

## 9 AREA STUDIES LIBRARIANSHIP

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### INTRODUCTION

As the name suggests, area studies librarians specialize in working with geographic areas of the world in a variety of ways. The region that an area studies librarian specializes in could be a country such as Japan or a continent such as Africa.

As the world becomes more interconnected, the work of an area studies librarian increases in importance. The expertise and knowledge (generally including both deep familiarity with the region as well as skill in one or more foreign languages) are highly desirable qualities for academic libraries across the nation. Thus, area studies librarians have many opportunities open to them.

From a practical perspective, being an area studies librarian means that every day will be different given the diversity of duties. Besides managing and developing the library's collection, area studies librarians teach information literacy courses, answer research questions both at the reference desk and by e-mail, phone, instant messenger, and other media, work on special projects, and conduct research. They also get the chance to develop a close relationship with the departments they serve. Robbins (2010) explains with numbers the current trends and future needs of area studies librarians. Those changes make a career in area studies librarianship an exciting one as academic libraries move to stay a step ahead of the information needs of users of their collections.

## INTERSECTIONS WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES

When one looks at the various titles of area studies librarians, it is not quite discernible what their duties encompass. Take for instance the title of a librarian at the University of Kansas: Slavic and Near East Studies Librarian. Unlike a biology subject specialist, where it is very clear that the person is responsible for library's biology collection, in the case of area studies, one can be responsible for a variety of disciplines (such as languages, history, and politics) that are linked to a specific part of the world. The aforementioned Slavic and Near East Studies Librarian has a remarkable talent for language (11 languages at the advanced level; 5 at the intermediate level; and 9 at the basic level) and has many responsibilities. He performs collection development for the Balkan Peninsula, the Near East, and linguistics. Due to his language skills, he is also the cataloger for the materials related to those regions. Though it is not the norm for subject specialists to also be catalogers, it serves as an example of how varied area studies librarians' work can be. More commonly, area studies librarians serve as reference librarians or provide library instruction.

Area studies librarians (also called "area studies bibliographers," "librarians for [name of a region of the world] studies," or sometimes simply classified as a "humanities librarian") can work with a wide range of disciplines, from history to economics to literature and everything in between. Unlike other subject specialist librarians, however, they will be responsible only for covering these disciplines as relating to their region of the world: for example, the history, economics, and language of Japan. This can get complex when materials discuss more than one area of the world. An example of this could be a book on the economic relationship between Latin America and China. If the book were written in Spanish, then it is likely that the area studies librarian responsible for Latin America would be asked to purchase it. Very expensive items that discuss multiple regions of the world may end up being funded by multiple librarians.

## WORKPLACES

Most area studies librarians work in academic libraries, although a few work in large public libraries or specialized libraries. The specificity of their responsibilities varies with the size of the library. The bigger the collection size, the more specific the librarian's duties are likely to be. For example, in a small liberal arts college, the librarian who covers humanities, social sciences disciplines, and fine arts may also cover area studies if he or she has expertise on a specific region. On the other hand, in a large institution, they may cover only a particular geographic area. At the University of Kansas where the author works, there is a Librarian for African and Global and International Studies; a Librarian for Slavic Studies; an East Asian Studies Librarian; a Japanese Studies Librarian; and a Librarian for Spanish, Portuguese, Latin American and Caribbean Studies. This demonstrates that in some cases the region of the world an individual covers can be rather small, as in the case of the Japanese Studies Librarian, or rather

large, as with the African and Global and International Studies Librarian. How regions are divided and assigned depends on various factors. The institution may seek a librarian with certain language skills that match the current research and curricular needs of the teaching faculty or they may seek a librarian with language skills to match that of historically divided geographical regions. In the case of the area covered by the Librarian for Spanish, Portuguese, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, one could wonder how two European countries are mixed in with most countries in another continent. The answer has to do with colonialism. Both Spain and Portugal had colonies in the New World—thus merging all of those countries under the responsibility of one area studies librarian. Keep in mind that budgets do not necessarily match the size of the area covered. Many area studies librarians may also share duties outside of their main units. They can have responsibilities to help staff the general reference desk or to work half-time as instruction librarians. They may also be responsible for performing original cataloging, especially if they are knowledgeable about several languages. The number of hours spent performing work outside of area studies varies by institution.

## SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE POSITION

Besides having a master's degree in library science (MLS), a prospective area studies librarian would usually have a second master's degree or a PhD related to the geographic area in which they want to specialize. This allows for some flexibility. Degrees may be in the social sciences, humanities, or foreign languages. The author's training is in Hispanic literature and Spanish linguistics rather than history or Latin American studies. Many librarians actually complete this "second master's degree" or PhD *before* they decide to pursue careers as librarians. Some schools offer dual master's degree programs in information science and a content area. For example, the University of Texas at Austin offers a combined master of science in information studies and master of arts in Latin American studies. Although the content area degree is often seen in the "preferred" list of qualifications rather than the "required" list, students interested in this particular line of work should regard an advanced degree in a content area almost as required since it is a defining component when evaluating the applications during the hiring process. After all, subject specialists work closely with faculty from the various departments they serve. Knowledge of their research content only helps facilitate the conversation, and thus strengthen the relationship. Librarians with additional advanced degrees may find that the research skills, content knowledge, and academic interests they bring with them also aid their work toward tenure and promotion.

Proficiency in a second language is another major component in being an area studies librarian. For many area studies positions, knowledge of one or more relevant languages may be a deciding factor in getting the position. Native speakers of a language may have an advantage in the job hunt. For example, a native Spanish speaker who grew up in Latin America has not only the language background but also knowledge of the culture. No matter what their degrees are in, they may likely be familiar with the various political issues and overall history

of the area based on their years living in the region. Non-native speakers of Spanish, however, can certainly build up similar expertise through coursework and travel. These experiences would also provide the person with valuable knowledge about the country or region with which they want to work.

For both native and non-native speakers, having the experience of living in a particular country for an extended period of time provides many other valuable skills. It can give the person general information regarding, for example, the cost and availability of books. This information is very useful when dealing with vendors on either approval plans or firm orders. Having that firsthand knowledge will give the applicant an edge on the job market. For both native and non-native speakers, visiting countries in their area of interest is a great way to make a potential area studies librarian more competent.

### **MASTER OF LIBRARY SCIENCE AND OTHER COURSEWORK**

Many information science programs offer at least one course on collection development. This type of class provides a general background in the overarching issues and concepts particular to collection development. The theories and models taught in these classes will help a librarian discuss day-to-day responsibilities related to managing a library's collection with colleagues. However, in the case of area studies librarians, the knowledge and skills necessary in collection development may come mostly from internships with another area studies librarian or through discussion lists pertaining to their area of interest. The reason for this is that most classes focus on the North American market.

It is important to take at least one course each in cataloging, archives and manuscripts, reference, and information literacy instruction. Having a basic knowledge of cataloging can make performing complicated searches in the catalog easier, and will also help when the area studies librarian is called upon to catalog non-English materials. Most area studies librarians have to provide individual research consultations or work a few hours per week at the reference desk. A course in reference will prepare them to tackle questions from faculty and students without fear. The demand for information literacy instruction has increased as holdings of electronic materials have increased, making it even more necessary to help students navigate the multitude of resources available. Area studies librarians teach students how to interact with the resources available at their institutions and beyond. Taking a course on library instruction helps librarians begin to teach with confidence. Having said that, it is important to recognize that MLS coursework tends to provide a theoretical background for instruction rather than hands-on practice. The most useful knowledge comes through actual teaching in a library.

### **INTERNSHIPS AND WORK EXPERIENCE**

Many MLS programs offer internship opportunities so that their students may gain practical skills. Though some library science programs require a single

semester-long internship to satisfy the requirements to graduate, the author advises anyone desiring a career in area studies librarianship to do more than this. A prospective area studies librarian might take part in an extended internship spanning more than one semester or complete one or two internships in different departments. They may also find part-time jobs or volunteer work in libraries that provide valuable experience. Some of these internships or other positions may not relate directly to area studies. For example, a prospective area studies librarian might choose to work in a reference or instruction department to build his or her skills in these areas.

Part-time jobs and internships will provide a prospective librarian with knowledge and skills not covered in the classroom. For example, one could be involved in a digital scholarship project related to area studies. Keep in mind that it is always advisable to intern, volunteer, or work in a similar institution where one wants to work. This means that if the ideal job is to be an academic area studies librarian, it would be preferable to gain experience in an academic library setting.

It is important to look frequently at current ads for professional positions, even if one has many semesters left before graduating. This will help prospective area studies librarians keep apprised of current trends in job requirements. This information can be used to gain the necessary experience to qualify for jobs to which they would eventually hope to apply. For example, an MLS student might notice that many positions that appeal to him requires cataloging experience. If he became aware of this while he still had time left in library school, he would have the chance to take additional cataloging courses or pursue an internship in cataloging. This would increase his chances of securing a similar job in the future.

For students interning or working part-time in collection development, attending an international book fair could provide additional practical knowledge since MLS coursework tends to focus on the North American market. For example, the Feria Internacional del Libro in Guadalajara, Mexico, is the biggest and most important book fair in Latin America. The American Library Association and the Feria Internacional del Libro have a partnership to help librarians cover some of the costs of the trip. For more information on the ALA-FIL FREE PASS Program, visit this site <http://www.ala.org/offices/iro/awardsactivities/guadalajarabook>.

The LéaLA—Feria del Libro en Español de Los Angeles is an alternative to further expand one's skills and knowledge in collection development without leaving the country.

Though there is no bulletproof way to secure a position as an area studies librarian, all of the strategies discussed in the paragraphs above make one's curriculum vitae stand out.

## CAREER PATHS

For some librarians, moving up in the ranks is the way to go. They find that they work best when they can continue to work on the collections for their areas and have that continuous connection with the departments for which they are liaisons. Many others find that they are interested in leadership opportunities.

They can become heads of area studies units or even heads of collection development departments. Some area studies librarians stay in the same institution for decades while others choose to move from one institution to the next as positions become available. It is also possible for some librarians with deeper knowledge of a subject to also become a teaching faculty member in their academic departments, thus receiving joint appointments as professors.

Some area studies librarians find employment outside of academic libraries. Museums, large public libraries, and cultural heritage organizations often hire those with expertise in both librarianship and languages. Publishers, including those that create databases, as well as book vendors frequently hire area studies librarians to help design and sell products in multiple languages for libraries.

## PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

There are many professional organizations one can join to stay abreast of the developments in area studies based on the geographical area of interest. The following list is meant to provide a general overview of organizations dedicated to major regions of area studies. The list is not comprehensive. It is important to keep in mind that some organizations are ideal to join as students because they will provide you with valuable information. Once new librarians begin their careers, there will be other organizations that will be relevant to their position.

### *Latin American Studies*

*Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials* <http://salalm.org/>

Founded in 1956, it has provided the only national and international forum focused on Latin American studies for academic and research library collections and services. The Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials offers special student rates, and it is highly advisable that students join and attend conferences before graduating. Doing so will provide students with access to a community of librarians, academics, and others interested in Latin American studies librarianship. Through an e-mail list, members can learn about issues, resources, new opportunities, and open positions. There are several scholarship opportunities available to help its new members (especially students) attend the annual meetings and to encourage involvement. The organization provides new members with the option of joining a mentorship program, as well as committees that align with their interest.

### *Western European Studies*

*The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Western European Studies Section (WESS)* <http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/wess/acr-wesec>

WESS promotes the improvement of library services supporting study and research in western European affairs from ancient times to the present.

### ***Slavic Studies***

*Midwest Slavic and Eurasian Library Consortium* <https://midslav.wordpress.com/>

The Midwest Slavic and Eurasian Library Consortium promotes cooperation among member libraries in support of Slavic and Eurasian studies throughout the United States and Canada. Originally founded in 1996 as the Kansas Slavic Consortium, the group currently consists of seven member libraries primarily from the midwestern United States.

*Pacific Coast Slavic and East European Library Consortium* <http://intranet.library.arizona.edu/users/brewerm/pacslav/>

The group was formed to promote the development of Slavic studies resources in the Pacific region of the United States and Canada.

*East Coast Consortium of Slavic Library Collections* <http://www.eccslavic.org/>

Established in 1993, the East Coast Consortium helps coordinate the activities of Eurasian area studies library collections located in the eastern United States and Canada.

### ***Asian Studies***

*Council on East Asian Libraries* <http://www.eastasianlib.org/>

The Council on East Asian Libraries was founded in 1958 as the Committee on American Library Resources on the Far East and built on earlier organizations going back to 1948. As a nonprofit organization, the Council on East Asian Libraries' mission is to serve as a forum for the discussion of East Asian library issues of common concern; to formulate programs for the development of East Asian library resources, services, and systematic organization of all types of recorded information and knowledge; and to promote interlibrary and international cooperation in East Asian librarianship. *Note:* Librarians must be members of the Association for Asian Studies in order to join the Council on East Asian Libraries.

*North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources* <http://guides.nccjapan.org/homepage>

Founded in 1991, the North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources works closely with librarians, faculty, and funding agencies

to strengthen Japanese-language collections and to promote access to information in all forms and formats. The North American Coordinating Council collaborates closely with Japanese institutions, leading organizations in North America, and other global institutions with interests in Japanese studies to develop consortial relationships, as well as to create and disseminate services.

### *Society for Chinese Studies Librarians* <http://www.scslib.org/>

Established in March 2010 in the United States, the Society for Chinese Studies Librarians is a nonprofit, nonpolitical academic organization aimed at promoting scholarly activities, professional exchange, information sharing, and project cooperation among Chinese studies librarians, so as to make contributions to China studies in general and to Chinese resources study in particular.

### *Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA)* <http://www.apalaweb.org/>

A predecessor of APALA, the Asian American Librarians Caucus (AALC) was organized in 1975 as a discussion group of the American Library Association Office for Library Outreach Services reflecting the interest in library services to minority communities and professional support of librarians of minority ancestry during the 1960s and 1970s. APALA officially became affiliated with the American Library Association in 1982. In 2014–15, APALA became part of the Joint Council of Librarians of Color, along with American Indian Library Association, Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Chinese American Librarians Association, and REFORMA.

### *African Studies*

#### *Africana Librarians Council* <http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/africa/ALC/>

The Africana Librarians Council was founded in 1957 as part of the African Studies Association under the name Archives/Libraries Committee. The Africana Librarians Council continues today as a coordinate organization of the African Studies Association. Members of the African Studies Association, including librarians, scholars, archivists, and documentary filmmakers, research and preserve materials from and about Africa. *Note:* Librarians must be members of the African Studies Association in order to join the Africana Librarians Council.

## PUBLICATIONS TO FOLLOW

Prospective area studies librarians may want to follow publications from the field of library science as well as content area journals written for academic



faculty and others with interests in a particular region of the world. Interestingly, content area journals often publish library-themed articles. For example, Latin American studies librarians can publish their work on the *Latin American Research Review*, a journal put out by the Latin American Studies Association.

Library science journals that prospective area studies librarians may want to follow include:

- *Collection Building*, a journal dedicated to all aspects of library collection development and maintenance from the practical to the theoretical
- *Collection Management*, an essential refereed quarterly journal that presents practical, research-based information about building, administering, preserving, assessing, and organizing library collections
- *Library Resources and Technical Services*, a peer-reviewed journal that takes a critical approach to the questions and challenges facing librarians and libraries. Major topics include collection development, scholarly communication, preservation (including digitization), acquisitions (including licensing and economic aspects of acquisitions), continuing resources, and cataloging (including descriptive metadata, authority control, subject analysis, and classification).

## FINAL WORDS

Area studies librarianship is an attractive career due to the flexibility it provides. It gives librarians the chance to teach, stay in touch with the trends in their field of interest, conduct research, and travel. There are unique opportunities to learn more about the culture and research output in those countries. It can also be a chance to establish and build relationships between institutions that are mutually beneficial.

Though books and other materials are important resources when gathering information on what career to choose, the advice of an experienced area studies professional can help in navigating the specifics of their area. A good mentor can improve the experience as a student and can serve as a support system as the student progresses in his or her career.

## REFERENCE

Robbins, Louise. "Subject Specialists for Academic and Research Libraries: Research, Recruitment and Education." (2010). Retrieved from <http://slisweb.lis.wisc.edu/~imls/findings%282%29.htm>.

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