

What Is a Librarian?

In his book *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century*, Michael Gorman defines a librarian as a person who earns a master's-level education at an accredited school and receives on-the-job training, as well as carries out one or more of the following tasks:

- Selects materials and electronic resources
- Acquires the selected materials and resources
- Organizes and gives access to them
- Preserves and conserves them
- Assists library users
- Instructs library users
- Administers and manages the library, library personnel, services, and programs¹

Many librarians, though, perform these duties with neither a master's-level education in library and information science (LIS) nor school library media specialist credentials. Some of these non-degreed and noncredentialed librarians are even certified by their states as librarians or library directors. Aren't they librarians?

Why We Become Librarians

Why do we choose librarianship? Some people know they want to become librarians from a young age. They were read to as toddlers, attended library story hours, learned to love reading and

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discover the hidden joys in books, felt comfortable in the children's room of their local library, loved attending children's and teen programs as they were growing up, and maybe found a mentor in a librarian.

People interested in technology may aspire to be systems librarians. Inquisitive types may strive to be reference librarians, desiring to help people find information by using electronic databases, while others might long to contribute to the educational role of libraries as centers of lifelong learning in their communities. Future leaders in our profession may see themselves playing an instrumental role in the acquisition, collection, organization, retrieval, and dissemination of information. When *American Libraries* editor Leonard Kniffel asked a class of library school students at Dominican University what made them choose librarianship, he found that “they were attracted by the books, the place, the people, and the need to find a job worth doing.”²

How We Become Librarians

How do we become librarians? Those determined early on to become librarians proceed straight through school, graduating from high school and college and going directly to graduate school. Although this is the most straightforward path to librarianship, it is not the most common way people become librarians. For most of us it is a much longer and more circuitous road—in fact, librarianship may not even be our first career choice. Some people may earn their bachelor's degrees only to find out that there are no jobs available in their field or that they are not suited to that particular field. Those with bachelor's degrees in English, history, philosophy, religion, or fine arts, for example, often require advanced degrees to secure a job in their field, which are limited primarily to college or university teaching, research, or scholarly publishing positions. If you aren't interested in a lifetime of teaching or scholarly research

and publishing, you might start looking for another career. Librarianship attracts people with education, interests, and backgrounds in all subject areas. No specific undergraduate program of study is required for acceptance into library school, so people from many disciplines enter LIS graduate programs.

According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, librarian positions in most public, academic, and special libraries, as well as in some school libraries, require a master's degree in library science (MLS) or library and information science (MLIS). The U.S. government requires that the librarians it employs have an MLS or the equivalent in education and experience, while other employers often require librarians to be graduates of the more than 50 schools accredited by the American Library Association (ALA).³ The ALA website (www.ala.org) states that the educational requirements for a librarian position can span a large range:

- Four-year undergraduate degree in any field
- Master of library science (MLS) degree
- MLS degree from an ALA-accredited school
- ALA-accredited MLS degree plus a teaching certificate (often the case in school libraries) or an ALA-accredited MLS plus a second degree, for example, a law degree⁴

School media specialists (also known as school librarians or teacher-librarians) can pursue either an ALA-accredited master's degree or a master's degree in education with a specialty in school library media from an educational unit accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).⁵

Library School Education

Melvil Dewey founded the first library school in 1887 at the Columbia School of Library Economy in New York. Dewey pioneered

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the education of librarians, believing that the best way to prepare people for library work was through classroom instruction combined with practical work in a library. He helped to set standards for the profession of librarianship in terms of education, ethics, and the role of the librarian in society. Columbia admitted women to its first class, which was a point of contention with the trustees. This disagreement eventually resulted in the school's closing two years later and its move to the state library in Albany in 1889. The curriculum in early library schools emphasized technical subjects such as cataloging and bibliography.

Graduate-level education for librarians wasn't introduced until 1926, when the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago opened. The Carnegie Corporation provided funding for the school to create an advanced, research-oriented library school; its first graduates accepted positions as academic librarians, library school teachers, and deans. The need for this level of education was slow to be accepted by librarians; however, several important works and conferences on library education between 1936 and 1948 led to the consensus that professional librarians needed a graduate degree. Library education thrived in the 1950s and 1960s, when federal funding supported libraries, library schools, and students of librarianship to a greater degree than ever before. Libraries improved, the demand for librarians increased, and library school recruiters were busy enrolling new students. The 1970s were not so favorable for the profession, and in recent decades a number of library schools have closed.

Over the last 60 years, library science education has continuously adapted to the changing needs for library and information services. The increasing importance of library automation, electronic information systems, and online access to information has caused some changes in library school curricula, but ALA's Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies does not include a core curriculum. The

standards mention that curricula “encompass information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, selection, acquisition, organization and description, storage and retrieval, preservation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination, and management.”⁶ However, since these 14 elements aren’t defined, and the standards don’t mention which ones require greater emphasis, there are wide differences among ALA-accredited schools in how these areas are covered and what MLS librarians need to know.

Due to this lack of a common core curriculum in LIS education, graduates from ALA-accredited LIS programs aren’t mastering comparable skills. Some schools cover in a week what others take a semester to teach. This inability to define a core curriculum contributes to the difficulty in maintaining the status of librarianship as a profession. Other professions, such as medicine, nursing, dentistry, law, architecture, and real estate, have clearly defined standards, comparable certification exams from state to state, and minimum requirements for continuing education.

You can earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in library science, associate’s degrees, and certifications as a library assistant or library technician. Some states certify library media specialists, public librarians, and library directors. Continuing education, online education, and distance education opportunities have become more important than ever as a way to keep up with constant change, learn new skills, and acquire degrees and certificates. Today, you can earn LIS degrees and certifications wherever you may live.

Kinds of Librarians

Librarians are generally categorized according to the type of library in which they work:

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- *Public librarians* work in public libraries.
- *School librarians, library media specialists, and teacher-librarians* work in school libraries or media centers.
- *Academic librarians* work in college, university, or post-secondary school libraries.
- *Special librarians* work in specialized information centers such as corporate libraries, government agencies, military libraries, law libraries, art libraries, museum libraries, or medical libraries.

In larger organizations, librarians may specialize in technical services, administrative services, electronic services, or user services. In small libraries, librarians typically perform duties encompassing all aspects of librarianship. Some librarians choose to work with specific groups such as children, young adults, students, adults, or special populations.

What Is an Accidental Librarian?

ALA itself recognizes that the educational requirements for librarian positions do vary, including a four-year undergraduate degree in any field. In states where an MLS is not required to practice public librarianship, librarians—even library directors—without MLS degrees are common. Many smaller libraries, especially those in rural areas, have a difficult time filling librarian and library director positions. They often hire people with other degrees or equivalent experience. In many rural areas throughout the U.S., there is no MLS librarian to be found for miles. Even if there were, most small towns cannot afford (or are not willing to pay) an MLS librarian's salary. Many small communities cannot afford librarians with college degrees, much less those with graduate degrees in library science.

How I Discovered That Not All Librarians Have MLS Degrees

If you live in a part of the country that requires an MLS to be a librarian, it may come as a surprise to you that many librarians don't hold this advanced degree. I grew up in Massachusetts and New York, where it was commonly known that the way to become a librarian was to go to library school and earn an MLS. Before deciding to pursue librarianship as a career, I worked as a paraprofessional in a public library where the librarians all had MLS degrees. No one without a professional degree would consider calling herself a librarian. When I moved to New Mexico, I met many librarians; however, outside of the university it was rare to find one who had been to library school. There wasn't (and still isn't) a library school in New Mexico, and online degrees didn't exist at the time. Most of the librarians I met came to librarianship out of a love for their communities; they valued books and reading, recognized the power of information, and supported education and lifelong learning on behalf of their communities. Many of these librarians founded the first libraries in their communities, volunteering their time to do so, and some even used personal funds to purchase books for the libraries they started.

Librarians without MLS degrees are essentially accidental librarians—increasingly being hired as frontline librarians in libraries of all kinds and sizes, performing duties that were formerly carried out exclusively by professional librarians, while MLS librarians can be found working behind the scenes in management and administrative positions, including technical services, marketing, systems administration, and personnel. It is not uncommon to see advertisements for librarian jobs in large city systems that require a four-year degree in any field plus library experience, while an ALA-accredited MLS degree is listed only as

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being “preferred.” A recently posted Assistant Librarian position in my area required only a high school diploma or GED, plus two years of postsecondary education.

Throughout this book, successful accidental librarians (such as Linda Hardy Dydo in the sidebar on this page) share their stories of how they found success and what they do in their jobs. I hope they will motivate, inspire, and encourage you to learn more about librarianship as you move ahead on your chosen path.

Linda Hardy Dydo, Assistant Library Director, Los Gatos (CA) Public Library

I had recently moved to San Jose, and I was looking for a job. I went to the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) to look at the job boards and to CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act), a federal employment program that was just starting. I registered, and they sent me out on interviews.

My first interview was with the police department as a record keeper. Before the interview, I sat down on the curb and cried. I was a secret anarchist, an anti-war protestor, a free-love proponent. How could I work for the cops? I wiped my face and went into the station, but it was too late. Someone else got the job. Yahoo!

My second interview was with the library department. I got hired two minutes after the oral interview. I didn't even make it to the elevator. I was a library aide! Promotions followed—to clerk, then library assistant (leaving the CETA program and entering civil service at this point). Librarian tests were scheduled, and no degree was necessary, so as not to disqualify all the students from San Jose State library school (which was having accreditation challenges at the time). I

placed high on the list, and I was respected for my work ethic, attitude, and skills. I worked my way through Children's Librarian, Teen Librarian, Branch Manager, Head of the IT Department, and Head of Reference at Main. I was part of the team that established the agreement between San Jose Public and San Jose State to occupy and run a new eight-story library together, and part of the team that implemented this merger.

Thirty-two years later, here I am, the Assistant Director at Los Gatos Public Library. I am proud of myself and proud of a profession that could look beyond credentials.

The Facts About Accidental Librarians

Accidental librarians may be more numerous—and important—than you think:

- For decades, great research libraries have hired scholars over degreed librarians for director positions.
- Many deans of library school programs do not hold MLS degrees.
- No special qualifications are prescribed by law for Librarians of Congress, who have come from the varied professions of newspaperman, novelist, poet, physician, and diplomat. In 1899, at the urging of the ALA, President McKinley appointed the first experienced librarian, Herbert Putnam, to the position of Librarian of Congress. L. Quincy Mumford, Librarian of Congress from 1954 through 1974, was the first Librarian of Congress to have graduated from library school.
- The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) offers postdoctoral fellowships in research

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libraries to humanities scholars to develop meaningful linkages between disciplinary scholarship, libraries, archives, and evolving digital tools. Study in the area of LIS is not a requirement for this fellowship.

- The Virginia code does not require the state librarian to have an MLS. Sandra Treadway served as Deputy State Librarian at the Library of Virginia for more than a decade and became the Virginia State Librarian before she had a library degree. Treadway “learned about library operations the old-fashioned way—climbing the ladder to the top one rung at a time.” She never intended to do library work.⁷

As you can see, many accidental librarians are both accomplished and prominent.

According to *Public Libraries in the United States*, only 67.9 percent of FTE (full-time equivalent) public librarians in the U.S. hold ALA-accredited MLS degrees.⁸ Table 1.1 lists the states in which less than half of the total FTE public librarians have ALA-accredited MLS degrees. Table 1.2 lists the states where more than half of the total FTE public librarians hold ALA-accredited MLS degrees.

As you can see, the situation varies considerably between Montana, where 20.9 percent of FTE public librarians hold an ALA-accredited MLS, and Hawaii, where 99.7 percent hold such a degree.

In most states, school librarians (also known as teacher-librarians or school media specialists) are not required to have MLS degrees. School librarians are usually required to have an undergraduate degree in education, with a school library media specialist certification. This certification requires coursework in library science or passing a qualifying test. School librarians are certified at the state level, and each state has its own requirements.

Often an organization or corporation will add a librarian's duties to the job of a secretary or administrative assistant when materials

Table 1.1 States in which less than half of public librarians have ALA-accredited MLS degrees (Data from Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2004. National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, DC, 2006.)

State	Total FTE Librarians (percentage)
Montana	20.9
Wyoming	21.5
North Dakota	22.6
Kentucky	23.8
Iowa	25.6
Mississippi	26.3
Vermont	26.9
Nebraska	27.2
West Virginia	27.2
South Dakota	28.9
Oklahoma	33.6
Idaho	33.7
Kansas	36.8
New Hampshire	37.2
Alabama	38.4
Arkansas	40.3
Louisiana	41.2
New Mexico	43.2
Maine	45.6
Tennessee	49.4

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Table 1.2 States in which more than half of public librarians have ALA-accredited MLS degrees (Data from Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2004. National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, DC, 2006.)

State	Total FTE Librarians (percentage)
Delaware	50.7
Maryland	52.0
Utah	53.5
Wisconsin	53.6
Missouri	55.0
Alaska	58.1
Illinois	62.8
Massachusetts	64.9
Indiana	65.0
Minnesota	65.5
Pennsylvania	67.7
Michigan	68.0
Colorado	70.0
Nevada	71.8
Texas	71.8
Ohio	73.3
Oregon	75.3
Connecticut	76.3
Arizona	78.3
South Carolina	78.9
Florida	83.4
Virginia	83.9
New York	84.0

Rhode Island	85.5
District of Columbia	88.5
California	93.2
Washington	94.3
Georgia	95.1
North Carolina	95.4
New Jersey	99.6
Hawaii	99.7

purchased for shared use by employees have accumulated to the point that they are no longer accessible. In such a case, management realizes the need for someone to organize and manage the collection, track usage, and retrieve information. They may not recognize that this is a “librarian” position, or that the job requires any special skill or knowledge.

Other special librarians, such as church or synagogue librarians, often begin as volunteers. Many prison librarians are not required to hold MLS degrees; some hold the title of Library Aide or Library Technician, but are actually running their libraries single-handedly.

Because academic librarians work in an environment that values the degree, postsecondary, college, or university libraries are less likely to hire librarians without MLS degrees, making it less common to find accidental librarians in academic situations.

Mary McKinley Ingraham, University Librarian at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, driving force of the Maritime Library Institute and editor of its *Bulletin*, said in a 1939 editorial, “There is no doubt that specialized training is a necessity for most of us who would work in libraries, but is there any absolute norm by which we may determine the method or content of that training? Despite the unquestioned value of the many schools of library service, we have to admit that the greatest librarians in the world, from

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Zenodatus at Alexandria to Putnam at Washington, were not graduates of library schools.” She was careful to stress that librarianship requires education and training, calling it a “learned profession,” but suggested that this training can take place in many contexts and by diverse means.⁹

What Makes a Librarian?

By now you can see that there really are no universal criteria in the U.S. for determining what makes a librarian. It’s no wonder that librarians have such varying levels of education, experience, and knowledge about library and information science. Librarians come from all subject backgrounds and educational levels, and have varying degrees of library experience.

**Eileen Gilbert, Director,
Boscawen (NH) Public Library**

I’m so glad this author has acknowledged the fact that not everyone working in a library has an MLS! I would like to earn mine fairly soon, but I’m enjoying my work without it. I am 26 years old and the Library Director in a town of around 3,500. I worked as a page at a different library in high school and as a student aide in my college library. I really enjoyed both jobs and when I graduated with a degree in English I knew I didn’t want to teach. In my current job I plan programming, work the circulation desk, order and process books, and shelve.

Although some states and schools have established standards, with very few exceptions these are voluntary or optional. Some state standards can easily be met with very little education, experience, or training, and it may be possible to be certified as a librarian or

library director in your state with no library education or experience. If you don't qualify as a librarian in one state, you can go to another state and easily become certified as a library director there. Some people assume that passing their state certification test is equivalent to an MLS, but even if you have an MLS there is no common basic foundation of knowledge you are required to master in graduate school. Confused?

The lack of national standards in the U.S. for qualifying librarians creates a chaotic professional atmosphere. Disagreements about who is and isn't a librarian abound. We engage in ongoing discussions about the state of LIS education and our profession, "illegal librarians," and what makes a "real" librarian. In this atmosphere, insisting that someone has to have an MLS to be a librarian is unrealistic: There are plenty of practicing librarians who do not have the degree.

Unfortunately, when nondegreed librarians reject learning from MLS librarians because they feel threatened by them, and when MLS librarians reject nondegreed librarians because of the belief that they are not "real" librarians, they overlook some of their greatest opportunities to learn from each other, advance our profession, and improve our libraries. Misunderstandings on both sides of this issue abound, causing our profession to be fragmented. We cannot afford a "librarian vs. librarian" mentality. We are facing some of the most challenging and exciting changes in our field, and this is the time to join together and move forward. Degreed and nondegreed librarians alike are responsible for creating and upholding the standards of our profession, and for valuing librarianship and each other.

What Do Librarians Do?

The primary functions of a librarian are to:

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- Collect information
- Acquire information
- Organize information
- Retrieve information
- Disseminate information based on the needs of the populations we serve

These five functions create a foundation for the practice of librarianship, and understanding them as such helps librarians stay focused on our main purpose. As our profession rapidly changes and evolves it is essential for us to be grounded in a set of core functions that we can easily apply to new developments in the information field. Brief descriptions of these functions follow, and each will be covered in detail in Part II of this book.

Collect Information

Librarians develop collections to meet the information needs of their communities. They must constantly assess their community's changing information needs and collect, as well as deselect, materials and resources based on those needs.

Acquire Information

Librarians evaluate, select, and purchase or lease materials and information resources to meet the information needs of the populations they serve.

Organize Information

Librarians organize information by (1) classifying it according to subject, and (2) cataloging it by describing it in a way that makes the information easily accessible. Librarians also make library resources, services, and programs available electronically in a way that users can easily access and utilize.

Retrieve Information

Librarians find information to meet the needs of library users. This involves analyzing users' needs to determine what it is they want and at what level, and searching for and extracting information in multiple formats from multiple sources. Librarians also assist people in finding the information they need.

Disseminate Information

Librarians play an important role in facilitating the transfer of knowledge and ideas from the sources of the knowledge and ideas to the people who need and want the information. Librarians do this by synthesizing and delivering information to people who request it in a form that is useful to them.

What Else Do Librarians Do?

In the process of acquiring, collecting, organizing, retrieving, and disseminating information, librarians also:

- Assist and instruct
- Provide services and programs
- Utilize technology
- Preserve and conserve library materials

In the process of doing our work, librarians are also responsible for upholding the basic principles of intellectual freedom, or the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. ALA's Library Bill of Rights affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas and articulates basic principles to guide their services. Librarians support the Freedom to Read and the Freedom to View under the Constitution of the United States, and we are responsible for advocating for these rights.

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Additionally, we must be aware of legislation that affects libraries or that may threaten these basic rights. We need to take responsibility for acting in support of the freedom of information on behalf of libraries and the citizens of our country. We are expected to protect the creators of works being shared in our libraries by seeing to it that the Copyright Act is observed (see Appendix C).

Assist and Instruct

Librarians play an instructional role, which includes teaching users how to access information, synthesize it, and use it. They also teach users how to effectively use library tools, technology, and resources. The desired result is for users to be able to search for information, analyze it, synthesize it, and use it on their own in the future. Librarians also develop content and design materials for instructional purposes.

Provide Services and Programs

Librarians plan, budget, and manage programs such as story hours, literacy skills classes, book groups, programs for all ages, and educational classes based on the needs of the community. Other services librarians provide include reference service and readers' advisory service.

Utilize Technology

Because technology has become such a large part of information storage and delivery, librarians evaluate information technologies; develop, design, and manage digital access and content; use technology appropriately and effectively; administer and manage computer systems; and train users on using technology to retrieve information and for other purposes.

Preserve and Conserve

Librarians are responsible for maximizing the life of library materials by preserving and conserving them.

What Do Librarians Need to Know?

Librarians need to know the following to be successful:

- The philosophy, theory, principles, and techniques of acquiring, collecting, organizing, retrieving, and disseminating information and how to apply them and adapt them to constantly changing environments
- The role of computers, the Internet, and emerging technologies in libraries
- Basic library materials and resources in all formats and how to use them
- Methods and techniques for researching, analyzing, synthesizing, and delivering information
- Reference interviewing techniques
- Community needs assessment methods
- Library planning processes and methods
- Budgeting methods
- Policy creation and development methods
- Management methods

What Skills Do Librarians Need?

In recent years, the LIS field and the practice of librarianship have undergone tremendous changes due to the growth of information technology and the resulting changes in the methods of acquiring, collecting, organizing, retrieving, and disseminating information. There has been a fundamental shift in libraries from ownership to access, and a corresponding shift in the skills librarians need.¹⁰ Today, librarians not only need to understand the basics of managing and disseminating information, they also need to:

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- See the big picture
- Make things happen
- Remove barriers
- Create vision and mission
- Work independently and on teams
- Exercise initiative and independent judgment
- Think creatively and innovatively
- Create partnerships and alliances
- Evaluate, select, and apply new technologies
- Troubleshoot technology
- Communicate clearly and effectively verbally and in writing
- Seek additional funding to meet unmet community needs
- Write grant proposals
- Develop new systems and adapt old ones to new situations
- Work with diverse populations
- Teach

What Are the Characteristics of Librarians?

Librarians are:

- Change agents
- Proactive
- Creative

- Inquisitive
- Initiators
- On the leading edge
- Customer service oriented
- Collaborators
- Risk-takers
- Active communicators
- Flexible
- Advocates
- Continuous lifelong learners
- Leaders
- Networkers
- Visionaries
- Team players
- Analytical thinkers
- Strategic planners

(This list is inspired by SLA's Competencies for Information Professionals, www.sla.org/content/learn/comp2003/index.cfm, and ALA's Accreditation Draft Core Competencies, www.ala.org/ala/accreditationb/Draft_Core_Competencies_07_05.pdf.)

Don't be shocked if you are beginning to realize that there is much more to librarianship, what librarians do, what they need to know, and the skills and qualities they need to possess than you previously thought. You aren't alone. Perhaps you haven't had a positive librarian role model or mentor, you didn't work in a library before becoming a librarian, or you were never in a position where you learned what is really involved in librarianship. You came into

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this profession accidentally, or as a second career, without the benefit of education or professional experience, easily meeting your state's qualifications (if any!) to practice librarianship. You thought, "The state certified me, so I must know all there is to know about being a librarian." Although this is not uncommon, it is a mistake to think that passing a certification test or meeting your state's qualifications to be a library director is the same as earning a graduate degree in library and information science. It's not quite that simple.

When you accepted your job as a librarian for your municipality, school, organization, or corporation, you became professionally obligated to perform your job competently and to continue to learn about librarianship. Most of you have taken this responsibility seriously and have worked hard to live up to the standards of our profession. A few of you, though, may find it easy and safe to keep doing what you've always done, resisting change and new ideas proposed by staff members. Over the years you may have surrounded yourselves with supportive friends, volunteers, and library users who praise you for the good job you are doing—but do they know what librarians do? You might attend your state library association conference every year and an occasional local workshop to fulfill continuing education requirements, but do you challenge yourself, apply new concepts, or plan to change? Do you wonder why you should put in all that hard work to become a better librarian when things are fine just the way they are?

If this sounds at all like you, it is time to take notice. You have an obligation to an entire profession and to the people you serve to take the next step. Librarianship is a dynamic, exciting, and challenging profession with room for many great librarians. By joining together to establish a common understanding of our profession and our role as librarians, we will all help ensure the survival of librarianship and libraries.

Exercise 1.1

Answer the following questions:

What are the 5 primary functions of a librarian?

What other things do librarians do to support these functions?

What skills and characteristics must librarians have?

Have you ever learned anything from an MLS librarian that helped you in your job?

If you were to make one improvement or change as a librarian, what would it be?

Endnotes

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