

Chapter 6

Recruitment Experiences in Area Studies Library Organizations: The Case of ACRL's Western European Studies Section (WESS)*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the urgent need to recruit individuals into academic librarianship for positions within or otherwise related to area studies. It first outlines the major problems that continue to inhibit recruitment efforts in area studies including negative perceptions of academic librarianship, a narrow interpretation of qualifications, deterrents of the library and information science curriculum for subject Ph.D.s, and the shrinking number of dedicated full-time positions. Educational incentives, experiential opportunities, and a stronger focus on professional recruitment and collaboration by area studies library organizations are each explored as potential solutions. The second half of the chapter presents the activities and accomplishments of WESS's Recruitment to the Profession Committee as a model for other area studies library groups to use to stimulate professional recruitment in their respective specialties.

INTRODUCTION

Academic librarianship occupies an uneasy place within the discourse on the graying of the professoriate and concerns regarding the recruitment of the next generation of professionals in higher education. While tenure-track positions in teaching departments are often fiercely competitive, sometimes tendering several hundred applicants

for a single opening, academic libraries often find themselves with a dearth of qualified candidates to fill their vacancies. Certainly this can be attributed in part to the fact that librarianship—academic or otherwise—is often not a first career choice for college graduates. The restructuring of academic libraries resulting from budget reductions and changing acquisitions patterns due to increasing on-line content has in turn contributed to a shrinking pool of available full-time positions, particularly for entry-level professionals. Another aspect of this

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issue pertains to the sometimes heterogeneous or extreme qualifications required for certain positions in academic libraries, especially those within area studies or that support such collections and which require specialized subject expertise and linguistic abilities. Nevertheless, given the impending wave of retirements in academic libraries expected to occur over the next decade, recruitment has become an important theme throughout the profession, yet there is little in the literature concerning recruitment of area studies librarians, either broadly or with respect to specific area studies specialties, who are not already enrolled in library and information science (LIS) programs or new librarians working in the field. This chapter addresses the urgent need to recruit individuals into academic librarianship for positions within or otherwise related to area studies by outlining the problems particular to area studies recruitment and recommending ways to stimulate recruitment to the profession using the activities and accomplishments of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Western European Studies Section (WESS) as an exemplum. Though area studies traditionally connotes regions outside of Western Europe and North America, viewed holistically Western European studies has all the hallmarks of area studies in terms of diverse linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics. For this reason, the recruitment experiences of WESS should be of interest to kindred library groups focused on other parts of the globe that have been experiencing similar difficulties in recruitment; furthermore, by speaking to issues common to area studies librarianship as a whole, it is hoped that the experiences of one organization can be applied more broadly to similar groups and that mutual benefit will result from sharing concerns and suggesting potential collaborations between these groups as a result of the publication of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

One of the goals of area studies is to moderate the cultural bias in all our accustomed patterns of life and thought. – Howard W. Winger (1966, p. 169)

While “area studies” in American higher education dates back to the 1930s, it was only with the rise of the Cold War and the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 that government leaders formally acknowledged the pressing need for America, in the interest of national security, to be better informed about heretofore neglected areas of the globe. From the outset, then, area studies was implicitly understood to exclude Western Europe and North America. The NDEA used area studies as a vehicle for the nation to meet its new security challenges by providing funding that helped create centers and institutes at leading universities on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Near and Middle East, Latin America, and elsewhere. These interdisciplinary centers facilitated the study of scores of foreign languages and the respective cultures of these world areas, becoming storehouses for the accumulation of intellectual and material capital that would in turn provide a source of expertise for the government’s national security needs and concomitant benefits to the academic and business communities.

The passage of the Higher Education Act (Title VI) in 1965 incorporated both the educational programs that were part of the NDEA and the study-abroad programs created by the Fulbright-Hays (FH) Act in 1961 and broadened the overall purview of international education. This was followed by a period of amendments and reauthorizations to the Title VI/FH programs that added undergraduate international studies, business and international education, language resource centers, and various other programs to the range of activities administered by the Department of Education. The growth of Title VI/FH over time

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