



POSITIVE EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS FOR FEDERAL LIBRARIANS

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★ 63 Years of Service to the Federal Government ★
1948 – 2011

PREFACE

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the arguments for and against mandating a master's degree in library and/or information science as a prerequisite for the grade classification GS-9 under Office of Personnel Management (OPM) standards. The author reviews the recent history of the debate over positive education requirements for professional librarians, discusses OPM's classification and qualification standards as they apply to the Librarian Series, GS-1410, and evaluates the positions taken by the two major trade associations for the library community—American Library Association (ALA) and Special Libraries Association (SLA). The report concludes with the author's recommendation to the Federal Library and Information Committee (FLICC) on the viability of seeking a revision to OPM standards, making the master's degree in library and/or information science requisite for GS-9 positions in the GS-1410 series.

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INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to its statutory authority, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has issued classification and qualification standards governing federal employees in the Librarian Series, GS-1410. Under these standards, librarians must meet the basic entry qualification requirements for professional education or possess equivalent education and experience. For library positions at grade GS-9 and higher, applicants must have “two full years of progressively higher level graduate education OR master’s in library science OR equivalent graduate degree, e.g., LLB or JD, related to the position” (emphasis added).¹ The growth of libraries as print and digital information centers has expanded the scope of postgraduate professional degrees available to future librarians. In addition to the traditional master’s degree in library science (MLS), the master’s degree in information science (MSIS) and the master’s degree in library and information science (MSLIS) are conferred.

Over the past 30 years, the library community has debated the arguments for and against petitioning OPM to make the MLS a mandatory prerequisite for grade GS-9 positions and has not hesitated to criticize OPM when it perceived that the agency was attempting to lower professional standards. In the early 1980s, the professional library community, including the Federal Library Committee, was at odds with OPM over proposed revisions to classification and qualification standards.² OPM proposed to restructure the GS-1410 and GS-1412 Technical Information Specialist series; to reduce the entry grade for GS-1410 librarians from GS-9 to GS-7, for persons hired with less than a two-year MLS degree and with no experience; and to redefine the minimum entry level at GS-5, for staff with a bachelor’s degree or equivalent experience.³

According to a spokeswoman for the American Library Association (ALA), OPM regarded the proposed changes as “shifting of personnel to duties more appropriate to their

¹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions Standrads: Librarian Series, 1410,” <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/Standards/IORs/gs1400/1410.htm> (accessed February 22, 2011).

² U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Office of Standards Development, “Proposed Final Standards for the Library-Information Service Series, GS-1410” (report, Washington, DC, November 12, 1982).

³ U.S. General Accounting Office, “Classification and Qualification Standards for the GS-1410 Library-Information Service Series” (report no. GAO/GGD-83-97, Washington, DC, August 1983), 1, <http://archive.gao.gov/f0302/122191.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2011).

status,” but the association viewed the proposal as a downgrade of positions and salaries.⁴ The Federal Library Committee commented formally to OPM that all drafts of the proposed standards reviewed by the Committee “showed a lack of comprehension of the true nature and scope of the library and information profession in the federal government.” According to the Federal Library Committee, “application of the draft Classification Standard in its present form would lead to gross inequities in classifying federal LIS [library and information science] positions.”⁵ OPM did not adopt its proposed restructuring of the GS-1410 and GS-1412 classification standards at that time.

FLICC RECOMMENDATIONS TO OPM

Before OPM adopted the new classification and qualification standards in 1993 and 1994, the Federal Library and Information Committee (FLICC) Personnel Working Group (PWG) worked directly with OPM’s Qualifications Standards Branch to improve the 1410 series. FLICC and OPM staff discussed the option of requiring the MLS degree for grade GS-9 positions.

In 1989 the FLICC Executive Advisory Committee had directed the FLICC PWG to work with OPM to revise both the 1966 Federal Librarian Series position classification standards and the corresponding 1968 qualification standards. In 1993 FLICC submitted a position paper to OPM in response to the request of Stephen Perloff, chief of OPM’s Qualifications Standards Branch. Perloff had asked the federal library community to demonstrate why a bachelor’s degree in library science provided insufficient preparation for entry-level positions within federal government agencies.

FLICC’s position paper stated that OPM and the federal library community were “in agreement that the 1966 federal librarian classification standards [were] grossly inadequate to classify the federal librarian of the 1990s.”⁶ However, FLICC also asserted that “the master’s degree in library science should be established as the minimum entry-level qualification for the

⁴ “Downgrading of Federal Librarians’ Jobs Feared,” *Library Journal* 107, no. 3 (February 1, 1982): 208–9; see also, American Library Association “American Library Association Response to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Regarding Tentative Standards for the GS-1409, GS-1410, and GS-1411 Series” (report, Chicago, April 1982).

⁵ Federal Library Committee, “The Federal Library Committee Response to the Office of Personnel Management Proposed Final Standards for Library-Information Service Series, GS-1410” (report, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, December 1982), 1–2.

⁶ Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians: A 1993 Position Paper Prepared for the Office of Personnel Management” (paper, Federal Library and Information Center Committee, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, August 1996), 1.

professional librarian, 1410 series, in order for libraries to meet federal information needs,” an opinion that OPM questioned.⁷

FLICC’s paper noted that “for entry level positions the rest of the nation’s library community recruits librarians who possess an American Library Association (ALA)–accredited master’s degree in library science (MLS); however, the MLS is not a mandatory requirement for entry level positions in the federal government.”⁸ FLICC developed a number of arguments in support of requiring the MLS degree rather than a bachelor’s degree, arguments that also reinforce the position that the MLS and MIS are stronger educational tools for a federal librarian than other types of graduate degrees.

For example, FLICC’s position paper enumerated the varied roles of federal librarians within their respective agencies. These roles include administration and maintenance of the library, collection development (including the identification and evaluation of electronic information resources), location and retrieval of requested information, and education and instruction of both library clientele and library staff. The paper illustrated why only “an MLS degreed librarian possessing professional knowledge, skills, and abilities” is qualified to deliver the “required level of performance” for each of these functions.⁹ FLICC’s paper also referenced a report, prepared for the PWG, identifying numerous competency requirements for the various functions performed by librarians and information services providers “that clearly fall at the professional postgraduate level.”¹⁰

OPM CLASSIFICATION STANDARDS

The Classification Act of 1949, as amended, establishes classification standards for positions in the General Schedule (GS-1 through GS-15).¹¹ The statute directs OPM to prepare

⁷ Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians,” vi, 1.

⁸ Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians,” 3.

⁹ Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians,” 6.

¹⁰ Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians,” 20, citing Jose-Marie Griffiths, “Letter to: Personnel Working Group, Federal Library and Information Center Committee” (Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, May 12, 1992).

¹¹ U.S. Code, Title 5 (government organization and employees), Part III (employees), Subpart D (pay and allowances), Chapter 51 (classification) and Chapter 53 (pay rates and systems), Subchapter III (general schedule pay rates).

and publish position classification standards for the federal personnel system to enable federal agencies to place positions in their proper classes and grades. The statute defines “position” as the work, consisting of the duties and responsibilities, assignable to an employee; “class” or “class of positions” includes all positions that are sufficiently similar to warrant similar treatment in personnel and pay administration. Criteria for assessing positions’ similarity are kind or subject matter of work, level of difficulty and responsibility, and the qualification requirements of the work.

The term “grade” includes all classes of positions that, although different with respect to kind or subject matter of work, are sufficiently equivalent to warrant their inclusion within one range of rates of basic pay in the General Schedule. Positions may be equivalent according to level of difficulty and responsibility and level of qualification requirements of the work.¹²

According to OPM,

classification standards usually include a definition of the kind of work covered by the standard; background information, such as descriptions of typical kinds of assignments found in the occupation(s) covered and definitions of terms; official titles; and criteria for determining proper grade levels.¹³

OPM has designated GS-1410 as the Librarian Series. This series

includes positions that involve supervision or performance of work that requires primarily a full professional knowledge of the theories, objectives, principles, and techniques of librarianship, to select, organize, preserve, access, and disseminate information. Typical functions in librarianship are collection development, acquisition, cataloging and classification, reference, circulation, computer system and data base management, and preservation.¹⁴

OPM also issued a guidance document, revised in 1994, enabling employers to evaluate specific federal library job positions and to establish the appropriate GS grade. According to OPM staff, the document, “Position Classification Standard for Librarian Series, GS-1410,” provides the criteria for GS grading that federal employers should use to assign a job opening to the correct occupation, distinguishing, for example, the position of librarian from that of archivist.¹⁵ OPM expects federal employers to evaluate nonsupervisory librarian positions

¹² 5 U.S.C. § 5102 and § 5105.

¹³ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Introduction to the Position Classification Standards” (TS-134 July 1995, TS-107 August 1991; revised August 2009), 4, <http://www.opm.gov/fedclass/gsintr.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2011).

¹⁴ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Position Classification Standard for Librarian Series, GS-1410” (TS-130, August 1994), 2, <http://www.opm.gov/fedclass/gs1410.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2011).

¹⁵ Andrea Bright (Manager, Recruitment and Diversity, Classification and Assessment Policy, U.S. Office of Personnel Management), discussion with author, Washington, DC, March 25, 2011.

according to the criteria in this document. Employers use the designated Factor Level Descriptions, assigning a range of point values to each of nine factors, with the greatest number of points assigned to the factor entitled “knowledge required by the position.” Other factors include the responsibilities of the job, as defined by supervisors, and the complexity of assignments. Each grade level of GS-9 through GS-14 has an assigned range of points, and the federal employer analyzing the classification compares the total number of points for all nine factors and selects the equivalent grade.

OPM QUALIFICATION STANDARDS

Librarian Series, 1410

According to Andrea Bright, Manager of Recruitment and Diversity, Classification and Assessment Policy at OPM, once a federal agency has classified a federal librarian position in the GS-1410 series and has assigned the position a GS level, OPM requires employers to apply OPM qualification standards when hiring for the position.¹⁶ Position qualification standards, which OPM amended in 2001, establish as a basic requirement that “all librarians must meet the requirements for professional education in library science or possess equivalent experience and education as shown for GS-7; however, as a standard practice applicants enter at grade GS-9 on the basis of a master’s degree in library science.”¹⁷ To qualify for the GS-7 grade, applicants must either have completed one full academic year of graduate study in library science in an accredited college or university, or they must have a total of at least five years of a combination of college-level education, training, and experience.¹⁸ Applicants for grade GS-9 positions must meet the basic entry-qualification requirements, or must have directly related educational qualifications and/or specialized experience in the amounts set forth in the table below.

¹⁶ Andrea Bright, March 25, 2011.

¹⁷ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions Standards: Librarian Series, 1410,” 1.

¹⁸ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions Standards: Librarian Series, 1410,” 1–2.

Table 1. Additional Education and Experience Requirements for Positions at GS-9 and Above

GRADE	EDUCATION	EXPERIENCE
GS-9	2 full years of progressively higher-level graduate education or a master's in library science or an equivalent graduate degree, e.g., LLB or JD, related to the position.	1 year equivalent to at least GS-7
GS-11	3 full years of progressively higher level graduate education in library science or a doctoral degree (PhD or equivalent) related to the position	1 year equivalent to at least GS-9
GS-12 and above	None	1 year equivalent to at least next lower grade level

Note: Equivalent combinations of education and experience are qualifying for all grade levels for which both education and experience are acceptable.

Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions Standards: Librarian Series, 1410.” January 2001. <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/standards/IORs/gs1400/1410.htm> (accessed February 22, 2011).

The OPM standard notes, “since many libraries are highly specialized, some librarian positions require a knowledge of a specialized subject or field of endeavor. Also, since materials in libraries are often in foreign languages, some librarians must have a proficient knowledge of one or more foreign languages.”¹⁹ The OPM standard also enumerates the requirements for position-specific education and work experience. OPM staff call these requirements selective placement factors.²⁰ OPM views the use of selective placement factors and quality ranking factors, which set the level of work experience required, as tools that employers should use during the initial screening process, working in tandem with their human resources department, to identify top candidates for a job.

¹⁹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions Standards: Librarian Series, 1410,” 1.

²⁰ Andrea Bright, March 25, 2011.

Group Coverage Qualification Standards

FLICC requested that the author of this report assess the possible ramifications of incorporating GS-1410 federal librarian positions into the umbrella category of “professional and scientific positions,” subject to the group coverage qualification standards for these positions. Under OPM standards, applicants for all positions in the occupations covered by this umbrella category must meet the basic entry requirements of the individual occupation—typically four years of college or the appropriate combination of education and experience, as specified in individual occupational requirements.²¹ Applicants who meet the basic requirements qualify for a grade of GS-5. Applicants who wish to qualify for positions graded at GS-7 and higher must have specialized experience and/or directly related education in amounts specified by the standard.

According to OPM staff, one of the primary reasons for establishing group coverage standards is to set uniform education and skill sets for a large number of related occupations, thereby avoiding the need to repeat these requirements in each posted job description. Group coverage standards have enabled OPM to establish a common grade structure for a variety of positions, saving time and money. However, because OPM now creates and disseminates documents electronically, the need for group coverage standards has lessened. Therefore, OPM’s trend is to establish more individual series, such as the Librarian Series, 1410, which does not have a group qualification standard.²²

OPM is aware that human resources departments in federal agencies tend to look exclusively at the OPM series qualification standards when evaluating an applicant for a librarian position classified as a GS-1410. As a result, human resources staff often consider a GS-1410 applicant qualified for only a limited number of positions. Classifying federal librarians within a more diversified category of employees could extend job opportunities for librarians. Nonetheless, OPM believes that grouping federal librarians with dozens of other professional and scientific positions would detract from the uniqueness of the skill set that librarians bring to any federal position.²³

²¹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions Standards: Group Coverage Qualification Standards for Professional and Scientific Positions,” <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/standards/group-stds/gs-prof.asp> (accessed March 2, 2011).

²² Andrea Bright, March 25, 2011.

²³ Andrea Bright, March 25, 2011.

Furthermore, the group coverage qualification standards for professional and scientific positions provide for an entry-level grade of GS-5, not GS-7. To qualify for the grade of GS-7, the group standard requires one year of specialized experience equivalent to a grade of GS-5, at least, plus one year of graduate-level education. Incorporating federal librarian positions into the umbrella category of “professional and scientific positions” could jeopardize the floor of grade GS-7 for entry-level librarian positions. Moreover, 30 years ago the federal library community argued against OPM efforts to downgrade entry-level librarian positions from GS-7 to GS-5.

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION POSITION ON POSITIVE EDUCATION REQUIREMENT

The American Library Association’s (ALA’s) policy manual sets forth the requisite education for a professional librarian. Under Section 54 of the manual, which addresses library personnel practices, Section 54.2—Librarians: Appropriate Degrees—states that

the master’s degree from a program accredited by the American Library Association (or from a master’s level program in library and information studies accredited or recognized by the appropriate national body of another country) is the appropriate professional degree for librarians.²⁴

According to Karen O’Brien, Director of ALA’s Office of Accreditation, ALA encourages employers who are seeking candidates for professional library positions to “prefer” persons holding a professional degree from an accredited school of library and/or information science. However, ALA also recommends that employers not eliminate job applicants at the outset of the job search process for lack of the master’s degree. Employers should have the flexibility to consider hiring an experienced candidate who has no library degree, or who has a degree from a nonaccredited school. When evaluating a job applicant, employers should consider the responsibilities of the specific job and should determine whether a master’s degree in library and/or information science would be an advantage in the job. At the same time, employers should assign merit to the applicant’s work experience and educational credentials in fields other than library and information science.²⁵ In its statement of policy regarding “library and information studies and human resources utilization,” ALA recognizes that individuals may

²⁴ American Library Association, Policy Manual § 54, “Library Personnel Practices,” § 54.2, “Librarians: Appropriate Degrees,” <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/section2.pdf> (accessed May 13, 2011).

²⁵ Karen O’Brien (Director, Office of Accreditation, American Library Association), telephone discussion with author, April 7, 2011.

acquire the skills necessary for professional library positions outside of the curriculum of the master's degree in library and information science. The policy states that

the library occupation is much broader than that segment of it which is the library profession. Skills other than those of library and information studies also have an important contribution to make to the achievement of superior library service. There should be equal recognition in both the professional and supportive ranks for those individuals whose expertise contributes to the effective performance of the library.²⁶

SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION POSITION ON POSITIVE EDUCATION REQUIREMENT

According to the Special Libraries Association's (SLA's) chief administrative officer, Linda Broussard, SLA has not taken an official position on the issue of whether a master's degree in library and information science should be a prerequisite for library positions. The association does not require its members to have this degree. SLA recognizes that library and information professionals holding positions in libraries, including the Library of Congress, often have graduate degrees in fields other than library and information science. An international organization, SLA recognizes that in many countries the library degree is not the common denominator for library and information science positions.²⁷

SLA has adopted a statement on "competencies for information professionals," identifying the abilities and skills that SLA considers essential for information management specialists.²⁸ SLA outlines competencies according to two categories: 1) professional competencies, which "relate to the practitioner's knowledge of information resources, access, technology and management and the ability to use this knowledge as a basis for providing the highest quality information services," and 2) personal competencies, which consist of "attitudes, skills, and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their

²⁶ American Library Association, Policy Manual, § 54.1, "Library and Information Studies and Human Resource Utilization: A Statement of Policy," <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/section2.pdf> (accessed May 13, 2011).

²⁷ Linda Broussard (Chief Administrative Officer, Special Libraries Association), telephone interview with author, April 22, 2011.

²⁸ Special Libraries Association, Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians, "Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century," <http://www.sla.org/content/learn/members/competencies/index.cfm> (accessed April 5, 2011).

profession.”²⁹ SLA describes these competencies as a “set of tools for professional growth, recruitment, and assessment.”³⁰

Other trade associations serving the library community, such as the American Association of Law Libraries, the Medical Library Association, and the Music Library Association, have also adopted professional “core” competencies, defined as “a specific range of skills, abilities, or knowledge that enable or qualify someone to perform a particular function or to carry out selected responsibilities.”³¹

CONCLUSION

OPM has placed the approximately 1,400 federal librarians under its jurisdiction in an individual occupation series, GS-1410, and has worked with the federal library community to establish both classification and qualification standards to evaluate job applicants in this series. However, federal librarians and OPM have had a long-standing disagreement regarding the minimum educational requirement for professional library positions (GS-9). In 1993 the FLICC PWG submitted a position paper advocating that OPM establish the master’s degree in library science as the minimum entry-level qualification for the professional Librarian Series, GS-1410. FLICC also noted that nonfederal libraries typically recruit professional librarians with ALA-accredited master’s degrees in library science.³²

FLICC prepared this position paper to defend against the premise that a bachelor’s degree is sufficient preparation for professional library positions. In this paper, FLICC illustrates why only “an MLS degreed librarian possessing professional knowledge, skills, and abilities” can deliver the “required level of performance” for each of the functions performed by federal librarians.³³ FLICC’s paper presents many arguments that could also justify the position that the curriculum for a master’s degree in library and information science is better preparation for the work of professional librarians than the course of study for a master’s degree in a sciences or humanities subject.

²⁹ Special Libraries Association, “Competencies for Information Professionals,” 2.

³⁰ Special Libraries Association, “Competencies for Information Professionals,” 2.

³¹ Wanda V. Dole, Jitka M. Hurych, and Anne Liebst, “A Core Competency for Library Leaders,” *Library Administration and Management* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 125.

³² Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians,” 3.

³³ Federal Library and Information Center Personnel Working Group, “Qualification Needs for Federal Librarians,” 6.

When evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of mandating the MLS/MIS/MSIS as a prerequisite for grade GS-9 library positions, the federal library community must consider the current thinking of the broader library community, as represented by ALA and SLA, as well as the opinion of the federal agency directly responsible for establishing classification and qualification standards for federal librarians—OPM.

ALA stated clearly in an interview with this author that although the association prefers that employers hire candidates holding a professional degree from an accredited school of library and information science, the lack of this degree should not prevent an otherwise qualified job applicant from competing for an available job position. Imposing mandatory educational requirements on specific job categories would deny federal employers the flexibility fully to consider experienced applicants. SLA conveyed to this author that it recognizes that library and information professionals who do not have an MLS or the equivalent currently hold valuable positions in many libraries, including the Library of Congress. Therefore, SLA does not have an official position on the positive education requirement. Moreover, SLA does not require its members to have an MLS/MIS/MSIS.

In discussion with this author, OPM stressed that it intends for federal employers to use its classification and qualification guidance documents as a starting point for the hiring process. These documents should provide employers with a degree of flexibility in making hiring decisions. Employers can identify top candidates and screen out persons who are not qualified, using selective placement factors that set position-specific requirements—such as the knowledge of a foreign language or subject matter expertise—and using quality ranking factors that set the level of experience required. In essence, a federal employer is free to write a position description in such a way that only persons with a library and information science education qualify, if that is what the employer is seeking. Conversely, making the MLS a mandatory prerequisite for professional librarian positions in the federal government would disqualify persons who lack the degree, even those who have years of experience or extensive subject knowledge or both. This exclusion would potentially apply to federal librarians transferring positions within the federal government.

Because it complies with OPM standards, the Library of Congress's Office of Human Resources follows OPM guidance on the issue of the positive education requirement for GS-1410 librarians. The qualification standard is silent on this issue, and thus Library of Congress

job postings follow suit. As noted in the OPM qualification standards, the MLS degree is not a hard requirement, but rather can be a measure of the skill set of a job applicant.

Using the OPM qualification standards as guidance, employers can maintain the high standards of the federal library profession by hiring qualified, experienced personnel. A mandatory education requirement written into the OPM standards is not necessary to enable federal agencies to recruit the best candidates. If the federal library community were to advocate a positive education requirement, this position would diverge from that of the professional associations ALA and SLA. Both of these organizations recognize that information professionals bring to a job knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired through varied educational backgrounds, as well as through equally varied work experience.

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