

Crisis in foreign language expertise in research libraries

How do we fill this gap?

by Charlene Kellsey

Crisis in academic research libraries seem to be endemic these days. Skyrocketing serial prices causing large-scale subscription cancellations, economic recession causing funding cutbacks, the graying of the librarian workforce, all are serious and much-discussed problems common to most academic libraries. There are also other, less well-known, trends developing, that may become crises if they are not recognized and addressed soon.

One of these is the difficulty in finding librarians to hire who have foreign language expertise adequate to serve the needs of large academic libraries. Statistics on foreign language enrollments and college entrance and graduation requirements in large part provide an explanation for the current situation.

The need for foreign language expertise may seem evident to those involved in the day-to-day operations of a large research library, but it might not occur to those outside the profession, including language teachers and guidance counselors. Bibliographers responsible for collection development must seek out, evaluate, and order materials in a number of languages, not only for foreign literatures, but also for philosophy, history, classics, etc. Reference librarians must teach students how to use resources in these areas and assist them in understanding what they find.

For example, some of the major reference sources and collections of source documents in fields like classics and medieval history are in German because of the large editorial and research projects conducted by German scholars in the 19th century. Catalogers are also in need of language knowledge, preferably in more than one language, because although catalog records are available from the Library of Congress for approximately 75 to 80 percent of books in English acquired by academic libraries, they are available for only about 25 percent of books in the major European languages.¹

Why are librarians with foreign language expertise becoming hard to find? Part of the answer lies in the entrance and degree requirements for languages of U.S. colleges and universities. The Modern Language Association, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, has conducted periodic surveys of these requirements since 1953. The latest available was conducted in 1994-95 and found that only 20.7 percent of four-year degree-granting institutions had a foreign language entrance requirement and 67.5 percent had a graduation requirement. While these numbers show some improvement from the lows of 14.1 percent and 47.4 percent respectively in 1982-83, they are still well below the highs of 33.6 percent entrance and 88.9 percent graduation require-

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ments in 1965–66.² Although entrance and degree requirements vary from one college to another, a common entrance requirement is two years of high school study of a language, and degree requirements are often two years of college level study, which students may test out of if they have had more high school preparation. While better than no language study at all, these modest levels are usually not enough to develop a reading fluency.

Library schools in general do not require a foreign language as part of the educational background of incoming students, and many of the librarians who received their undergraduate educations in the 1960s, when language requirements and enrollments were more prevalent, are now nearing retirement age.³ Additionally, many library school students who have had some language education do not think of it as a valuable job skill if they cannot speak the language fluently.⁴ Spoken fluency, however, is not what is required in most academic library positions; rather, functional reading knowledge is what is needed.

Academic libraries should also be concerned about the choice of language studied that is reflected in the enrollment statistics. Spanish has been the most studied language since 1970, when it surpassed French, and has shown large increases since then. This is probably due in large part to the increasing Spanish-speaking population in the United States; students see a practical reason for studying Spanish. In contrast, enrollments in French have dropped below their level in 1960, and German enrollments have dropped even more drastically.⁵ Yet French and German works still represent an important share of the research produced in the humanities fields. Without librarians who have knowledge of these languages, it will become increasingly difficult to acquire and catalog those works, to the detriment of faculty working in the humanities.

What can be done?

One of the recommendations to individual academic libraries by ACRL's new Ad Hoc Task Force on Recruitment and Retention Issues is: "Partner with academic departments to encourage undergraduate and graduate students in targeted majors to consider librarianship as a potential career" through work-study, internships, or practica.⁶ Even libraries that cannot accommodate many students in these types of

programs could establish contacts with the foreign language departments on campus and present information about academic librarianship through career talks, posting literature on department bulletin boards, and designating a librarian contact for interested students. Foreign language faculty are concerned about career options for their graduates, especially with the difficult job market in college-level teaching.⁷ Yet a popular career guide for foreign language majors only lists "librarian" in a chapter on teaching-related occupations, with no details.⁸ If foreign language majors are going to learn about opportunities in academic librarianship, it will be up to academic librarians to inform them.

The lack of qualified candidates with foreign language expertise is a matter of concern especially for ACRL's Western European Specialists Section (WESS). At the 2001 ALA Annual Conference in San Francisco, the WESS Research and Planning Committee and the Cataloging Discussion Group cosponsored a program on the particular difficulties of finding catalogers with European language skills and some practical suggestions for alleviating the situation.⁹

As a follow-up to that program, at the 2002 ALA Annual Conference in Atlanta, the WESS Research and Planning Committee appointed a new Subcommittee on Recruitment to work on some concrete actions for contacting and recruiting foreign language and area studies majors and graduate students to consider careers in academic librarianship.

Working within the larger context of the ACRL goals and the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Task Force on Recruitment and Retention Issues, the subcommittee hopes to make a difference in this particular area of academic librarianship, but individual academic librarians can also make a difference by getting involved and making contacts with language departments in their own institutions.

Notes

1. Charlene Kellsey, "Cooperative cataloging, vendor records and European language monographs," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 46, 3 (2002): 21–26, Table 2.

2. Richard Brod and Bettina J. Huber, "The MLA survey of foreign language entrance and degree requirements, 1994–95," *ADFL Bulletin* 28, 1 (1996), p. 34 Table 1.

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Discover

A close-up photograph of a man's face, looking directly at the camera through a large magnifying glass. The magnifying glass is held in front of his eyes, making them appear significantly larger and more intense. The man has dark hair and is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is plain white.

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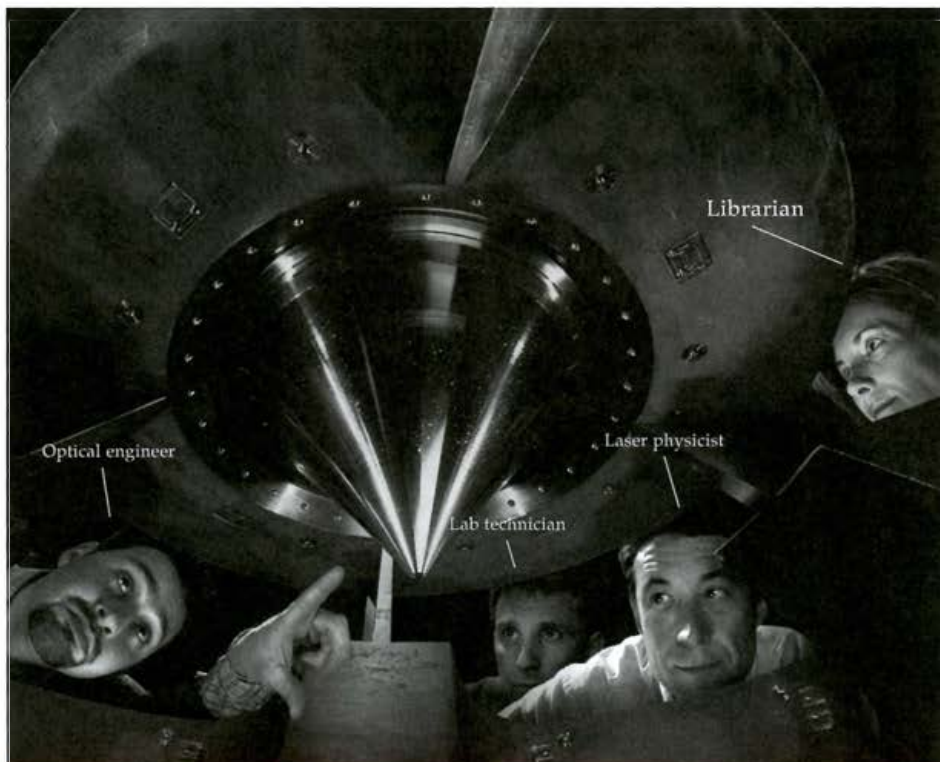
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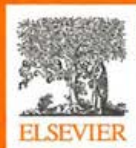
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Your colleagues at public and special libraries can help them learn about children's services or law and medical librarianship. Elaine Yontz suggests hosting a pizza dinner occasionally for student workers with a program that promotes librarianship as a career opportunity.⁶ 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. ■

(*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 Kellsey, "ACRL WESS discusses cataloging issues," *ALCTS Newsletter Online* 12, 3 (2001): http://www.ala.org/alcts/alcts_news/news_wess.html. ■