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What do six questions and fourteen years reveal about librarians?

An analysis of ACRL's Members of the Week

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) was founded in 1940 and represents more than 8,000 academic and research librarians. Since 2008, the staff-produced *ACRL Insider* blog has provided information on ACRL activities, services, and programs. The blog features information on publications, events, conferences, and online learning opportunities, along with podcasts and other media. A regular feature of the *ACRL Insider* blog is the "Member of the Week" (MOTW),[1] a selection that has highlighted more than 650 academic librarians to present. The MOTW designation spotlights the diversity and accomplishments of the ACRL membership and serves to promote academic and research librarianship to those who may be considering academic librarianship as a career. Those profiled are primarily self-nominated, although some are occasionally selected by ACRL or nominated by a colleague. It's a popular, easy, and effective way to virtually meet professional colleagues.

For the past fourteen years, ACRL has surveyed the MOTW with the same six questions. After stating their name, position, institution, and years of membership, the selected member responds to the following prompts:

1. Describe yourself in three words:
2. What are you reading (or listening to on your mobile device)?
3. Describe ACRL in three words:
4. What do you value about ACRL?
5. What do you as an academic librarian contribute to your campus?
6. In your own words:

The responses are informative and engaging, a quintessential example of human-interest stories. Although the members highlight the diversity of ACRL, they also share many similarities as would be expected in a professional blog.

Content analysis

Content analysis is a method of communication research that distills meaning and allows inferences about individuals or organizations, their culture, and their time. It has been used for nearly a century to examine literature, advertising, historical documents, and mass media. In librarianship, the method appears most often in the analysis of job advertisements

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to determine qualifications and skills.[2] It has also been used to analyze diversity, inclusion, and equity statements on library websites as well as social media posts to showcase library resources.[3] Content analysis of the responses to the MOTW survey questions can reveal the individual characteristics, personalities, quirks, and values of academic librarians over the past decade and a half. It also reveals themes and trends among the membership and the profession of academic librarianship.

To conduct the analysis, data was scraped from the ACRL Insider MOTW section. The web scraping was done with a basic .NET Core web application using the Html Agility Pack (HAP), an HTML parser. The first step was to get a list of each blog posts URL so it's content could be scraped from the page. This required scraping the 66 pages for the 10 blog post links on each page. Other than the initial page, the URL for each of these 66 pages was formatted in the same way, so generating them was easily done in Microsoft Excel by concatenating the URL prefix with an auto-incrementing integer. After scraping the URLs, well-structured links to each member's blog post were identified. With this list of 659 URLs, it was possible to scrap the HTML content from each blog post. The final step was to clean up the data by removing HTML tags and formatting it for a spreadsheet. This cleanup was done using a standard text editor with regular expression find/replace capability. Once the data was compiled into a spreadsheet and normalized, it was analyzed and coded through a combination of manual and software-based methods.

Demographics and employment

The overwhelming majority of respondents are from the United States, and all states are represented except for Hawaii and Rhode Island. The most popular state is New York with 68 appearances, followed by California (58) and Illinois (54). At the other end, Alaska, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, and North Dakota are only represented once.

The geographical region of the respondents from the United States is very evenly distributed. The range spans from a high of 27% from the Northeast to a low of 22% from the West. Twenty-six respondents (4%) are from outside the US. The most popular country is Canada (15), followed by Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates with two appearances each. The following countries round out the list, each appearing once—Australia, Barbados, Italy, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, and Singapore.
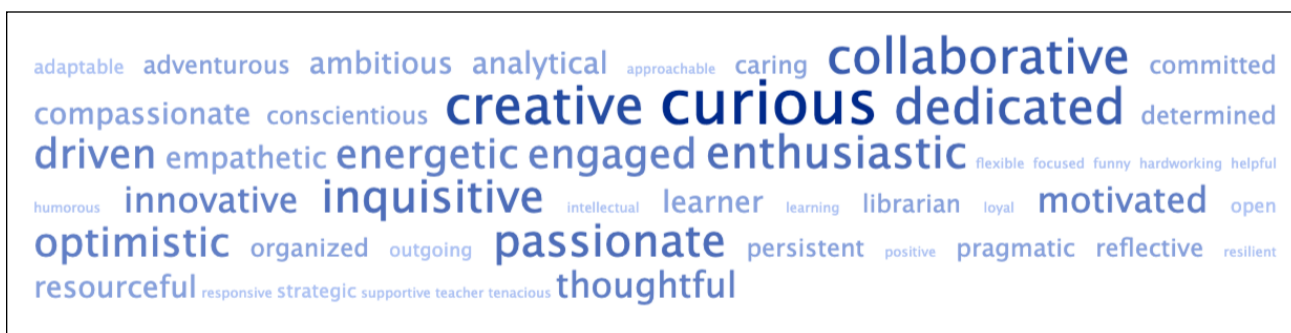
The professional descriptions of the MOTW reveal that approximately 84.5% work in four-year institutions. Librarians in 2-year associate colleges make up 6.5%, while library school students and faculty total 5%. The remaining 4% work in a mix of government and public libraries (e.g., Library of Congress, State Library, National Library of Medicine), nonprofit organizations (e.g., OCLC, historical societies, consortia), and private sector enterprises. Nearly one-third of the people in this smallest, mixed category work in New York City. Of the approximately 560 librarians working in four-year institutions, 11% work in primarily baccalaureate colleges, 24% at master's colleges or universities, and 65% in doctoral universities.

Librarians working in public services librarianship are most heavily represented. There are almost 350 members in this category (53%), which includes reference, instruction, access services, outreach, and student success, among many other job titles. It does not include administrators in middle or upper management. The administrator category, comprising deans and directors (82), AD/AULs (34), and department heads (79), totals 195 members.

The technical services positions including cataloging, acquisitions, digital, and electronic resources—but not administrators—total 44 members. Scholarly communication and special collections, which can include aspects of public and technical services, have 18 and 12 members, respectively—again, not including administrators. There are 13 library school faculty among the MOTWs, and the remaining members are a mix of specialized positions, for example, architect, housing specialist, and special projects. It's interesting to note that among all MOTWs are 55 people who have been named an "Emerging Leader," ALA's leadership development program for newer library workers.

Personal descriptions, reading, and listening

The call to "describe yourself in three words" elicits some of the most interesting content in the MOTW feature. Normalizing the data was a minor challenge, for example, grouping similar nouns and adjectives. Thus lesser cited descriptors such as *collaborator*, *creator*, and *innovator* were grouped with the more popular *collaborative*, *creative*, and *innovative*. The most frequently mentioned self-descriptions were *curious* (128), *creative* (74), *dedicated* (60), *collaborative* (58), and *inquisitive* (52). Below are the top 50 self-descriptions.

Some respondents interpret the prompt not as three discrete, separate words, but as a single phrase strung together. Thus the following fascinating phrases:

- dedicated information jedi
- human happiness agent
- terrific tutorial tamer
- je suis moi
- ancient language enthusiast
- data management evangelist

- curious questions asker
- backstage data manager
- outgoing canadian librarian
- learning common innovator
- quirky birder librarian

Even more fascinating are the plethora of responses to the question about the MOTW's current reading and listening. As one can imagine, librarians are considerable readers and aren't shy to share their recommendations. Also not surprisingly, fiction is the most popular genre, but nonfiction is well represented also. Professional reading in publications from ALA, ACRL, etc., is popular, in addition to blogs and major popular publications such as the *New York Times*. Nearly 100 titles appear in at least two responses. The following titles appear at least three times:

- *American Gods* (Neil Gaiman): 5
- The Hunger Games Trilogy (Suzanne Collins): 5

- *Americanah* (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie): 4
- New York Times: 4
- *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Rebecca Skloot): 4
- *Becoming* (Michelle Obama): 3
- *Between the World and Me* (Ta-Nehisi Coates): 3
- *Everything I Never Told You* (Celeste Ng): 3
- Game of Thrones (George R. R. Martin): 3
- Harry Potter series (J. K. Rowling): 3
- Harvard Business Review: 3
- *How to be an Anti-Racist* (Ibram X Kendi): 3
- Millennium series (Stieg Larsson): 3
- *The Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes and Posner): 3
- *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy): 3
- *The Sympathizer* (Viet Thanh Nguyen): 3
- *Ulysses* (James Joyce): 3

As for current listening, it's probably no surprise that National Public Radio (NPR) is a very popular choice. It appears dozens of times in various forms of programming, with the NPR podcasts *Hidden Brain*, *TED Radio Hour*, and *This American Life* ranked highest. *RadioLab* and *Freakonomics Radio* also ranked highly. Musical artists that appear at least three include Adele, Gillian Welch, Janelle Monáe, Nina Simone, and The Black Keys. Describing ACRL in three words elicited a tremendous sentiment of vocational fellowship and opportunity. Words highlighting communal support, engagement, and professional development appear again and again. The most frequently mentioned descriptions were *community* (123), *collaborative* (102), *connection (*80), *supportive* (76), and *professional* (67). Below are the top 50 descriptions of ACRL.

Again, some of the most interesting and illustrative responses are those treating the prompt as a three-word phrase. These demonstrate a deep admiration for the association and its membership.

- Simply the best
- Community of Practice
- Rife for re-imagining
- My librarian peeps

- Academic librarians connected
- Librarians connecting librarians
- Best of ALA
- Connections that matter

- Enables many possibilities
- Not Just Universities
- Librarians better together
- The best association
- Knowing what's happening

- The Coolest Librarians
- Making better possible
- Smart librarian warehouse
- My kinda people
- My professional posse

Value, contributions, and "in your own words"

The final three questions are even more open-ended and focus on the members' perception of ACRL's value, their campus contributions as an academic librarian, and a response to the prompt "in your own words." The things identified as most valued by MOTW can be categorized into four broad categories: professional development opportunities, networking with colleagues, leadership experience opportunities, and ACRL publications (e.g., blogs, journals, listservs, and toolkits). Elements from each category, and often multiple categories, are mentioned by at least one-third of all respondents. These categories of values align with the findings of the 2018 ACRL membership survey.[4] Awards, funding, and scholarships combine to form a distant fifth category that appears in approximately 10% of all responses.

Literacy and access to information in all its forms is the most frequently cited contribution of academic librarians to campus. This includes a breadth of instruction, resources, and services in working with students and faculty. The information theme also appears frequently across the entire range of years. However, an interesting finding is that some of the words used to describe contributions to campus vary over the years in the number of sentences in which they occur. For instance, the words *find*, *help*, *librarianship*, *reference*, and *variety* appear more frequently in the early years of the blog. On the other hand, the words *data*, *mentor*, *research*, *support*, and *teaching* appear more frequently in recent years. There has also been a strong emergence of contributions in the realm of social justice and DEI starting around 2017.

Responses to the final prompt "in your own words" frequently reiterate or blend sentiments expressed in the previous two prompts. The responses express a love of their work and libraries in general, as well as the overall joy and sense of personal and professional fulfillment in working with their colleagues and patrons.

Conclusion

The MOTW section of *ACRL Insider* is a great tool to get to know other ACRL members. It highlights the diversity of membership and range of perspectives and tastes. It also brings out the wide variety of work that contributes to the field of academic librarianship. Libraries fulfill their mission of information access and professional development through a greater number of resources, services, processes, and workflows than almost any other area of campus. Libraries and librarians are both the academic and the cultural heart of higher education. ✳

Notes

1. "Member of the Week," *ACRL Insider* (blog), last updated January 23, 2023, https://acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/category/member-of-the-week/.

2.   Melissa L. Gold and Margaret G. Grotti, "Do Job Advertisements Reflect ACRL's Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators?: A Content Analysis," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 6 (2013): 558–65.; Triumph, Therese F. Triumph and Penny M. Beile, "The Trending Academic Library Job Market: An Analysis of Library Position Announcements from 2011 with Comparisons to 1996 and 1988," *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 6 (2015): 716–39; Yadav, Akhilesh K. S. Yadav, "Key Skills and Competencies of LIS Professionals in the Digital Library Environment: A Content Analysis of Job Advertisements," *Library Management* 43, no. 1 (2022): 50–65.

3.   Erica Ely, "Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Statements on Academic Library Websites," *Information Technology & Libraries* 40, no. 4 (2021): 1–22; Jylisa Doney, Olivia Wikle, and Jessica Martinez, "Likes, Comments, Views: A Content Analysis of Academic Library Instagram Posts," *Information Technology & Libraries* 39, no. 3 (2020): 1–15.

4.   Sheri Jacobs et al., Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) 2018 Membership Survey, Avenue M Group (2018): 13.