
ALA-APA Support Staff Certification

RUSA's Role

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As I put pen to paper to write this column (yes sometimes the ideas still start that way for me), the ghosts and goblins are at the door. Perhaps that's not such a strange metaphor for this column because the idea of support staff certification is one that, like Halloween ghosts, has visited the American Library Association (ALA) in the past, only to disappear from view again and again. ALA has been discussing a certification program for library support staff for more than twenty years.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF ALA INVOLVEMENT IN CERTIFICATION

In 1991, in Issue Paper #1—the first of ten issue papers reporting on the World Book–ALA Goal Award Project on Library Support Staff (LSS)—Kathleen Weibel wrote that, “Certification of library paraprofessionals or support staff has been proposed as a means of recognizing those who have attained a certain level of knowledge or skill.”¹ Throughout Weibel's issue papers and in much of the literature on support staff certification that follows, there is a focus on certification for support staff that seems to hinge on the issue of certification as achievement-based, and not on the advantage libraries could gain from certification that is patron or service based. What do users gain when support staff are well trained? Why certification? How to accomplish it?

Competency statements for librarians are one way of measuring performance against a set standard, but development of those competencies is a complicated issue. The literature reveals that while there are examples of competency documents, little has been written about the process of developing a competencies document. Competency documents completed following Weibel's issue papers were really a blend of existing standards and local practices that could be adapted to other libraries and not competency based.

From 1985–1989 I served as a member of the State Library of Iowa—Continuing Education Certification Advisory Committee—that outlined the path for certification of public librarians for the State of Iowa.² This advisory committee worked with Debra Wilcox Johnson, who was then at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, to develop a program of certification for public librarians that has been continually adapted and is still in use today.³

In 2001, the Iowa State Library began the process of identifying competencies for both support staff and professional staff, beginning with collection development competencies for bibliographers and followed by competencies for reference. In 2001, a committee of four began the task of developing

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competency statements for the bibliographers at Iowa State University (ISU). These competencies were then used in a variety of ways: to serve as guidelines for training new librarians, to serve as yardsticks to measure the progress of continuing librarians, and to direct the need for additional training and guidance of individual bibliographer growth.⁴ After the collection development competencies were completed, competencies for reference professional staff were constructed. Following this I developed competencies for use with reference support staff.

The State of Iowa and ISU are not alone in their attempts at developing certification or competencies. Two RUSA members have been selected; I will serve with Jeannie Alexander from the Bucks County Free Library in Pennsylvania, as members of the ALA Support Staff Certification Project Task Force that will serve as an advisory board to study support staff certification as a national issue. ALA created the task force to develop competencies for support staff that can be used in all types of libraries so that the ALA-Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) can best serve library users at all levels in all types of libraries. For those of you who feel that training for support staff somehow devalues your MLS, I would say that developing competencies is not about a degree but about service to our users. This task force is about using competencies to define how to fill the gaps so that users are best served at all levels.

CONFERENCE WITHIN A CONFERENCE IN NEW ORLEANS

In June 2006 ALA-APA held a support staff Conference within a Conference.⁵ Beginning with this conference, ALA-APA once again examined the issue of support staff certification, this time with an emphasis on beginning with competencies as the basis for the discussion. How is this different and why might this make a difference to us and our libraries? Perhaps if the emphasis is on competencies, more emphasis will be placed on the issue of roles of support staff and not on how support staff impinge on professional librarian roles.

COMPETENCIES—WHAT ALREADY EXISTS?

There seems to be a lot of information in the literature on technology competencies and reference competencies, however, often what these articles are really talking about is job description and not competencies. Perhaps the best example of competencies that is already available is the “LTA Competencies” developed by the Connecticut Library Association, Support Staff Section.⁶ These competencies are divided into five categories.

1. General competencies for all library staff
2. Personal and professional competencies for all library staff
3. Technology competencies for all library staff

4. Public services competencies for public services staff
5. Technical services competencies for technical services staff

For the ALA-APA project, Nancy Bolt, a private consultant, has been employed to produce the following anticipated results:

- seek sponsorship of one or more ALA divisions for an LSS Certification Program ;
- build a consortium of interested ALA divisions, round tables, committees, and other organizations to form an LSS Certification Task Force and move forward on the project;
- negotiate a relationship with Western Council of State Libraries to cooperate with them on an LSS Certification Program;
- develop competencies as a basis, and initiate discussion in the LSS Certification Task Force on a final set of competencies;
- develop an implementation model for ALA;
- develop a cost model for ALA.⁷

WHO IS THE TARGET AUDIENCE?

The target audience is made up of LSS who would like to increase their knowledge of a broad aspect of library service and who would like additional training to be eligible for additional responsibility in the library. The level of further responsibility would be the decision of an individual library's administration. LSS who participate in the program could come from public, academic, or special libraries. At this point, school libraries are not a target audience. The proposed program is voluntary, however, states that currently have a certification program might consider adopting the ALA model. The target audience in this project is conceived as larger, and in fact includes any LSS member who desires additional information to advance in a local library situation. A common concern at almost all unit meetings is the possible devaluation of the master's degree in library science. Why wouldn't financially strapped library governing bodies and managers hire LSS (once they are certified by ALA-APA) instead of librarians with master's degrees? While this might be viewed as sacrificing trained LSS to protect professional librarians, the concern is real and will likely be raised in every venue where this is discussed, particularly in the ALA Council. Does this point of view run counter to the practical reality that exists in the field where libraries are changing, the requirements for library staff are changing, and more libraries are hiring LSS?

SPECIFIC GOAL OF THIS PROJECT

LSS will be able to participate in a national voluntary certification program that is endorsed by ALA, ALA-APA, and the participating divisions of ALA. Divisions will play varying

roles both as members of the task force and as purveyors of the certification units and courses.

Vision and Mission

The LSS Certification Task Force was assembled with the following responsibilities:

- discuss major issues relating to LSS certification;
- discuss competencies for LSS;
- develop a model of how a certification program might work;
- make a recommendation for future action.⁸

The final charge to the task force added:

- discuss and outline a potential framework that would result in an LSS Certification Program to be sponsored by ALA-APA;
- discuss and recommend ways to address issues and problems raised by interested parties;
- review potential competencies, both basic and specialty, that could be part of an ALA-APA certification program;
- participate in meetings at ALA Midwinter and a spring retreat in Chicago to discuss recommendations for the project.⁹

In ALA's most recent strategic plan, "ALAhead 2010," this issue of LSS certification is addressed directly. Section Goals II: Education states that "through its leadership, ALA ensures the highest quality graduate and continuing education opportunities for librarians and library staff." Objective 4 further states that ALA will "establish standards for educational programs for library support staff."¹⁰ In addition, one of the recommendations from the 3rd Congress of Professional Education is:

ALA, in cooperation with Library Support Staff Information Round Table (LSSIRT) and other appropriate stakeholders, should study the feasibility of developing a voluntary national support staff certification program administered by the ALA-APA. Successful state models should be studied and access, practicality, and quality should be included in the considerations.¹¹

WHY A CERTIFICATION PROGRAM FOR LSS?

An LSS Certification Program has benefits for the individual, the library, and the public.

Benefits to the individual:

- LSS have a desire to improve their understanding of library operation;
- LSS would like to be eligible for advancement within the library structure as determined by the individual library; and

- LSS believe that their performance is instrumental in quality public service and would like to deliver the best service possible.

Benefits to the institution:

- staff who are knowledgeable about broad aspects of library operation;
- staff who might be able to serve the library in a number of different positions; and
- staff who have demonstrated ability and willingness to accept higher level responsibility.

Benefits to the library user:

- library users served by the best-trained staff possible; and
- better support of the library's mission and goals based on fuller staff understanding.¹²

While aimed toward public librarians, these competencies will be broad enough that they can serve as a starting point for discussions about competencies for LSS in general. The competencies will be developed by doing a study of existing competencies, vetting them through staff of public libraries and state library agencies, and coming to agreement on a set of competencies that can lead to a general understanding of library service.

ISSUES FOR SUPPORT STAFF CERTIFICATION

Assessment of Learning

Assessment is actually two issues. The first is how to actually assess whether someone participating in a certification program is meeting the competencies. If the model used is that of the County Public Library Association program for public libraries, then the assessment of competencies would be done by the course providers and would be part of the approval process for providers. A second aspect of assessment that was raised by LSS is the idea of credit for time of service; however, the goal of competencies is clearly about meeting those competencies and not doing a job for a lengthy period of time. This does raise the issue of whether the certification is for how well you can do your job (which would honor past experience) or for learning something new (which would not). Clearly this program is about learning something new, so this issue has not come up.

The approach that has been used by the states of Iowa and Minnesota requires a certain number of competencies and a certain number of contact hours for LSS to be certified. A participant can demonstrate (usually through assignments or portfolios) that they already know something, and they get credit for the competency but they do not get any credit for hours. Participants still have to take the required number of hours for certification, but they can concentrate on areas

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where they do not have experience. This is one positive approach to dealing with the issue of time served.

Tangible Rewards

Another more difficult issue raised by LSS is tangible rewards. Some members of the LSS community have indicated that they would not support a national certification program because there were no guaranteed rewards at the end. Some persons also want ALA-APA to require that certification program participants be able to get a promotion or a raise at the end, but this is not possible. Because the whole ALA-APA program is intended to be voluntary, unless a state or library system chooses to make it mandatory, this issue is not one the task force will address. Still, this is a concern.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The advantages to an LSS certification program based on competencies is clarity of the known—persons taking and completing Course X will have competencies and skills A, B, and D. These competencies would move from one library position to another. The disadvantages are few and seem to hinge on the concerns about advancement and credit for time in position—issues the task force understands but will not address because they do not affect the development of competencies.

RUSA'S ROLE IN SUPPORT STAFF CERTIFICATION

There are two opportunities for RUSA in support staff certifications: The first is as part of the advisory task force to define the competencies for certification, and the second is as purveyors of the courses that can be offered as part of the certification process. RUSA has much to offer in the way of expertise and potential education for certification. In addition, RUSA can reach out to support staff in a more significant way, make support staff issues more integral in RUSA programming, and also make sure support staff are represented as members of RUSA committees.

CONCLUSION

It is not often that the opportunity to get involved in something so important to our mission presents itself at just the

crucial juncture. As RUSA reaches out to support staff, it will, at the 2007 Midwinter Meeting, consider a reduced dues category for support staff and explore further ways to deliver continuing education to this audience, both electronically and during ALA conferences. Currently, RUSA offers a variety of Web courses that could be adapted to meet certification competencies, such as “The Reference Interview” and “Readers’ Advisory 101.” The challenge is coming; how will RUSA rise to meet it? If you have opinions on this issue or insights to offer, please contact me directly or share your ideas and concerns with others on the RUSA Blog, www.rusablog.org.

References and Notes

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