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What Is a “Real Librarian”?

Considering the Distinction

In a recent conversation with a former library colleague, she enthusiastically shared about her return to school to earn her MLIS so that she could be a “real librarian.” I was certainly excited and encouraged her, but the phrase she used caught my attention. I have heard “real librarian” used on multiple occasions, and although I understood the intended meaning, it bothered me and caused me to consider: What is a “real librarian”?

The prevailing viewpoint seems to be that a “real librarian” is someone who has the proper education and certification, which in our current context is the MLIS, MLS, or MSLS. In my home state of California, certificated teacher librarians have the specialized Teacher Librarian Services Credential. In school libraries, a distinction is made between teacher librarians and library assistants, specialists, or technicians, commonly referred to as *paraprofessionals*. In academic libraries, a clear distinction is made between *librarians* and *library staff*. The unspoken difference is that some possess the specified educational degree or certification, while others do not, making them not quite librarians.

But is this accurate? Should education or certification be the defining factor for being a “real librarian,” or should it encompass more? Should we also consider function and work?

Before recently joining academia, I worked in public and school libraries, where the vast majority of my colleagues did not have a library-specific degree or certification. This was largely due to cutbacks, resulting in many part-time and entry-level positions. In the small and mid-sized public libraries where I worked, there was one, maybe two, staff members with an MLIS, not including myself once I earned my degree. According to the 2022–23 California Public Library Statistics, about 28 percent of public library full-time employees have an MLIS.¹ In the school district where I worked, there were no certificated teacher librarians at all for its forty schools. Districts and states vary, but in California, it is not uncommon to have just one certificated librarian for an entire district. According to the California Department of Education’s 2022–23 Annual School Library Evaluation, only 19 percent of school libraries have a teacher librarian or a qualified certificated librarian working at least part-time.² Academic libraries have more degreed librarians, but usually even more staff, who, along with student workers, are regularly the first to engage and assist patrons and are essential to daily library operations. This means that most patrons are being served by library workers who do not possess the specified degree or certification, and a good portion of library work is being done by them.

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Which causes me to ask: Are all these people who serve our patrons and students not librarians? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a *librarian* as “the keeper or custodian of a library.”³ Those of us in the profession will likely argue that it is so much more, but the broadness of the definition is worth considering. In his article about information professionals without MLIS degrees, William L. Jenkins points out that the first librarians of the ancient world in Alexandria had training in different fields, many of them poets, and what made “them worthy of service was their intelligence, management skills, cataloging and search talents, and incredible memories.”⁴ In other words, it was based more on skill and function than specific training or education.

My school and public library colleagues were answering reference questions, providing reader advisory, giving presentations, implementing programs, performing tech services, and daily engaging patrons in myriad ways. They were indeed keepers of the library, especially the solo school library workers. It became a little inside joke with my school colleagues that we were “assistants” because the librarian we were supposedly assisting never showed up. Often, to patrons interacting with library workers, they are librarians. Children, especially, see no distinction and invariably call whoever is working and helping them in a library a librarian.

What makes a librarian a librarian? Certification, function, or both? Do the professionals within the field or patrons determine who a librarian is? Or both? If a library specialist is providing essential, daily library and patron services, could they be considered a librarian by merit of their function and work? What library work encompasses is indeed broad and continuously changing, varies widely depending on the context, and is often learned on the job rather than in the classroom.

I confess that my own vision of a “real librarian” was grounded in academia, perhaps because academic librarians are generally more respected and often associated with the profession. I wanted to be a “real librarian” and pictured working in higher education as its fulfillment. Now that I am on the other side as a university associate librarian, I have realized that my desire to be a “real librarian” was limited and even somewhat skewed.

To be sure, there is great value in certification and a library-specific degree. The training and knowledge are invaluable and necessary for libraries to thrive. Those who have put in the work and effort to obtain certification or a degree should be given proper respect and corresponding greater and specialized responsibilities and duties. Studies have shown how beneficial certificated librarians are to students.⁵ Yet perhaps we need not exclude those without certification who are doing the work to ensure due respect for those who do have it. Maybe, in a way, they merit acknowledgement even more because they do not receive equal respect for “keeping” the library.

What does this mean? Perhaps a change in our language or terminology. Academic librarians have often set the precedent and have great influence in the field. Libraries at their best are wonderfully inclusive, so perhaps this should extend to, and somehow ensure, that those performing librarian functions do not feel as though they are not “real librarians.” After all, they almost certainly are to their patrons.

In response to my dear colleague starting the MLIS journey, knowing how well she serves and is loved by the students in the library, how could I not say, “You *are* a real librarian”? *»*

Notes

1. Reports, “Staffing,” 2025, https://ca.countingopinions.com/pireports/view_dashboard.php?pkey5f2b0f251405ca110b922ae683961fad3&live.
2. Statistics About California School Libraries – School Libraries (CA Dept of Education), “Statistics about California School Libraries,” November 1, 2024, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/lb/schoollibrstats08.asp#staffingstatistics>.
3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v., “librarian,” accessed July 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/librarian_n?tab=meaning_and_use#39410897
4. William L. Jenkins, “If You Were a Real Librarian, You Would Know: Information Professionals without M.L.I.S. Degrees.” *Searcher*, 13, no. 8 (2005): 44, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d114d33c-eb69-3638-8100-7f370ba0fde0>.
5. Stephanie Cohen, Ivy Poitras, Khaila Mickens, and Anushka Shirali, “Roles of the School Librarian: Empowering Student Learning and Success Informational Brief,” November 2019, <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/slssap/ncc-roles-brief.pdf>.