

Chapter 9

Professional Development Needs and Resources for Government Document Librarians

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ABSTRACT

Few accredited library science programs offer more than one class on government resources or librarianship. As a result, government documents librarians often receive limited formal education focused on federal, state, or local government resources. The majority of professionals working with these materials drew from a number of additional resources, including networking, listserves, conferences, and webinars, to supplement their knowledge, stay abreast of changes in the field, and contribute to the professional community. As with other areas of librarianship, access to these options is limited by economic factors. Individuals working with government materials face reduced budgets for travel, registration, and lodging. Limited staffing makes taking time off for conferences difficult, and additional duties make it challenging for many librarians to find time to engage in classes or webinars. This chapter looks at previous surveys and the results of a new survey to determine the current obstacles, needs, and opportunities for government documents librarians.

INTRODUCTION

Historically those working with government materials have received little formal training in government related resources while working towards their master's degree in library science. Once in a position there may or may not be on-the-job training. With a full work load the new government

document librarian may not have funding or time to attend the few document-focused conferences. There is a need for improved access to training and a wider variety of learning options that are time and budget friendly.

Variety in content and methods of access are important considerations for those working with government information. Documents librarians

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require specialized knowledge of government organization and the agencies responsible for the production of a wide range of materials from local to international levels. Libraries that house federal, state and local collections have a wide range of budget and staffing issues. These collections are found in law, academic, special and public libraries of different sizes. The professionals in charge of these collections have different subject specialties and areas where their skills are weaker. Additional responsibilities for academic, state and public librarians combined with budget cuts and limitations reduces the likelihood for a specialist to be devoted to just government information. This workload makes time a limited resource and creates an obstacle to professional development. Despite these limits document librarians are finding ways to meet reach out to their professional community and increase their knowledge. This chapter will look at surveys to evaluate the needs, common barriers and the use of professional development opportunities currently available for government document librarians.

BACKGROUND

Professional development is a combination of professional involvement through committees, research, professional projects and continued education that leads to the exchange of ideas and growth of the individual in the profession. For librarians working with government documents, professional development allows for improved familiarity with technological advances, increased depth of understanding of collections, awareness of changes within the profession and active participation in scholarly pursuits. These opportunities supplement the frequently limited formal education provided in library schools and on-the-job training.

In 1966, Heinritz surveyed twenty-three government document instructors and 15 course lists regarding how government information was being

taught. He found that overall the classes, which were electives, had course work and class time consisting of 66% federal, 10% state, 4% local and 10% international focus. The study also found most library programs offered only one course on government information and the material covered was closely tied to the strength of the document collections at each institution.

Although a paper by Hartford and Osborn (1971) indicated a growing interest in the subject, the number of classes offered on government document use and management had changed very little. When Sarah Reed looked at government publications courses in a small number of Midwestern library schools in 1973 most schools still offered a single class, often a general overview. Given the large amount of information to be covered these classes could not provide an in-depth view of the many subject areas of government document librarianship.

Marvin Guilfoyle and Irma Tomberlin found that “those who eventually accept a documents position may find themselves, like a beginning teacher, suffering from a devastating case of ‘reality shock’...their largely theoretical preparation has little prepared them for the real problems they now are facing”(1978, p. 57). Believing that a single, semester-long course could never adequately prepare someone for the reality of a government document position, they advocated for practicums. They argued that an additional semester where students work with collections would help students decide if they wanted to work with a government collection and would provide a better sense of these collections.

Sandra Faull (1982), in an opinion, called for library science programs to offer two document classes with one focusing on administration and reference. Although additional preparation for government librarians through classes and practicum opportunities would be welcome these options are either limited or unlikely to be available. Practicum positions require a library with a document collection, and librarian willing to take

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