

# BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

## A survey of librarians with a health sciences background\*

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### INTRODUCTION

Examinations of the experiences of librarians with a health sciences background have appeared in the library literature over the past decade. Fikar's 2001 survey was perhaps the first article written about this topic. The majority of respondents to Fikar's survey felt that their background was beneficial or would be beneficial to their librarianship career [1]. Watson's survey of a small sample of Canadian academic health sciences librarians found that the 21 of 30 (70%) respondents felt that having a health sciences degree was not very important or not at all important to a health sciences librarian career [2]. As opposed to this, a 2007 survey of British health librarians found that those with a science background said their degree "gave them more confidence with the terminology and general subject background." Those without a health sciences degree emphasized "transferable skills or other management skills" as important rather than their background. Most felt there was a need for "better subject knowledge" [3].

The current survey sought to identify why those librarians who had a health sciences background chose librarianship and if they felt their health sciences background was advantageous in working as a health sciences librarian.

### METHODOLOGY

A web-based survey of twenty-nine questions was designed and piloted <[http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=bmqKnhw6LsserHZ6AyFC7BpwT8OSogDL19WiyPQK604\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=bmqKnhw6LsserHZ6AyFC7BpwT8OSogDL19WiyPQK604_3d)>. Questions were designed to elicit information about the reasons why respondents who had health sciences degrees and, therefore, had presumably not originally intended to become librarians changed their career or career path, their impressions of librarianship, and the impact of their health sciences background on their current careers. The survey received internal review board (IRB) approval from the author's institution.

An email invitation to respond to the survey was sent to more than twenty health sciences librarianship or association email discussion lists. The email

discussion lists included MEDLIB-L, the Medical Library Association's (MLA's) primary email discussion list; appropriate MLA chapters and relevant sections; Special Library Association and American Library Association division email discussion lists; and international email discussion lists. The email invitation requested responses from those who had obtained a master's degree in library science after first receiving a health sciences degree in one of the following disciplines: allied health, behavioral sciences, dentistry, life sciences and preclinical sciences, medicine, nursing, occupational and physical therapy, pharmacy, public health, or veterinary medicine. The level of the health sciences degree could range from an associate to a doctorate in the relevant field.

### RESULTS

The full survey (Appendix A, online only) was available online. There were a total of 274 respondents. Fourteen of these respondents were excluded from the final analysis because they indicated they earned their health sciences degree after their library degree or they did not have a library degree. Respondents with a health sciences degree who pursued a librarianship career without working as health sciences professionals were also included in the survey. Of the 246 respondents who answered the question about gender, 212 (86%) were women and 34 (14%) were men. The median age of the 247 respondents who answered how old they were was 52, with a range of no specific age, listed by 7, to 73 years old. The demographics of the survey's respondents such as their age, gender, and kind of library and department they worked in were similar to the 2007 *MLA Membership Survey* with one exception: While the majority of respondents to this survey had worked in librarianship for 6–10 years, the majority of respondents to the MLA survey had worked more than 20 years in the field [4].

Of the 260 respondents who listed their health sciences degrees and the subject area, 12 (4.6%) had a behavioral and social sciences background, with 1 (0.3%) reporting a dual degree and 69 (26.5%) who had an allied health background. Of the 260 respondents who listed their degree level, 20 (7.6%) did not specify their degree; 9 (3.5%) held a medical degree, veterinary medical degree, or doctor of pharmacy degree; and 104 (40.0%) had a bachelor's degree. Seven (2.7%) of 260 reported working less than a year as a health sciences professional before deciding to change careers and 35 (13.5%) more than 20 years.

Over half of the respondents, 145 (55.8%), did not consider other careers besides librarianship, while 115 (44.2%) of the respondents said they did. When asked which other careers they considered, respondents mentioned advanced degrees in their field or in a different health sciences field. Several respondents mentioned non-health sciences career paths prior to becoming a librarian, such as law, teaching, writing, or retail work at a bookstore.

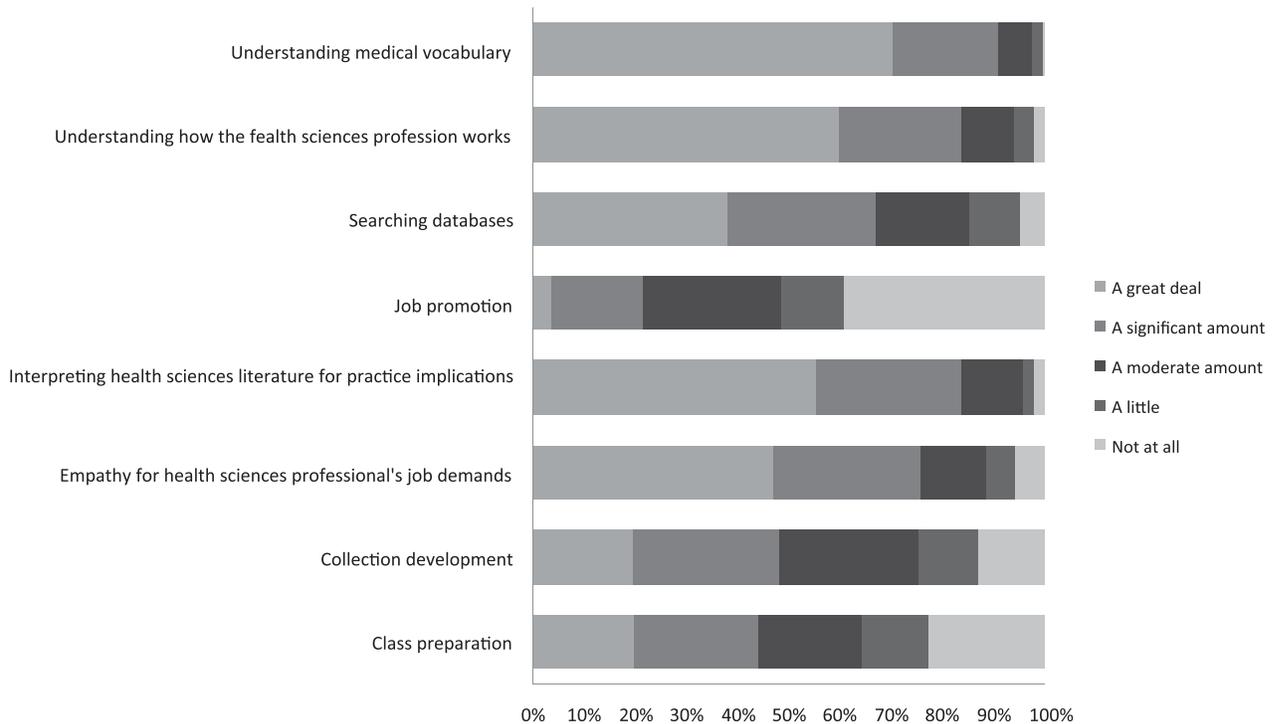
\* Based on a presentation at MLA '10, the 110th Annual Meeting of the Medical Library Association; Washington, DC; May 23, 2010.



A supplemental appendix is available with the online version of this journal.

**Figure 1**

For each of the following areas, how much do you think your health sciences background gives you an advantage as a librarian over your colleagues who do not?



The median number of years that respondents worked as a librarian was 16–20, with 16 (6.3%) of 254 respondents reporting less than 1 year and 36 (14.2%) more than 20 years. Thirteen (5.1%) respondents worked in government libraries, none in archives or special collections, and 77 (30.3%) in academic health sciences libraries. The largest number of respondents who worked in a particular department worked in reference or information services, with 91 (35.8%), while 37 (14.6%) worked as solo librarians. Some respondents also reported that they were self-employed, were currently unemployed, or worked in libraries related to consumer health or patient education, either in an organization or in a research center.

When asked to rate which aspects of library work they enjoyed, from “Like a great deal” to “Dislike a great deal,” database searching; interacting with both patrons and colleagues; having opportunities for continuing education; teaching; having opportunities for doing research; and working on the library website, research guides, and so on were liked a great deal by a majority of those who answered the question. Cataloging resources was the only response that elicited the majority of neutral or negative responses. Eighty (31.5%) of 254 respondents selected the neither like nor dislike category for this option. It also received the most responses for “Dislike it a little,” 23 (9.1%), to “Dislike it a great deal,” 18 (7.1%).

Figure 1 shows to what extent (on a scale from “A great deal” to “Not at all”) respondents thought their health sciences background gave them an advantage as a librarian over their colleagues who did not have a health sciences background. Over half of the respondents felt that their background helped them “A great deal” with understanding medical vocabulary, interpreting the health sciences literature, and knowing how the health sciences profession works.

Respondents were also asked how much certain skills that they learned as a librarian would have benefited them in their former health sciences profession. The categories that would have benefited the librarians the most in the “A great deal” response were “Research skills” with 95 (38.5%) of 247 respondents and “Internet and technology skills” with 90 (36.4%). When asked which skills that they learned as a health sciences professional that would have benefited them as a librarian, the categories that received the “A great deal” response were “Critical thinking,” “Interactions with people,” and “Communication skills.” Eighty (32.4%) respondents felt that Internet and technology skills learned as a health professional did not benefit them at all as a librarian. Yet, when some respondents contributed comments to the “Other” category for this question, they made several comments that these skills would be beneficial to the respondents no matter which profession they worked in.

## LIMITATIONS

This was a study of a small, self-selected group of librarians who changed careers or career focus prior to becoming librarians. It is difficult to gauge the total population of this particular field. The 247 respondents represent those who felt their career choice was important enough to respond to this survey.

## DISCUSSION

There were mostly similarities between the results of this survey and Fikar's 2001 survey. In both surveys, respondents left their former careers for similar reasons including burnout, difficulty finding a job in their former professions, and desire to use their health sciences background in another way. Fikar's respondents also mentioned being dissatisfied or disliking aspects of the health care system such as insurance regulations, large amounts of time for detailed documentation, long hours, blood-borne pathogen risk, and increasing threat of litigation as reasons for leaving their other careers. Also similar to the current survey, Fikar's respondents mentioned choosing a career in library and information science because of a love of books, interest in libraries, and interest in database searching. They believed they would have had a better quality of life because of less stress and shorter hours. One major difference between the 2 surveys was when respondents were asked if they considered other professions besides librarianship. While the majority of respondents in the current survey said that they did not consider other professions, 58 (53%) of Fikar's respondents did consider other careers besides librarianship [1].

Because the majority of respondents in the current survey felt they had an advantage over their colleagues in areas such as medical vocabulary and understanding of how the health sciences professions work, results suggested that these librarians or health sciences librarianship associations are in a position to assist their colleagues without a health sciences background. For example, librarians with a health sciences background or current health sciences professionals or students might hold sessions on how librarians can work with these user groups.

Librarians engaged in previous health sciences careers can provide continuing education classes for librarians to help them understand aspects of the health sciences professions. Librarians without a health sciences background can also be supported in taking classes in areas such as medical terminology or anatomy. Postgraduate options in health sciences might also be offered at more schools as additional opportunities for librarians to enrich their careers.

The results of this survey also provide ideas for recruiting future librarians to the profession. Since it

would appear that some people with a health sciences background are considering alternative ways to utilize their backgrounds, library schools should continue to offer health sciences librarianship courses or graduate or postgraduate options as a way to attract future librarians to the profession. Over half of the survey respondents went right into librarianship without pursuing a health sciences career, suggesting that recruitment efforts focused on undergraduate- or even graduate-level health sciences students could be quite successful. Highlighting the health sciences skills that these survey respondents listed as particularly valuable to them in their library careers and those they learned as librarians that would have helped them in the health sciences might also help to convey the nature of the library profession.

## CONCLUSIONS

Librarians with a health sciences background felt that their background gave them an advantage in certain aspects of librarianship. More attention should be given to second-career librarians with a health sciences background by interviewing these librarians with specific backgrounds, such as nursing or public health, to learn more about their experience to see if it varies amongst the backgrounds. Sharing their experiences could serve as a tool for those considering a career change into librarianship or for library schools to see if they are meeting their future graduates' expectations.

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