

# The Ideal Candidate for School Library Media Specialist: Views from School Administrators, Library School Faculty, and MLS Students

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Preferred characteristics in applicants for school library media specialist (SLMS) positions are studied in this article from three perspectives, that of the library school faculty, the library school student, and the school administrator. Surveys were sent to public high school administrators in the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho; faculties of American Library Association (ALA)-accredited master of library science (MLS) programs; and students enrolled in ALA-accredited programs. Using a five-point scale, participants rated twenty-six qualities organized into five general groupings: education, experience, recommendations, involvement, and compatibilities. Faculty ( $n=27$ ), students ( $n=142$ ), and administrators ( $n=26$ ) agreed that the most valued SLMS job candidate would have the ability to work well with others and possess excellent managerial and technical skills. Differences in the three groups' perspectives suggest a lack of common perception of the role of the SLMS among school administrators, MLS students, and library and information science faculty and a need to align visions with national guidelines for the role of school library media programs in the educational mission of the school.

In preparation for applying and interviewing for positions, hopeful school library media specialists (SLMSs) organize portfolios of their work, write cover letters, and create résumés, and their professors write letters highlighting the students' qualities that they believe will attract the interest of employers. To facilitate the best matches between SLMS positions and applicants, SLMS students, their faculty advisors, and school administrators responsible for hiring decisions need to share a vision of what constitutes a strong, if not ideal, candidate for an SLMS position. There is, however, a lack of research on what qualities or competencies school principals seek during the hiring process and how these competencies compare to the perceptions held by students and their faculties. Access to this information could enable SLMS candidates to better highlight their education and qualities to potential employers as well as guide MLS students and SLMS programs in selecting preprofessional experiences and training to better match school administrator expectations. This information might also help to identify discrepancies in visions or misperceptions about the role of the SLMS and the school library media program in the schools.







did not have to be associated with the school library track of the information science graduate program to participate. This method allowed students to be polled who were taking part in the discussion list environment, yet who might not be taking classes over the summer when the study was conducted. Students who expressed interest in participation were emailed a survey. As with the LIS faculty survey, students were requested to reflect their own opinions of what qualities were most important for SLMS candidates to possess, not what they believed might be the opinion of high school administrators.

## Results

Each one of the twenty-six qualities was rated as to whether the participant (administrator, faculty member, student) felt it was of great importance (5), fair importance (4), some importance (3), minimal importance (2), or no importance (1) when hiring a SMLS (see table 1)

Table 1. Mean Ratings of Importance of Twenty-six Qualities in Hiring SLMSs (by Perspective: Administrators, LIS Faculty, LIS Students)

	Administrators	LIS Faculty	LIS Students	Overall*
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank

## Category 4: Involvement

Involvement in professional organizations	3.50	20	3.78	17	3.40	20	3.56	18
Evidence of volunteer work w/ children or young adults	3.12							

All three groups viewed the following nine qualities as being of at least fair importance (M  $\geq$ 4.0):

- x ability to work with others (overall, 4.88; administrators, 4.96; faculty, 4.92; and students, 4.77);
- x strong technology skills with knowledge of classroom (overall, 4.66; administrators, 4.77; faculty, 4.48; and students, 4.73);
- x evidence of strong managerial skills (overall, 4.60; administrators, 4.81; faculty, 4.52; and students, 4.47);
- x evidence of excellent teaching skills (overall, 4.53; administrators, 4.38; faculty, 4.78; and students, 4.44);
- x evidence of excellent classroom management skills (overall, 4.46; administrators, 4.65; faculty, 4.37; and students, 4.36);
- x educational philosophy in alignment with district (overall, 4.34; administrators, 4.59; faculty, 4.19; and students, 4.23);
- x evidence of creativity (overall, 4.27; administrators, 4.46; faculty, 4.15; and students, 4.20);
- x strong young adult (YA) literature background (overall, 4.23; administrators, 4.19; faculty, 4.33; and students, 4.16); and



skills (collaboration and multicultural perspective) would make them marketable (Warren and Peel 1998). There is overlap, although not an exact match, in the literature and the current study. Students a half decade ago and today believe that strong interpersonal skills and technology skills will aid them in getting a job in a school.

The literature suggests that administrators most value the following six qualities:

1. a background in instructional theory;
2. experience with diverse classroom populations;
3. evidence of superior knowledge in the subject area being taught (Roden and Cardina 1996);
4. successful student teaching or teaching experience;
5. good oral and written communication skills (Caldwell 1999; Abernathy, Forsyth, and Mitchell 2001; and Ralph et al. 1998); and
6. strong classroom management skills (Abernathy, Forsyth, and Mitchell 2001).

Comparing these six qualities to the top valued qualities (M=4.0) by administrators in this study, the authors found strong classroom management skills were valued in the literature and in the current study. The preference for successful student teaching or teaching experience found in the literature could be grouped, if not directly equated, with a recommendation from previous school personnel in this study. The current study did not ask participants to rank the importance of a background in instructional theory, experience with diverse populations, knowledge in the subject area being taught, or communication skills. However, administrators' support for the ability to work well with others could suggest that these other people skills (working with diverse populations and communication skills) might also have been highly rated. While the literature (qualities valued in hiring of teachers) and the current study (qualities valued in hiring of SLMS) do not consider exactly the same attributes, the authors found that people skills and management skills are valued both the literature and in this study. What becomes problematic is verifying the finding in the literature that evidence of superior knowledge in the subject area being taught is highly valued by administrators. Qualities in the current study that might be as measures of subject area knowledge are the MLS degree, library endorsement on teaching certificate, and, to some extent, a strong background in young adult (YA) literature. While knowledge of YA literature is certainly needed, such knowledge does not represent the range of skills and knowledge needed by SLMSs. Some states have strong (or are strengthening) requirements for the school library media endorsement on their teaching certificates, others do not (Thomas and Perritt 2003). Therefore, the ability of certification to represent subject knowledge may depend upon the state issuing the endorsement. Of the three qualities (MLS degree, SLMS endorsement, background in YA literature), the MLS degree appears to be the better indicator of training in librarianship. Yet, administrators view the MLS as the least important candidate quality and the only one of less than fair importance (M<4). Certification endorsement and background in YA literature were rated about equal in importance (M=4.2). (If administrators viewed school media endorsement on the teaching certificate to also represent evidence of knowledge of librarianship represented by the MLS degree, the authors would expect SLMS endorsement to be rated equal to if not higher than the MLS.) This suggests that administrators might not have a clear understanding of the duties of the SLMS or of the training assumed in the MLS degree and may have a narrow view of the role of the school library media program. It is not fetched that administrators might lack these understandings as some



teachers still don't understand the value of a library media specialist alone the significance of properly identifying, evaluating, and using information (Whelan 2003, 50).

From the administrators ratings, one can construe their view of the role of the SLMS in the school. Managerial skill, technology know and application, and sociability are the three broad and most valued characteristics (M=4.5). This suggests that administrators see SLMSs or school librarians as managers of their duty areas. However, evidence of teaching skill (M=3.74), school media endorsement on the teaching certificate (M=4.22), and an MLS degree (M=3.85) were not valued as important (M=1.5), suggesting that perhaps administrators do not view school librarianship as a knowledge area as they might view the need for a physics teacher to have a degree and certification in physics do they view teaching as a function of the SMLS. That is, one might surmise that administrators view the running of the school library media

(subject knowledge, subject certification, and nationally accredited library degrees). Among the ratings of the three groups (administrators, faculty, and students), faculty had the closest alignment with the goals of Information Power.

Administrators in this study, overall, express a narrow view of the SLMS and of the role of the school library media program in the educational mission of the school (see also Brown and Petrus unpublished), the literature suggests that this is an artifact of their own educational training for school administration. In a depiction by Hartzell (2002), a review was made of the education of school principals in regard to the school library. Hartzell remarked that the courses required to become a school principal speak very little to the value that a strong library program can add to a school. In fact, Hartzell (2002) pointed out that the one area where school libraries are mentioned is in school law curricula where libraries are seen as potential threats to the school when copyright and censorship issues arise. This leaves many administrative students with the impression that school libraries are legal time bombs instead of with the impression that school librarians can make significant contributions to a principal's success (Hartzell 2002, ¶11).

ALA's Information Powers the current national guideline for the role the school library media program and, therefore, the role the SLMS should have in schools. This current study suggests that library school faculty perspectives of valued qualities in applicants for SLMS positions support Information Power, at least in areas addressed by this study. Administrators and students, however, show a less supportive perspective of the SLMS. This suggests that school administrators, as well as school library media majors, need a better introduction to and understanding of the school library media program, centers, and specialists.

Cain-Caston (1999) and Ralph et al. (1998), in their research studies on administrative practices in hiring teachers, offer some ideas that the authors can adapt for school administrators, LIS faculty, and LIS students going into the school library media profession. Caston (1999) stressed a need for offering annual seminars to students during their preservice educations to keep them abreast of current hiring practices. Ralph et al. (1998) related the importance of a collaborative effort on the parts of teachers, administrators, and university faculty to unify curriculum taught to preservice teachers. One way to implement these suggestions, including an introduction to libraries for administrators, is through annual local seminars for the three groups, perhaps hosted by state educational media associations (professional associations of SLMSs). In seminars, administrators would learn about innovative ways that SLMSs are being used in

goals established in Information Power, administrators can have a broader understanding of the qualities that will ensure the best school library media programs in their schools and applicants will know the qualities to better highlight and document in their applications. The schools and their students, as well as their surrounding communities, will be the ultimate beneficiaries.

For now, SLMS applicants need to consider preparing applications that both fulfill the current perceptions of administrators and help administrators gain a more balanced view of the role of school library media program and the SLMS in their schools. The applicant can provide real world evidence of successful performance in areas administrators most value and also add in some background from, for example, Information Power and the literature that documents the role of the school library media program in strengthening learning outcomes in schools, and provide administrators with real world evidence of successful performance in these additional areas. Researchers need to consider such pilot projects as the seminars outlined above, using pre and post testing to document changes in attitudes and values toward the role of the school library media program in schools and the qualities sought in hiring SLMSs.

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