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Valuing the Information Professional

I. Costs

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2012 the average librarian salary was \$61,720 per year (Occupational Employment and Wages, 25-4021 Librarians, May 2012). In New Hampshire, where I live and work the average was \$51,620. This however, is actually closer to the average starting salary of academic librarians reported by the company Libqual+. In a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet on their website, Libqual+ shows that salaries do increase with experience and additional education and are generally around \$70-65,000 depending on the job title (Libqual+, 2013). The Faculty Salary Structure worksheet shows that the highest paying jobs were in human resources and business management. These positions were followed by jobs in IT, web development, functional specialties, and subject specialists, in roughly that order. Salaries in the lower half of the range were in preservation, cataloging, technical services and archiving.

An important point to consider is where salaries are concentrated. The difference in total salaries in the Calculation of Regional Factors worksheet shows how the money is allocated within the library organization. For example within the geographical category labeled New England, a total of \$757,042 was being spent on reference librarians with less than five years experience. More than double that was being spent on total salaries for catalogers with similar

experience. Although the threat of cataloging jobs becoming obsolete still looms large in the minds of librarians, the data shows that this trend has possibly stabilized.

It should also be noted that the spreadsheet is based on Libqual+ surveys of less than 6000 librarians, while the BLS data is from census data collected by the federal government. However, there is correlation. The BLS reports that three of the New England states enjoy the highest concentration of jobs and location quotients while Libqual+ shows that the region has the highest percentage of all US average salaries combined.

Cautionary tales of wage depression abound. It is important to remember that salaries are constrained in many professions, not just librarianship. It is well known that economic “structural problems have retarded growth and wages for decades” in the United States (Brooks, 2012). However, there are also indicators that there is a floor for wages, at least locally, as a public library’s faltering search for a new director illustrates. The Sandown, NH library received 26 applications from 12 different states in June 2013. Of the pool of 23 candidates that possessed an MLS, seven withdrew their application based on the salary of \$48,00 to \$55,000. A new recruitment attempt started in the fall has produced six applicants, one of whom has “declined because of the pay” (Rittenhouse, 2013).

Another set of costs to consider are those that I will incur. Academic librarians are expected to have a second master’s degree. The Libqual+ data allows for a maximum of \$5000 salary increase from education credit in their examples of salary calculations for persons who already have an MLS degree. My education at SJSU will cost around \$25,000. Depending on whether or not I have tuition remission, I might have to spend another similar sum to obtain a second subject degree.

II. The Output of the Organization

The output of any institution of higher learning can be considered in several different ways. I work for a law school, the most obvious thing we produce are lawyers. After completing their education, our graduates do fairly well; 90% pass the bar exam on their first try, 89% are employed or pursuing another full-time degree within nine months (UNH Law by the Numbers, 2013). Since “law students graduating today are faring worse than experienced attorneys,” salary data was not investigated (Moppet, 2013).

As a whole UNH Law ranks 118th out of 144 law schools in the US World News and World Report rankings (2013). However their intellectual property center is in the top ten. In a recent “survey of IP faculty members around the country, UNH Law was tied for eighth place, in an increasingly competitive field” (UNH Law moves 23 Positions in US News Rankings, 2013). The IP library with its extensive collection of serials, monographs, and legal treatises is a major contributor to this success and an institutional hub for the dissemination of specialized information in these areas of the law.

A comparison of our other product, published research, illustrates well how spending on library materials can boost the reputation of an academic institution and improve the quality of the scholarly opportunities that are available there. An examination of a web page which lists all of the publication credentials of the library faculty teaching staff shows that the librarian from the intellectual property collection has published 11 articles and a book, while the remainder of the librarians have published about as many as a whole entire group (Faculty Scholarship, 2013). This seems to justify allocating resources to develop specialized collections as well as providing adequate staffing to allow librarians to write.

In addition to doing research and publishing articles, the librarians where I work teach courses. In a small school that has a 16:1 student to faculty ratio, with librarians that are also instructors, students at UNH Law are very well-supported by the library staff (UNH Law by the numbers, 2013). New graduates also retain their library privileges for one year following graduation.

The Library also utilizes several social media platforms and maintains a blog. Utilizing social media is another good way that the information professionals who run the library add value to the organization. This strengthens the library as an institutional asset, but there are also ways of measuring output. Romero notes that “it should be taken into account that while in 2010 branding was the primary goal of communication in social media, this year...an ROI analysis can help an institution to evidence how the cost savings inherent in using these...substantiate their use. (2011).

III. Contributions of the Information Professional: Knowledge Applied to Information

Some of the librarians where I work are published authors while others are not. There is considerable variety in the topics that my co-workers have written about. A professional association recently published an article on library logos derived from architecture. It was researched and written by a UNH Law librarian utilizing materials from the intellectual property collection (Fletcher, 2013). This is a good example of how a well-funded library and motivated employees can increase the visibility of their institution.

Another way that individual information professionals contribute to the value of their organization is through the unique knowledge bases that they bring. In a special library collection, these second subject specialists can contribute greatly to the depth and relevancy of

research while offering a diverse knowledge base. This type of flexibility enables an institution to quickly capitalize on intellectual trends due to the immediate availability of an expert who can relay a rich array of secondary sources.

While the possibility of replacing traditional librarians with Ph.D.'s in academic libraries, is an idea that has been floated around, the contributions of an informational professional should not be minimized (Wilkinson, 2011). For example, in an academic law library, staff members with a background in healthcare management would be immediately useful to someone seeking to understand the new healthcare laws. Other, less obvious links are people with special education experience and disability rights; a prior career as a musician might give a librarian a novel way of how to approach entertainment law; experience working as a librarian in a zoo functions as a pre-requisite in understanding materials on biotechnology patents; an undergraduate degree in Eastern Philosophy can give a unique insight into key trends in emerging markets. These are all ways that knowledge can be applied to information resulting in a sum that is greater than its parts.

Additionally, librarianship is a profession with a patron-oriented ethos. In contemporary parlance, this translates to customer service. This is why recent studies in evaluating library quality that have been designed to “facilitate an understanding of value from the customer perspective, going beyond a mere determination of satisfaction” are a useful way to measure value (Broady-Preston & Lobo, 2011). Most academic institutions rely on outside accreditation and the library is no exception. By extension, these metrics include the quality of the individuals who staff them. Self-evaluation on a regular basis becomes really crucial because “failure to demonstrate quality may become a greater cost to library services than the time and resource

costs entailed in achieving external compliance with pre-set standards” would be (Broady-Preston & Lobo, 2011).

Librarians learn the specific skills needed for their profession through their education. There really are no other formal programs that exist which train people to become this type of professional. Librarians have the combined skill set of conceptual knowledge applied to practical situations while maintaining a customer-centric mindset. Also, Librarians understand the larger picture of how the library fits into the organizational mission allowing them to meet long-term goals and not allowing their customer service orientation to become reactionary.

The impact of quality library services and materials is easily overlooked and seems hard to measure. This is because librarians “contribute small pieces to what might be much larger projects” (Whisner, 2000). However, a study of high school students showed that “students who frequented well stocked, well staffed libraries had higher ACT scores and ended up better prepared for college” (Sherman, 2007). It stands to reason that students who enjoyed ample amounts of quality library experience are more likely to advance to higher education. Therefore it is easy to see how consistency in library services can make an impact on a society over the course of a lifetime.

In conclusion, although the nature of the work done by librarians is not always easy to quantify, there is measurable value that only someone with an MLIS degree can bring to an organization. While some of these metrics rely on outside accreditation, self-evaluation is a useful means of gauging value and relevancy. Librarians add value to knowledge, and this knowledge increases in worth over time from both an individual and societal point of view.

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