Librarians’ subsequent gath-
erings in universities required the development of a way for them to share their materials and to make knowledge more readily available to students. Faculties—usually a group of scholars studying in the same general area—shared their information materials and selected someone, often one from their own group, to be responsible for this new collection. This individual consulted them about adding to the collection and offered such appropriate services as might be required. Depending on the size, tradition, and other characteristics of the university, these collections were combined into larger, more general collections. This made accessibility of the information more equitable and provided a program of general services.

The 1800s and Early 1900s

Although early libraries in the United States functioned as public libraries, they were often limited to members of a certain society or students in a Sunday school.

One of the most long-lasting benefits to public libraries was the series of grants Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Corporation made for public library buildings in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Each community had to promise to maintain its library, but the prospect of receiving such funds encouraged many communities to plan public library service.

Public libraries were important in the task of helping the many immigrants who came to this country in the 1800s and early 1900s to become a part of American society. There were special problems in working with people whose language and background differed from those of their neighbors, and public libraries attempted to serve them. They reached parents through their children and expanded the library’s traditional schedule to provide times when the immigrants, who often worked long hours, could come to the
library. Expanded collections of foreign language materials and programs that provided citizenship classes were important features of this effort.

In the last quarter of the 1800s, two developments helped change the character of libraries and librarians. A key figure in both was Melvil Dewey, who developed the Dewey Decimal Classification that is used in many libraries today. He was the vocal leader in the founding of the American Library Association and in the establishment of a formal educational program for librarians. Both of these developments were significant for the professionalization of librarianship. Librarians came to know each other through annual American Library Association conferences. Through shared experiences and formal discussions, they began to express themselves as a group on such issues as library cooperation and development, public relations, censorship, copyright policy and law, and library management.

Dewey’s school, first located at Columbia College and later at Albany, New York, provided an opportunity for librarians to prepare themselves with a formal course of study. They learned classification, binding of books, and use of reference materials, as well as library history. Other schools, at universities or colleges and public libraries, were founded in the first quarter of the 1900s. Then, in response to recognition given to librarianship as a profession and the need for standardization of library education, the American Library Association recommended that library education programs be established only in institutions of higher learning.

If higher scholarship demanded access to more materials, there was no such tradition in lower-level schools until much later. Blab schools, so named from the practice of having children recite out loud, heavily emphasized memory usage and made little use of such
scarce and expensive learning materials as books. Obviously, they were hardly places where libraries were likely to be established. Blab schools existed throughout the United States until the early 1900s.

As the twentieth century progressed, the push for libraries in elementary and secondary schools began with the recognition that high school students and faculties required organized resource materials. Once established, library use had to be encouraged, so dynamic high school libraries developed. Elementary schools have a shorter history, coming to the fore primarily after World War II. School library media specialists often came from the ranks of teachers, although the number of school libraries and the need for librarians in recent years have encouraged more people to train for this specialty as a first career. Today, most U.S. school systems employ full-time media specialists.

As the profession matured, special libraries developed. Special libraries are often associated with particular industries or businesses; but collections of special materials such as maps or special subjects such as art often form special libraries, too.

The Special Libraries Association, founded in the first decade of the 1900s, fosters the continuing education of its members and assists in development of techniques for greater service and efficiency. Special librarians are located in major population centers like Boston, Chicago, and Washington, DC, as well as in research centers, corporate headquarters, and research and development laboratories throughout the world.

**Development of Information Science**

The field of information science, which has grown rapidly during the past fifty years, is very closely allied to library science. The