January 30, 2014

Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel on The Status and Future of Canada's Libraries & Archives
The Royal Society of Canada
The Academies of Arts, Humanities and Sciences of Canada
Walter House
282 Somerset W
Ottawa, ON   K2P 0J6

Re: "A Freshly Minted Perspective": A Personal Response to the Call for Submissions as per *Notice to the Library and Archive Communities* (dated September 10, 2013)

Dear Sirs/Mesdames:

My name is Jason Wong, and I graduated with my MLIS in 2011. In the three years since graduation, I must say that I have noticed and am currently a part of the disturbing reality for the "freshly minted" classes of LIS graduates. To this end, I am writing to you to respond to the education questions in the Framing Questions document, those questions being:

1. What changes, in your judgment, are necessary in the professional education and training of librarians/archivists in the 21st century?
2. What conversations do you think need to take place with library, archival, and information studies programs about professional competency requirements, and have they begun?

My short answers to these questions are as thus:

1. There has to be a critical evaluation of the number of schools and programs graduating new librarians and archivists that are allowed to exist, and there has to be a similar evaluation in the number of students that the whole establishment graduates on an annual basis. Furthermore, curricula need to be overhauled and innovated to better prepare those who wish to seek positions in non-traditional library settings.
2. The profession needs to have a harsh conversation about whether or not it is realistic that a graduate-level degree is still needed the basic qualifier for professional competency. Furthermore, the profession should examine moving towards a licensing and professional regulatory model that can be found in numerous other professions.
3. The profession needs to take other real steps into addressing the issue of the systemic under/unemployment of many of its freshly minted graduates.

In this letter, I apply my discussion to libraries specifically, but I do venture to state that there may be some applicability to archives.

Part I: An Inconvenient Truth: Too Many Schools Graduating Too Many Grads for Too Few Jobs - The Case for an Overhaul of Library Schools

One of the most apparent things that I have come to realize about the LIS establishment is that it has been set up to ensure the failure of many, and the establishment has utterly failed in coming to terms with this most apparent truth: **there are too many LAIS schools graduating far too many LAIS graduates for too few LAIS jobs, and in particular, LAIS jobs at the professional entry level.**

In the three years since graduation, I have held two contractual positions, ranging from 8-12 months in length, and from what I have seen, such short contracts are the norm. Stability of employment is near non-existent for many new grads, and certainly I am a part of these ranks where full-time, long-term, stable employment is very much elusive.

Is it reasonable that the realities of many of our graduates are one of the following: unemployment and completely unable to penetrate into LIS-related jobs, underemployment in part-time and/or non-professional level positions, or the seeming-perpetual limbo of barely 12-month long contracts? Similarly, is it reasonable that the best (and only) professional advice for new graduates from the established librarian professional elite is to "Be patient and wait your turn [for a stable job]"? (This has been actual career "advice" given to me on multiple occasions from professional librarians)

While it is without any doubt that current macro-economic and political matters contribute in part to the tenuous employment prospects of the field, let us not fool ourselves: we as a profession are just as at fault for bleak new graduate employment prospects because we have, among other things, failed to properly regulate the number of students we admit and graduate. In all the dramatic platitudes and "woe as me" statements about how bureaucrats/politicians/administrators/faculty/the public/[insert "other" group not affiliated with libraries here] are assailing and dismantling libraries, I find it particularly interesting that these are now the commonly used scapegoats to prevent any inner reflection or discussion about the job market and librarian labour supply trends.

Entry-level positions are widely unavailable, and when they are, there is either the rat race of hundreds of grads scrambling for these crumbs, or even worse, these supposed entry-level positions go to the overqualified earlier graduates who have already been in the under/unemployment cycle for a number of years!

I have witnessed these occurrences on multiple occasions. The most egregious example that comes to mind is an institution that last year posted four contracts, three for a 10 month term, one for 20 month term. Based on the nature of the job postings, these appeared very much to be targeted towards new graduates, and nothing during the interview process led me to believe otherwise. I believed that given my qualifications and two years of professional experience in a

similar environment, I would have at least have had an offer for one of the 10 month contracts. Yet, I was turned down for all four. I was able to learn straight from my interviewer that all four contracts went to previous employees of the institution, each of whom **had over four years of professional experience**. Given this, is it any wonder that employment prospects for new graduates are so dim?

What does all of this mean for professional education? To be frank, it all means that we need acknowledge that there are things that we can do from within the profession to alleviate the situation, and that we must start by looking at the supply side of things.

First and foremost, library schools need to stop perpetuating the greatest **lie** that is being told to prospective students, current students, and recent graduates: that there are "plenty of library jobs" and that "a retirement bubble is coming and the jobs will be a plenty." **Nothing is further from the truth, and library schools should be ashamed that they are lying through their teeth.** Schools need to stop spreading this misinformation, pure and simple. **The demand in the job market is simply. Not. There.**

Secondly, schools need to be more selective in the prospective students that they admit, or at the very least be more forthcoming in the kinds of qualifications that are actually needed for librarian positions. For example, it is the worst kept secret in the academic library world that those candidates who hold other graduate-level degrees will be much stronger candidates. If this is already the *de facto* truth, then why not put that as a requirement for prospective students, or at the very least, disclose it?

Thirdly, schools need overhaul their curricula in terms of preparing students for those "non-traditional library jobs". In essence, schools need to offer more abilities to develop practical and technical skills that are needed on the frontline of LIS service. It has been in my view that there has been far too much lip service and enough practical action to prepare new graduates for the mythical El Dorado of "non-traditional library jobs". I have seen far too many LIS jobs that require technical expertise that is beyond what is taught and offered at schools (for instance, working proficiency with coding and programming languages, IT systems design, advanced cataloguing, supervisory and staff management experience, etc). Certainly, while I respect the value that theoretical foundational courses have in developing a familiarity with the technical aspects of LIS jobs, the competitive advantage of LIS grads is significantly undermined when this is the maximum extent of preparation. If we are to send our LIS graduates into the world of "non-traditional library jobs", then every competitive advantage is crucial in making LIS graduates stand out, especially when the competition has targeted subject knowledge that allows to be more effective sooner, and can often work for a lower salary demand.

Fourthly, if program admission caps and more selective admissions are not enough, then we need to have a rough examination about which schools and programs need to be closed as a dramatic but necessary step in alleviating the current, grossly disproportionate situation

between librarian supply and demand.

As a last closing comment about my ideas for the reconfiguration of professional LIS education, I have found it peculiar that Canadian schools are accredited under the regime of the American Library Association. I venture to suggest if there is room for the creation and implementation of a new, more rigorous, and Canadian-specific set of accreditation standards that either supersede or operate alongside the ALA's, and standards to which can be crafted for Canada's own unique LIS environment?

Part II: An Institutionalized Pettiness: The Disconnect Between Idealist Egalitarianism & the Reality of Librarian Snobbery - The Case for Professional Licensing

One of the major questions that I encountered time and time again in my academic and professional experience was "who gets to call themselves a librarian?". To this date, no one has offered a consistent or satisfactory answer. It is just as unfortunate that I have encountered a varying degrees of condescension, elitism and all-round arrogance as to what and who constitutes a "real librarian", despite idealist language in other situations and settings espousing the virtues of our "egalitarian" profession.

The term "real librarian" is, in my view, a problematic one at best. From the many people who have dropped this term, a "real librarian" is, supposedly, someone who has gone to graduate school to obtain an MLIS (or equivalent) **and/or** works at a library **and/or** does "librarian duties". Indeed, it seems that every person in the profession has a different definition of who or what a librarian is.

Because of this lack of definitive clarity, I have witnessed and been on the receiving end of the "real librarian" snobbery. Take for instance the following statements that I have heard time and time again in my short three years in the field:

- "Oh, don't worry about him -- he's *just* a library tech."
- "Did you hear about [a recent MLIS grad]? She had to take a technician job.... I wonder what's wrong with her?"
- "That's [a fellow MLIS grad], but she doesn't work at a library.... She's not a *real* librarian."
- "You had to take a job as a library assistant? That's so sad -- isn't that a career limiting move?"
- "Oh, you're just too young/new to understand..."

These statements, and the various iterations of them that are (sadly) more commonplace in our profession than we lead ourselves to believe, have a commonality: we work in stratified organizations, and despite professing the "flat organizational structure" or "the equal workplace", it seems that there are a number of us out there who purvey or even enjoy putting

librarians on a higher pedestal using shifting, inconsistent criteria. At best, this practice this petty. At worst, it is toxic and demoralizing.

Furthermore, an inconsistent criteria of "the real librarian" has allowed for the members of the profession to pick and choose the values and tenets of the profession that they personally believe in, while rejecting others. I find it very sad to say that I have met "real librarians" who object to and do not uphold some of the core values of our profession, with some of the most baffling and eyebrow-raising being intellectual freedom and information literacy -- core values that have been broadly recognized and affirmed as integral parts of the profession. I find it absolutely unacceptable that some of my peers and colleagues can do this, and can also actively choose to not uphold these core principles in their daily work. To make matters worse, there is no means of formal recourse for me to challenge a colleague who is failing to abide by professional ethical standards, or to have a means to properly defend myself should my own professional standards be called into question.

I also call into question the notion of the MLIS as the only educational credential of being a "real" librarian. I see no reason why a newbie fresh out of library school with an MLIS automatically gets to be called a "librarian", but a seasoned library professional who has worked in libraries all his/her career cannot use the valuable professional experience as an equivalent to education. In an age where there is a noticeable trend of solo library acts, wherein a library is being staffed by a small body of staff, often times with people who *do not* have graduate-level education (such is the case in special libraries), why is there not some sort of mechanism to recognize professional experience as some equivalent to librarian education, and recognize that they are still perfectly qualified to be a "librarian"?

To be very frank, I find the problem of "realness" in librarianship to be very peculiar. I note that no other profession has the confusing ambiguity of who can be considered "real": lawyers, accountants, doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, social workers, massage therapists (to name but a few!) all have systematic means to recognize "realness" of their members, and do so by different means -- Many have prospective members submit to form of examination; others have a sponsorship model where a current professional member mentors or sponsors a protégé; while others take a holistic look at a prospective candidate with a blend of methods. Regardless of method, all these professions have instituted systematic and formal mechanisms for determining professional members from others, and there is no doubt as to who can or cannot be regarded a professional.

Accordingly, it is absolutely baffling that the librarianship "profession" has no similar mechanisms in place. In my view, the institution of professional licensing to recognize a "real" librarians is an absolute must for the future. Given the number of models already in place and entrenched in other professions, surely we can certainly, as a profession, come together and decide on a model that is fair, balanced, and inclusive.

What would professional licensing accomplish? Firstly, and most importantly, it would mean that there is finally some sort of consistent understanding across the profession as to who is who. Secondly (and relatedly), there is some sort of standard that professional librarians across the country can be held account to. Thirdly, it would lend greater credibility to the profession, especially in regards to external stakeholders outside the library world. Fourthly (under the right model), it would recognize **both** professional experience and education as determinants and factors for admittance.

The implementation of professional licensing would create a new, protected title that actually means something based on a set of standards. In my ideal model, "Professional Librarian" would be a protected term that could only legally be used by those who pass the licensing process, and would be standardized across institutions. Those who would be working their way through the licensing process, or who meet some of the credentials could keep titles similar to ones we see today ("public services librarian", "reference librarian", etc), or to allow for more clarity, could be given new titles that convey they are their way to professional status, such as "paralibrarian", "junior librarian", "librarian-in-training"). Members would be able to use this term in correspondence, on business cards, etc.

As for the body that would administer and recognize such licensing, I am fully aware that some existing professionals object to pre-existing professional organizations in principle. Accordingly, I propose for the creation of a new "Canadian Society of Professional Librarians" (or similarly named) to take on the sole purpose of professional librarian licensing and enforcement of professional ethical standards. At the same time, these licensed professionals would be free to join other professional bodies as they so choose. Such a model already exists in a field such as law, where all members of the legal profession have to be members of the local bar society, yet they are still free to join any number of other professional organizations. Additionally, this society would also charged with upholding professional standards, providing continuing education opportunities, providing support for members as it pertains to professional issues (eg. Support for professional members fighting book banning or censorship causes), etc.

Regardless of the model that professional licensing would take, I believe that moving toward this model would result in a more robust, inclusive and reflective model for the profession in the 21st century. It recognizes that there is a role for a graduate-level education in becoming a "real" member of the profession, but that it is not the only mean to do so. It also lends more credibility to our profession, and provides an objective standard that everyone can be measured against.

Part III: Conclusions from a Freshly Minted Professional & On Leaving the Profession

In my three short years in the profession, some of the hardest truths that I have had to come terms with are: the librarian profession in its current form treats its freshly minted professionals poorly, and that without any systematic reform from within the profession, it will

continue to alienate and push out new talent.

Such is my case. I was told time and time again from many sources within the profession that I would have promise and a rewarding career in the field. From my recruitment to graduate school, to the duration of my studies, and to my graduation, I received accolades both formally and informally that my combination of interdisciplinary subject expertise and developed soft skills were exactly what the profession needed, insomuch that I was the recipient of three major scholarships and awards in my graduate career, with the 2011 University of Alberta Libraries Outstanding Professional and Academic Achievement Award being the most notable. I say all this not to gloat, but to rather demonstrate that I was led to believe that I had some *promise* in the field.

Yet where has all this led me in the three years since? Two short-term contracts at institutions where my credentials were not enough, where others who have been at the post-graduate rat race for even longer than I have were snatching up the available openings and jobs. Currently, the best that I can do is a two shift a week, part-time library assistant position. On the lowest rung of the professional ladder, I have often had no access to the most basic of benefit security nets. I am tired of the looks of pity from colleagues as contracts come to an end, along with packing up my desk every eight months, and subsequently being unceremoniously shown the door. Is this how the profession is going to cultivate its next generation: to have graduates engage in a war of attrition to see who can last the longest through the under/unemployment?

My fall from grace has been saddening and demoralizing. It has impacted my social, physical and mental health, as I have struggled through the depths of depression in trying to come to terms with how profoundly unfair the profession treats its freshly minted professionals. Nonetheless, my struggle has been humbling, and it has given me the clarity that I need. At this point in time, given the nature of the profession, **I am delivering my own coup de grâce: the best thing for me to do is to leave the librarianship profession and never look back.**

In a profession where I was expected to contribute, this letter is my final (and hopefully the most lasting) contribution. Sadly, my case is not unique. In the process of reconnecting with old classmates and sharing my struggle with them, my story has resonated with them. Broadly speaking, there are many more of us freshly minted professionals out there who are facing the same circumstances as I have. The only difference is that I am no longer afraid of potentially burning bridges or shooting myself in the foot for calling people out and drawing attention to the plight of the freshly minted librarian professional. This profession should be **ashamed** of the fact that it attracts people based on false pretenses, then leaves them out in the cold when these people need jobs. I reiterate that I find it undoubtedly offensive that the best career advice that those with job security can give is "wait your turn" or "be patient." With all due respect, I would say to those who dispense with that "advice" to keep their mouths shut and to keep that "advice" to themselves, because that is not going to get anyone gainfully employed.

Before the profession engages in any further discussion of "what libraries need", "where libraries are going" and other questions of navel gazing and self-importance, the question that it first needs to tackle is "what can we do about freshly minted graduate under/unemployment?". To this end, I believe that some of the questions and points that I have raised here help to answer this question, and that action on these fronts will go towards stopping others from having to go through what I have gone through.

The only time that I have regretted my decision to go this route was back in November when I was struggling to come to terms with my underemployment, and the feeling of squandering away the best of my 20s. Today, I have come to the realization that all this was but a failed experiment, and that I am very lucky to be leaving the profession at an age when I am still young enough to move past the regret and resentment and to go back to square one to try a new career path. I believe that I am also doing my part by giving prospective students my blunt assessment of the profession, and warning them of the dangers that lie ahead for them should they choose to pursue librarianship. I have no sense of shame of doing any of this, and I could care less about what others in the profession think of my decision or the points that I have raised here. As Rex Murphy recently said on quitting: "sometimes there's more smarts in leaving than in taking up the game." And his words here certainly apply to me and the foolish game of librarianship for the freshly minted professional.

Yours Sincerely,
Jason Wong
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