

Competencies and Certification

WHERE THE PROFESSION STANDS

by Sandy Brooks

Competencies are a perennially hot topic in career and education discussions. To be "competent" is to be capable and well qualified.

Therefore, a "competency" is an expression of a skill or characteristic needed by a worker to be capable and well qualified to do their job. A list of competencies for a certain job or career can be used in a number of ways.

‡ **Job descriptions**—established competencies can be used in job descriptions to define the role of that worker, and what skills or characteristics are needed to do that job well.

‡ **Compensation/Career Ladders**—establishing proficiency in various competencies can be used to assign steps to a career ladder or pay scale. (For more information on developing a library worker career ladder, see the document on ALA's "Library and Information Studies Education and Human Resource Utilization"—or LEPU—at <http://www.ala.org/hrdr/lepu.pdf>).

‡ **Education**—established competencies can be used to construct educational opportunities, such as certificate or degree programs for that job. On a smaller scale, a group of competencies can be pulled from a longer list to be addressed in continuing education workshops, conferences, and other training.

‡ **Evaluation**—established competencies can be used as part of an annual job evaluation. Do you possess all the skills necessary to do your job (based on your job description)? Have you received training during the year to review or update these skills?

‡ **Consistency**—established competencies allow for some sort of consistent, objective consideration of a class of jobs or a career track on a national or regional level.

"Skill Standards" is another trend attempting to meet some of the same goals of competencies. "Skill Standards" are devised to answer two questions, according to Washington State Skill Standards: What do workers need to know and be able to do to succeed in today's workplace, and how do we know when workers are performing well? Sample skill standards for library technicians can be found at <http://flightline.highline.etc.edu/library000/SkillStandards.htm>.

In August 2001, the Connecticut Library Association executive board adopted a set of competencies for library support staff, as presented by C.L.A.S.S. (the Connecticut Library Association Support Staff section). It is very difficult to define competencies for a class of jobs as varied as "library support staff." Particular job descriptions in this class range from shelver, page, and secretary, to department heads and even directors of small libraries or branches. In Connecticut we tried to assume the most minimal competencies needed for the whole spectrum of support staff jobs. We hoped that competencies established by other organizations would cover more specific support staff jobs. For example, the American Library Association's (ALA) Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) has developed a set of competencies for children's librarians (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/competencies.html>), which should more closely reflect appropriate skills needed by children's staff than anything aimed at library support staff in general. The Public Library Association is working on a program to certify public library administrators (<http://www.pla.org/projects/certification/certification.html>). Their program should more closely reflect appropriate skills needed by a library director or branch manager, regardless of whether they hold an MLS or not.

The Connecticut L T A Competencies cover the areas of General Competencies,

Personal/Professional Competencies, Technology Competencies, Public Services Competencies, and Technical Services Competencies (complete list available at <http://www.lib.uconn.edu/cla/new/class.html>) C.L.A.S.S. developed this list by searching the Internet for existing support staff competencies, then using them, along with our own first-hand knowledge of the work support staff do, to construct the qualifications. (C.L.A.S.S. was prompted to take on this task to help a statewide continuing education committee target workshops to the needs of various library workers.)

Some of the criteria gleaned from the Internet were actually objectives for certificate programs, whether voluntary, mandated by state or region, or for formal education programs. Some of these resources include:

- ‡ **Minnesota Voluntary Library Certification Program:**
A Program for Library Employees at <http://www.arrowhead.lib.mn.us/certification/comp.htm>
- ‡ **Rochester Regional Library Council Technology Competencies for Library Staff** at <http://www.rrlc.org/competencies/techcomp.html>.
- ‡ **Library Supportstaff.com Competencies**—Web sites for Library Staff Information Professionals at <http://librarysupportstaff.com/4competencyy.html>. (This collection of links by Mary Niederlander is by far the most comprehensive collection of competency information I've found online.)

When researching competencies, one almost immediately begins to see a connection to certification. Certification of library support staff is usually presented in one of two ways:

- ‡ **Certification** (more commonly called "accreditation") of *training programs* for library support staff for (usually certificate programs or associate degrees in a one- or two- year college program)

¶ **Certification of the individual worker** (usually a voluntary certification, such as given in Minnesota as noted above, or by the New York State Library Assistants' Association —see <http://nysl.org/certificateprog.html>)

In 1996, ALA's LSSIRT undertook a survey asking paraprofessionals from across the country about their concerns. The results of the survey indicated that the top three concerns among library support staff were Career Ladders, Compensation, and Continuing Education (full task force reports available at <http://www.ala.org/ssirt/>). Since 1996, LSSIRT has been targeting conference programming and round table activity at addressing these three issues. A review of all the task force reports shows several common threads among the three issues — competencies and certification are two of the most prominent, emphasizing the link between the two concepts.

The ALA/AP A Certification Task Force has the following to say about certification of library support staff:

"The certification of library technical assistants (LTAs) has been considered during the development of the ALA/APA Certification Program. This aspect of certification needs to be more fully developed by its proponents before it can be acted upon by ALA/AP A. Library technical assistants are, therefore, not eligible to apply for certification in the first phase of this program. However, it is important that ALA/APA be receptive to the education and development needs of all workers in the library industry." (http://www.ala.org/hrdr/apa_certiflta.html).

The ALA/APA is the new Allied Professional Association of the American Library Association, which is a service organization that was formed to advocate for improved status, pay equity and salaries for librarians. For more information see http://www.ala.org/hrdr/ala_apa.html.

At this point, ALA only accredits Masters degree programs, not library technical assistant programs. Currently, there is no national certification program in place for support staff. Some of the key players who are looking at these issues are:

¶ ALA Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (ALA LSSIRT) — LSSIRT is currently considering what role, if any, it should take in the development, promotion, and/or implementation of a national library staff certification program.

¶ Council on Library/Media Technicians (COLT) —COLT has as one of its objectives "to initiate, promote and support activities leading toward the appropriate placement, employment and certification of library support staff personnel." COLT does not currently have a national certification program in place. (See *A Position Paper on Skill Certification for Library/Media Support Staff* at <http://library.ucr.edu/COLT/coltcert.html>)

¶ According to ALA/APA information (http://www.ala.org/hrdr/apa_certiflta.html), "The ALA Committee on Education historically has had responsibility for the policy statement Criteria Programs to Prepare Library Technical Assistants. This policy was last revised in 1979. A revision of this criteria statement was recently forwarded to ALA Council but

returned to the Committee for review after the completion of four task forces associated with the Congress on Professional Education." (see the proposed revision at <http://library.ucr.edu/COLT/alaedu.html>)

¶ Also according to ALA/APA information, "The ACRL/CJCLS/Library/Media Technician Training Committee is largely made up of educators from two-year LTA training programs. This committee has had more interest in working toward accrediting programs than in certifying individuals."

Where does the profession currently stand on competencies and certification for library support staff? There are no national competencies or certifications in place at this time. However, a number of organizations are increasingly concerned about and looking at these issues. You can make your opinions on this topic known by contacting representatives of LSSIRT and/or COLT. (Visit <http://www.ala.org/ssirt/> - click on "Steering Committee" under *Organization* for contact information for LSSIRT board members, or click on "Council on Library/Media Technicians" under *Resources* to reach COLT board members.) You can also work towards getting competencies and certification programs established in your state or region. Together we can then "connect the dots" toward a unified national program that best meets the needs of the library profession and its stalwart workers.

LTA Competencies

COMPILED BY THE CONNECTICUT LIBRARY ASSOCIATION SUPPORT STAFF SECTION

1. General Competencies for all Library Staff

- a. Knowledge of library mission and patron base.
- b. Knowledge of basic local library policies.
- c. Knowledge of the departments and services of library.
- d. Knowledge of library's personnel roles and communication procedures ("chain of command").
- e. Knowledge of library's participation in consortiums, networks, and other resource-sharing organizations.
- f. Ability to collect and compile library statistics.
- g. Ability to acquire supplies and equipment and maintain inventory.
- h. Ability to prioritize and organize tasks.
- i. Ability to understand and demonstrate customer service philosophy.
- j. Knowledge of general library terminology.

2. Personal/Professional Competencies for all Library Staff

- a. Display a positive, professional attitude and image, including awareness of professional associations.
- b. Display a willingness to change, and seek opportunities to grow both personally and professionally.
- c. Display good communication skills -interact well with all kinds of people, and communicate clearly and concisely in English, both verbally and in writing.
- d. Ability to work effectively in groups, and establish and maintain working relationships with both users and staff.
- e. Ability to work well independently and be goal-oriented.
- f. Ability to recognize ethical issues and deal with unethical practices/decisions.
- g. Ability to recognize and encourage diversity and individuality in both patrons and other staff.

3. Technology Competencies for all Library Staff

- a. Demonstrate a basic understanding of the role technology plays in the creation, retrieval, and delivery of library resources and services.
- b. Demonstrate an understanding of the library's role in, and philosophy of, introducing technology to the public.
- c. Knowledge of keyboarding techniques.
- d. Knowledge of and ability to operate equipment and do minor repairs.
- e. Knowledge of skills needed to use equipment available to public, and ability to train public to use it.
- f. Knowledge of online computer automation system.
- g. Knowledge of word processing and other software.
- h. Knowledge of e-mail and Internet software and appropriate uses.
- i. Knowledge of Internet and database searching techniques.

4. Public Services Competencies for Public Services Staff

- a. Ability to introduce users to all library services.
- b. Ability to use the entire library collection to satisfy user requests.
- c. Knowledge of library's circulation system and public access catalog.
- d. Knowledge of fine and fees policies, and cash and security procedures.
- e. Knowledge of basic reference and information resources and referral procedures.
- f. Knowledge of available community resources.
- g. Knowledge of library copyright requirements.
- h. Knowledge of library classification system with the ability to do shelving and shelf reading.
- i. Familiarity with reader's advisory issues and resources.
- j. Familiarity with ILL procedures.
- k. Ability to deal with disruptive patrons and emergency situations.

5. Technical Services Competencies for Technical Services Staff

- a. Knowledge of appropriate methods and techniques for materials processing, storage, and preservation.
- b. Knowledge of the publishing industry and vendors from which library acquires materials, supplies, equipment, and services.
- c. Knowledge of procedures for verifying and ordering materials, receiving orders, resolving problems, and accounting for expenditures.
- d. Knowledge of cataloging utilities (OCLC, Library of Congress, Rlin, etc.)
- e. Familiarity with MARC format, cataloging rules, subject headings, and classification schemes.
- f. Ability to pay attention to detail.

This list of competencies was endorsed by the Connecticut Library Association executive board at their meeting on 8/16/01.

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