Taking Charge Of Your LIS Career: The Library Support Staff Certification Program Of The American Library Association

Nancy Bolt
Nancy Bolt & Associates, LSSC Co-Director (2007 – 2014)

Abstract:

The American Library Association believes that the library profession is changing and library paraprofessionals, those without an MLIS, have an increasingly important role to play in the delivery of library services. The Library Support Staff Certification Program (LSSC) was developed to support this role. This presentation will review changes in the role of paraprofessionals, the background of LSSC, LSSC requirements, the path to certification and an evaluation of the first four years of the program.

The Library Support Staff Certification Program is open to anyone without a MLIS, whether or not they are currently working in a library. Candidates must achieve six out of ten competency sets. Candidates may achieve a competency set by successfully completing an LSSC approved course or by submitting a successful portfolio. An ALA website (American Library Association ... n.d.) provides complete information on the LSSC with helpful tips for candidates. A full evaluation of LSSC, prepared by the author as Project Manager and submitted to the funding body by the Project Director, Keith Fiels, was completed in the spring of 2014. The Report showed that LSSC had a positive impact on candidates, their libraries, and the provision overall. (Fiels 2014)

> *The personal satisfaction I have as a graduate [of LSSC] is a treasure and an investment in myself that I will always be so very proud of. I encourage all paraprofessionals to pursue this certification as I believe it serves to set us apart as knowledgeable and informed individuals serious about our profession, library support staff. And I agree the finances can pose some issues, but I also agree the benefits will be well worth it over time. LSSC candidate (Fiels 2014).*

Keywords: Paraprofessionals, American Library Association

Introduction

In the United States, libraries tend to be staffed primarily by two levels of employees: "professional", meaning those who have a Master's degree in Library and Information Science (MLIS), and those who do not. Those who do not have various titles (over 200 in one survey) but the generic term is "para-professional."

The Library Support Staff Certification (LSSC) program was created to provide library staff that do not have an MLIS, with recognition that they are valued in the library profession. It results in support staff receiving recognition as Certified Library Support Staff. Since its inception in 2010, almost 500 support staff have enrolled in the program and 106 have graduated.

The overarching goals of LSSC are:

1. To provide a career path for library support staff (LSS) to achieve education and recognition for their contribution to the library profession;

2. To improve library service by increasing the number of LSS who achieve certification by demonstrating nationally accepted competencies of library service. (Fiels 2007).

Origin of LSSC

In 2003, the American Library Association held the third of three Congresses on Professional Education (COPE). The first two, on initial library education and on continuing professional education, focused on people obtaining a master's degree in library science and then continuing their professional development. The third, COPE III, was a Focus on Support Staff Issues. One of the key recommendations emerging from COPE III was:

> ALA, in cooperation with LSSIRT [the library support staff roundtable in ALA] and other appropriate stakeholders, should study the feasibility of developing a voluntary national support staff certification program administered by ALA. Successful state models should be studied and access, practicality, and quality should be included in the considerations. (American Library Association 2003).

It took three years for the ALA Executive Board to act on this recommendation. In 2006 Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels engaged Nancy Bolt (Nancy Bolt & Associates) and Karen Strege, formerly Montana State Librarian, to explore the need and interest for a support staff certification project. The needs assessment did indeed show that there was interest,

leading to a three-year grant in 2007 from the national Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to establish the Library Support Staff Certification Program. A second grant was received in 2010 to continue the program.

LSSC was approved by the ALA Executive Board in 2010 as an official certification program of the American Library Association.

The changing role of library support staff in US libraries

> I believe that an LSSC would finally legitimize and accredit the vital contributions made by support staff which are frequently not recognized as important by librarians. I heard librarians say "you can get library support staff anywhere", I realized that many librarians have not idea of the depth and breadth of our knowledge and the specialized work we do. LSSC is the support staff's "diploma" that we can take anywhere we go. (LSSC candidate) (Fiels 2014).

There was a time, not too long ago, when library support staff (LSS) were not allowed to interact with library users except at the circulation desk, where support staff checked out the books. LSS were not allowed to staff the reference desk or do children's story hours or manage library branches. In the past few years, this has changed dramatically.

LSS are the largest segment of workers in public and academic libraries and comprise nearly two-thirds of all workers in public libraries and one-third in academic libraries. (Holton 2006; IMLS 2007). As the quote above shows, many support staff are extremely talented and willing to accept responsibility and leadership positions in libraries (US Census 2009); as the economic crisis in the United States forced libraries to reconsider their staff pattern, support staff began to perform roles previously done by librarians with an MLIS. The growth of technology in libraries also brought in staff with special technical abilities, often without a master's degree. Finally, libraries realized that, for people coming into the library, any staff they interact with is a "librarian." This was particularly true for immigrants to the US looking for library staff who "look like them", who might speak the same language and have similar experiences. . As the role of support staff changed, so did the role of the librarian with a master's degree, giving MLIS librarians more responsibility for program planning and outreach roles. It is important to recognize that many library support staff have made a career of library work, are committed to the profession and are dedicated to serving library users.

LSSC competencies

> I have a great passion for libraries, for what they are and what they stand for.   I feel my participation in LSSC will allow me to learn new methods, procedures, and techniques to share my love for the library with others and keep a library current and a needed part of the community as a whole. (LSSC Candidate) (Fiels 2014).

The first step in creating LSSC was to establish criteria for certification, which led to a lengthy discussion by the Project's Advisory Committee (AC) about the basic skills that an LSS should have, what skills might be optional and what skills might be required.   The AC wanted the competencies to be appropriate for all types of libraries: academic, public, school and special. The AC realized that people in graduate library school typically take a basic library course and then choose a specific area of the library profession as their career. The goal was for support staff to have a similar option in certification.

The AC first proposed 10 competency sets; each set with specific competencies included in the set. The AC circulated the competencies and solicited feedback from the entire membership of the American Library Association (ALA).   Three thousand comments were received. Basically, the comments supported the overall topics encompassed in the 10 competency sets. However, they had several suggestions about the specific competencies incorporated in each set.   The most common critique was that all of the sets should include competencies that addressed library service to people with disabilities and particularly adaptive services to serve them.   Another common theme was to base library services on the needs of the community as a whole and of individual groups within the community. "Community" was defined broadly as a geographic community or an academic community such as served by academic and school libraries, or a corporate or institutional community such as a business, hospital or government agency.

The ten final competency sets were:

<u>Required</u>
Foundations of Library Services – Basic tenets of library service such as access to information, freedom of information, copyright, ethics, and customer service

Communication and Teamwork -- Communicating with library users and other staff; working on a team with other library staff or stakeholders to better serve library users

Technology -- Use of technology in serving library users, understanding of basic technology

Electives

Access Services -- Circulation, interlibrary loan, customer service

Adult Readers' Advisory Services -- How to find books, music, or films of interest to library users and to meet their needs

Cataloging and Classification – Basics of copy cataloging and collection classification systems

Collections – Basics of collection selection, acquisition, processing, discarding, and repair

Reference and Information Services -- Reference collections and techniques in determining library user information needs

Supervision and Management – How to plan for library services, manage a library operation, and supervise staff

Youth Services – Library services to both children and teenagers

After much discussion, the AC decided that to be certified the candidates had to achieve all three of the required competency sets and three that they chose from the electives for a total of six. The AC felt this was a broad enough spectrum of library knowledge for certification.

In 2012, after the LSSC program had been in operation for over two years, the AC decided to review the competencies. As a result of this review, the AC determined that there was confusion and duplication in the competencies within the competency sets. The AC organized review teams who looked at all the competency sets and decided, first, to maintain the ten competency sets and second, to revise and update the competencies within the sets. These were approved by the ALA Executive Board in October 2012.

Program Organization

> I am part of the management team and [LSSC] has helped me tremendously! Getting a better understanding of the "overall picture" has really helped me in decision making. Please don't see this as a program that is for non-management. This is for all staff in the library that do not have the MLS/MLIS. (LSSC candidate) (Fiels 2014).

The Advisory Committee (AC) that worked to develop the competencies also worked to develop all the aspects of implementing the LSSC program. They had to answer such questions as:

> How does LSSC recognize the existing knowledge and skills library of support staff?
> Should LSSC organize teaching new knowledge and skills?
>> If not, who should teach these courses and how do does the AC know that they cover the competencies?
> How can candidates be recruited for the program?
> Who should be eligible to enter the LSSC program?
> Will the state libraries (one in each state in the US) be able to help?
> Who else might be our partners in this effort?
> What should be the cost of the certification process?

The AC tackled these issues over a two-year period before it was ready to go to the American Library Association Executive Board.

The AC first realized that the library staff that would enroll in this program most likely had significant experience in some of the competencies – but not in all. The AC wanted a way to recognize existing knowledge and skills and also provide a way for candidates to gain new knowledge in the competency sets in which they had little or no experience.

The solution was a two-path method towards certification. Candidates who had knowledge and skills in a competency set were able to submit a portfolio that demonstrated their ability. Candidates who did not choose to do a portfolio could take courses provided by LSSC approved providers. Both of these approaches are discussed below.

Portfolios

The portfolio had to cover all of the competencies in a competency set. The AC were concerned that the candidates might not know how to best demonstrate these abilities so the AC developed "Portfolio Development Suggestions" for each of the competencies in a competency set. These were kinds of assignment that the candidates could complete. For example, Competency 2 in the Foundations of Library Service Competency Set reads:

LSS know the ethics and values of the profession, including an understanding of the Library Bill of Rights, the ALA Code of Ethics, freedom of information, confidentiality of library records, and privacy issues. (LSSC 2012)

There are two portfolio development suggestions (PDS) and the candidates were urged to select one. This is the first PDS:

> Review the Library Bill of Rights, the ALA Code of Ethics, and any legislation in your state that relates to privacy of library records. Find out if your library's governing body has adopted the Library Bill of Rights and the ALA Code of Ethics. If it has not, why not? Describe a situation in which you have or might have used these documents and laws (LSSC 2012).

For the first six years of the project, there was no cost to students to have a portfolio reviewed because the project was federally funded. Only 16 candidates out of 468 choose to prepare a portfolio but collectively they prepared 42 portfolios in different competency sets.

Bolt (2012) surveyed candidates who had knowledge and experience in a competency set and asked why they did not choose to do a portfolio:

- Wanted an update or to refresh their skills in the area of the competency set
- Did not feel disciplined enough to undertake this effort on their own
- Did not have enough confidence in their knowledge and skills to do a portfolio
- Wanted the feedback from a professor in a course to make sure they understood the content of the portfolio set.

Course work

The Advisory Committee (AC) and LSSC staff recognized early that LSSC did not have the resources or time to mount courses in all of the competency sets. This effort was not included in the federal grant and the American Library Association (ALA) was not able to fund this approach.

The AC decided to seek providers from state libraries, library associations, regional library cooperatives, community colleges, universities, and private consultants. The providers would have to submit an application to provide the course. The course would have to address all of the competencies in a competency set and be taught by someone with knowledge and experience in the subject area. Providers could apply to teach as many of the courses as they felt they had expertise. While all of the above groups were encouraged to submit applications, in reality, most of the courses came from community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. One state library (Louisiana), one regional library cooperative (InfoPeople in California), and one consultant (in technology) also became providers.

In approving a course LSSC was, in fact, delegating the decision if a candidate passed a course to the provider. Because of this, the AC wanted some certainty that the course covered at least 70% of the competencies. The application asked the providers to submit a "course/competency map" that showed the relation of the course content and assignments to the competencies in the LSSC competency set being considered.

In order to be approved the institution, in addition to the application, had to pay a fee to LSSC. In return, they could charge a tuition fee to candidates that enrolled in the program. Applications came in slowly, partly because institutions wanted some assurance that the process would be worthwhile.

Currently there are 20 providers who collectively have provided 626 courses to candidates in all ten competencies. Not surprisingly, the most courses are taken in the three required competency sets: Communication and Teamwork (118), Foundations of Library Service (100), and Technology (81). Among the electives, the most popular

courses are in Reference and Information Services (67), Cataloguing and Classification (63), and Collections (60) (Lashbrook 2015).

Cost of LSSC and financial aid to candidates

Much thought went into what to charge candidates for LSSC. LSSC needed to be self-funding after a period of time. The cost had to be enough for the LSSC program to be self-sustaining, but not so much that it would discourage library staff from participating. The final decision was to charge $350 ($325 for ALA members). Some library staff found this too expensive for them to enroll. The AC also learned that the course fees charged by the providers were considered prohibitive by some of the candidates.

Because of the federal grant, the AC was able to offer both scholarships and course subsidies for the last three years of the federal funding. For each year, the AC established a number of scholarships and course subsidies that would be available.

Candidates would apply directly to LSSC for the course subsidies. A total of 247 subsidies were given over three years. These subsidies helped offset the cost of the courses. A candidate who received a subsidy one year was not eligible in subsequent years unless subsidies were not all claimed.

Each year, LSSC also offered scholarships for one-half of the registration fee. These were provided in cooperation with state library agencies. The AC contacted all state libraries and asked if they would like to partner with LSSC in offering these scholarships. States were encouraged to match the LSSC scholarship and pay the other half. Four states did match the LSSC amount. Over the three year period, 328 scholarships were awarded with 15 state library partnerships.

Partners in LSSC

> I believe that the staff members who have been participating in this program have developed some very useful skills, philosophies, and attitudes. We are a better organization and our patrons are getting better customer service. Thanks, Library Director. (Fiels 2014)

State Libraries

From the beginning, LSSC staff and the AC knew that to be successful, partners were needed partners in promoting and implementing LSSC. Two key partners were state library agencies and community colleges.

State Library agencies are one of the key institutions that provide continuing education to library support staff. In many states, the state library agency actually operates a state certification program, sometimes embedded in law (requiring certification for employment), and sometimes in policy (where certification is encouraged). Often the cost of state certification is supported by the state library.

The AC asked state libraries to cooperate in three ways by:
- Helping to publicize the LSSC program
- Participating in the scholarship program
- Offering joint certification with LSSC and the state program.

Almost all the state libraries were willing to publicize the program. LSSC staff sent news releases and quarterly newsletters to all state libraries. They published the news releases in their state publications and on their websites.

Fifteen state libraries participated in the scholarship program; some for only one year, some for two, and others for three years. The states were given ten scholarships to distribute in their state. LSSC provided them with an application form and a customized news release to use in publicizing the program. At the end of the application program, the states chose the recipients, informed them that they had won a scholarship, and reported the contact information to LSSC.

The attempt to share actual certification turned out to be much more difficult. Some states stated clearly that their program was working fine; some that LSSC was too expensive for the support staff in their state; and some that they knew what they wanted the support staff in their state to know, and this was different than the LSSC competencies.

Another problem was that, while the AC wanted the state to give credit to support staff in their state, if those staff achieved LSSC certification, the AC could not offer reciprocal recognition for the state's certification courses because their curriculum had not been approved as matching the LSSC competency sets. Because of these barriers, only two states agreed to accept LSSC as meeting state certification requirements. Several other states that did not have state certification programs did endorse LSSC; however, they had no power to require local libraries to hire LSSC graduates.

Community Colleges

The only formal, accredited training programs for library support staff in the US are Library Associate and Library Technical Assistant (LTA) programs operated by community colleges. Their curricula are closest in content to the LSSC competency sets. One objective in this grant was to explore cooperation with LTA programs. Staff prepared a proposal for the AC to pursue cooperative contracts between LTA programs and LSSC. The purpose was to offer LSSC certification to graduates of LTA programs whose course offerings closely followed the LSSC competencies. LTA programs were encouraged to review their curricula and submit them to LSSC for review. If the coursework covered at least six of the LSSC competency sets, including the three required competency sets, then their students graduated not only with the LTA degree but also with the LSSC certification. Using grant funds, LTA programs were promised 10 Scholarship Awards to provide to their graduates.

By the end of the grant, there were Recognition Agreements with 14 LTA programs with six in development. When an LTA program applied for recognition, a course competency map had to be prepared for all of the competency sets they wanted approved. There were two kinds of Agreements: one where the LTA program was approved for six competency sets and another where the program was approved for only five competency sets.

Recruiting LSSC candidates

> I really feel librarianship is my career but too late in my career to do an MLIS. [LSSC is the] best way get the kind of education I wanted to get. LSSC validates that I have education. I want to learn more. The satisfaction of knowing I accomplished something worthwhile in my profession is priceless.
> LSSC Candidate (Fiels 2014).

Early in the development of LSSC, the Advisory Committee established the eligibility criteria to register for LSSC. Only two criteria were established: the candidate had to have the minimum of a high school education and the candidate had to have worked in a library as a staff member or a volunteer for at least one year in the last five years. The reason for the second criterion was to ensure that the candidate had at least some knowledge of how libraries work and of library vocabulary. The second criterion also ensured that these were people who were truly interested in a career in the library profession and not just looking for work in a period of economic downturn.

First, a website was created with all of the information about the program. This included the competencies, portfolio development suggestions, information and guidelines for preparing a portfolio, a list of course providers and the application to become a provider, suggestions for financial aid, and archived webinars.

Second, a major kick-off campaign was arranged for the 2010 ALA conference. News releases were sent to all state libraries, state library associations, community colleges, the US library press, and other national library associations.

Thereafter, over the next three years, the LSSC staff embarked on a multi-state tour of library association meetings and made presentations in 32 states, reaching a total of 1008 people. Staff offered to provide a free presentation if the association would pay our expenses. In addition, staff spoke at national, multi-state conferences: REFORMA (the national organization to promote library service to the Spanish speaking), Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), Western Council of State Librarians, ALA Midwinter and Annual conferences, Amigos (another association for the Spanish speaking), Association of Rural and Small Libraries, People of Color conference, and the Public Library Association.

Articles were written for as many publications that would print them. Staff tried to place an article about LSSC, its purpose and guidelines in at least one national periodical each month. Monthly webinars covered an introduction to LSSC, how to write a portfolio, and how to use LiveText, the only certification management system selected by LSSC staff to manage all aspects of the program.

At the onset of the program in the first quarter of 2010 there were 50 applications. Each quarter since then has shown an increase in candidates until federal funding ended in 2014, when staff was reduced and applications slowed.

Current Candidate Profile

There are currently 468 LSSC candidates, of whom 106 have graduated. Ethnicity of candidates is more varied than among MLIS graduates.   ALA estimates that approximately 11% of MLS graduates are from minority groups. In the LSSC program, 21% of the candidates are from minority groups of American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, and African American. As can be expected in the library community, 94% are female and only 6% male. Candidates come from 45 states in the US, Canada, and Bermuda (Lashbrook 2015).

What was surprising was the age of candidates. The largest group (40%) was aged 45-54, the second largest group was 35-44 (21%) and the third largest were 55-64 (20%). Fewest participants were aged18-24 and 65-74, both of which groups made up 1% of the total. One speculation is that younger people have fewer life responsibilities and are still in a place to attend graduate school. Those in the older age range, however, often have families and expenses that make it more difficult to attend graduate school, even with the increase in online learning (Lashbrook 2015). Based on the final evaluation, staff and the AC concluded that this "older-skewing" population had committed to the library profession and wanted recognition for their work (Fiels, 2014).

Impact of LSSC

> My employee has increased his professionalism when working with patrons and fellow employees. He has increased his knowledge base and it shows when we meet in groups to discuss issues, technology, etc. We have all benefitted!!! LSSC immediate supervisor (Fiels 2014).

Staff and the AC wanted to determine if the LSSC Program has changed the attitudes and skills of LSS, the opinions of supervisors and delivery of library services. Causality is challenging to document because many factors, not only the LSSC Program, affect whether a candidate is skilled and knowledgeable, whether a supervisor sees improvement in a LSS's performance after certification, and whether the certified support staff provides better service to library users. Dr

Rachel Applegate, at the University of Indiana, was engaged to conduct an evaluation of LSSC through surveys to candidates, their immediate supervisors, and the directors/deans/principals of their library (Fiels, 2014).

Three surveys were conducted by Applegate. The Candidate survey focused on both process and outcome: how the program had worked for the individuals, and what the results were for their professional lives.   At the time of this survey there were 293 candidates and graduates. The Supervisor survey focused on outcomes: benefits to libraries and to library patrons. The Director survey focused on outcomes and projections: benefits to libraries and library patrons, and the place of various forms of library staff development in the future staffing of libraries. Contact information for immediate supervisors and directors was provided by the candidates and there were 29 respondents.

Highlights of the findings

Candidates, supervisors and directors provided significant evidence of positive outcomes for both staff and patrons. Candidates found the process do-able but found barriers to completion, and hence to widespread voluntary adoption of this process. Supervisors and directors found the process valuable and beneficial both to their organization and to patron services. The part played by formalization of support staff competencies remains unclear with respect to alternatives such as on-the-job training, library technical assistant programs and the MLS degree.

Overall, candidates were very satisfied with the program. Predictably, the greatest barriers were money and time. Of the candidates, 47% felt that their supervisor had been supportive and 33% felt their co-workers were helpful and supportive.

Outcomes

Some candidates/graduates reported being given new responsibilities, a pay increase, or a promotion. On a five-point scale, the following statements were rated more than 3.5:

- The process of certifying through a course or portfolio has taught me new skills and knowledge
- I have more knowledge about the library

- I have learned new things
- I have gained confidence
- I participate more fully in the work of the library
- Hiring managers/supervisors respect certification.

Immediate supervisors agreed that candidates acquired skills and knowledge. On a five-point scale, these comments also received a rating over 3.5:

- The process of certification has taught [the candidate] new skills and knowledge
- More self-confidence
- More knowledge about the library
- Serves the public better
- More able and willing to participate on library teams.

Immediate supervisors indicated that they value formal certification but do not report requiring this for their support staff, either through LTA programs or LSSC. Library directors generally knew only a little about the program overall, but more about their own employees pursuing it.

The Future of LSSC

LSSC continues to be supported by the American Library Association. However, with the end of the federal grant in 2014, LSSC lost a full-time staff member and is now staffed by one half-time person. Portfolios, which were reviewed free under the grant, now require a payment from the candidate. The amount of funding for publicity and time for travel to state associations is severely reduced. Instead of three live webinars a month, webinars are archived. They are still available but lack the personal touch. As a result, registrations have slowed.

The goals of LSSC remain valid however and, as the evaluation shows, LSSC has a positive impact on the individuals who received certification, on the libraries in which they work, and on the users that they serve.

References

American Library Association. 2003. *Third congress on professional education: focus on library support staff, (COPE III).* Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=Sorted_by_Sponsoring_Group&template=/Conte ntManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=24207.

American Library Association – Allied Professional Association, n.d. Library Support Services Certification: Recognizing Value: Encouraging Growth. http://ala-apa.org/lssc/

Bolt, N. 2012. Survey of LSSC candidates preparing portfolio. Denver, CO, Unpublished.

Davis, D. and Tracie Hall. 2006. *Diversity counts.* Chicago, IL: American Library Association, http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/divcounts.cfm

Fiels, Keith M. 2007. Recognizing Value: Encouraging Growth: The Library Support Staff Certification program. Initial proposal for funding. Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services. Unpublished proposal.

Fiels, Keith M. 2014. Recognizing value: encouraging growth: the national Library Support Staff Certification program, final report submitted, July 2014. Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services. Unpublished report.

Holton, B, Laura Hardesty and Patricia O'Shea. 2006. *Academic libraries: 2006: first look* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008337.pdf (accessed November 23, 2009).

Institute for Museum and Library Services [IMLS]. 2007. *IMLS Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2007*: Washington, DC: Institute for Museum and Library Services. http://harvester.census.gov/imls/pubs/Publications/fy2007_pls_report.pdfI. Also accessed in 2015 https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-united-states-survey

Lashbrook, I. 2015. Six month report of the Library Support Staff Certification Program: Chicago, IL: American Library Association. Unpublished.

Library Support Staff Certification Program, 2013. *Portfolio Development:* Chicago, IL: American Library Association. Accessed at http://ala-apa.org/lssc/for-candidates/

Library Support Staff Certification Program. 2012.
 http://ala-apa.org/lssc/files/2010/03/Foundations-of-Library-Services-PDS-2012.pdf

US Census.2009. *Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2009,*
   https://harvester.census.gov/imls/pubs/pls/pub_detail.asp?id=140#
http://www.imls.gov/research/public_libraries_in_the_united_states_survey.aspx