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# Librarianship Students' Perceptions of the Role of the Client Services Librarian

Linda Kerr and Crystal Fulton

## Abstract

Prospective librarians differ greatly in educational background, but a core part of their learning before starting their professional career is how to serve clients effectively. Before beginning the librarianship programme at University College Dublin (UCD) in 2017, students were asked to seek out the person in a library local to their area, who deals with client services and find out what their job entails. Upon completing UCD's required module in information and client services, students were asked to describe the professional role again and to reflect on whether their perception of the client services role now differed from what they learned before starting the course. A majority of students initially believed their role as a client services librarian would be mainly administrative, potentially because they encountered paraprofessional working in client services positions. Upon completion of the module, the majority of students perceived a broader role for client services librarians. There may be opportunities for educators and the profession to assist students learning to take up the client services role.



## Introduction

The client service role is a valued part of core library functions. A central point of contact with the public is important for orientation and personal interaction with patrons (Arroya, 2015). Learning how to interact with clients, to support the needs and wants of the many users of any library, to educate clients and promote information and digital literacies, and to work with the library's communities are key aspects of learning for students studying librarianship. In the UCD course as in other degrees in librarianship worldwide, students are required to take a client services module to help them acquire multiple diverse skills to fulfill these functions of client services that will help new professionals serve their library communities. The module also challenges students to explore and develop an appreciation of their professional service provision role and the contribution they will make to the field. This year, students engaged in an exercise to self-assess their perceptions of the professional client services role and how those perceptions evolved as they identified and acquired necessary professional skills during the module. This article highlights before and after-module student perceptions of the role of client services librarians and offers insight into how perceptions of the profession may be more accurately shaped before students enter a professional programme.

## Client Services - A Core Feature of Librarianship

Client services involve multiple information and communication skills. For instance, librarians need to be trained researchers, who not only locate information, but also provide value-added service, such as evaluating information to help clients. Be it online or in person, the relationship cultivated by a librarian with a client can have lasting benefit for the institution and the user of that institution (Tripathi, 2014). Librarians need to connect "learners, researchers, and educators to relevant information in new contextualized formats" (Burns, 2016). By training new librarians to interact with clients and negotiate clients' queries effectively, they can better understand their role.

## Pre-arrival and Post-Module Tasks

Before arriving on campus, the class of 2018 was tasked with finding the person who deals with client services in a library of their choosing and determining what this person's responsibilities included. Because students seeking the postgraduate programme are required to complete work experience in a library or information setting, it was anticipated that this task would be completed before students joined the School's programme. Similarly, it was anticipated that the postgraduate and final year undergraduate students who work in more continuous capacities in libraries would easily



complete this task. The task was intended to open class discussion on the professional role of which they were about to learn, enabling students to compare what they had found and to categorise aspects of the client services role. Importantly, through completion of the task, students were provided an opportunity to explore and discover the professional’s role themselves.

After finishing the module, the students were asked to reflect on what they had learned and on how their idea of the role of client services librarian had changed, if at all.

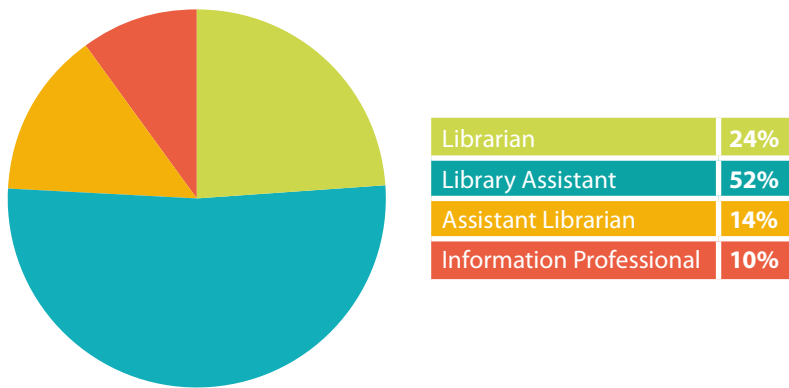
### Types of Libraries Visited

Students mainly visited public libraries. Sixteen (55%) took place at a public library. Five (17%) students chose an academic library, three (10%) a special library, and the last three (10%) chose another kind of information centre. Two (7%) did not indicate library type.

### Library Employees Consulted by Students

Students were charged with finding a library employee who worked in client services. Interestingly, the majority of students interviewed a Library Assistant, as shown in Fig. 1. However, they also spoke to individuals described as *Librarians, Library Assistants, and Information Professionals*.

Interviewees in Client Services Roles Located by Students



The diversity of library employees consulted raised questions around how a client services librarian may be identified in a library. Library patrons commonly mistake all library staff as librarians (Bramely-Moore, 2012). However, given students’ required library work experience prior to admission to the postgraduate programme, some understanding of the different roles in libraries was assumed.

Students’ reported experiences revealed that library employees of varying grades functioned in client services roles. Twelve of the fifteen Library Assistants interviewed, confirmed they worked in client services. The roles of paraprofessionals in the library have changed over the last few decades, with predictions of de-professionalisation of librarianship dating back to Harris’ (1992) seminal work. The circulation desk has been replaced with self-checkout terminals. Circulation, shelving, and administrative duties used to be the remit of the paraprofessional. Although circulation, shelving, and administration are still part of the job, they take up less of the paraprofessional’s time with increased automation. One study in a California University found that when the client services desk was staffed by a paraprofessional, there were few questions that needed to be referred to a librarian (Dinkins & Ryan, 2010). They deemed this development to be a great success. In the United States, varying levels of education are required for different library jobs. According to Leeder Reed (2016), a paraprofessional can be certified to perform professional librarian duties without a degree. In contrast, Watstein & Bell (2008) assert that professional librarians are essential to help users “identify, find, use, and evaluate information,” because they have been trained in “question-handling techniques, finding specific resources, and making referrals.” (p. 6)

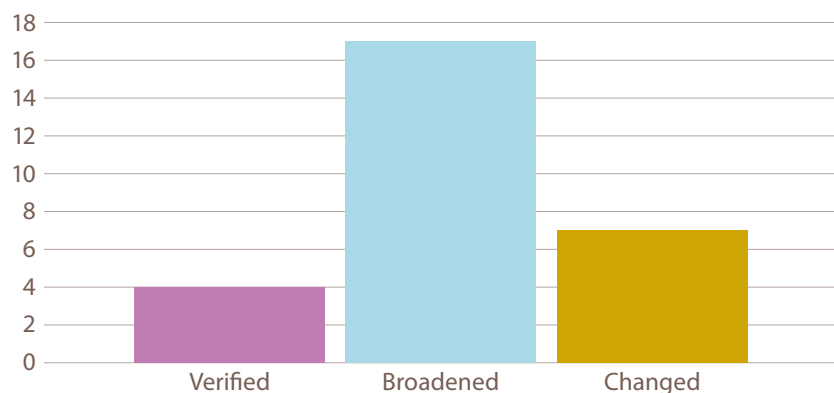
### Students’ Perceptions of the Client Services Role

The majority of students in the pre-module task believed that the client services role largely consisted of a range of administration duties. While there are often some administrative duties associated with any professional role, in this case, the students had no clear idea of the professional responsibilities that accompanied this professional role. Instead, there seemed to be

confusion between professional and paraprofessional roles by position title, as well as between responsibilities associated with the client services role. Overall, students most often did not fully appreciate the nature of the profession they were training to join.

In the post-module task, the majority of students reported that their perception of the role of the client services librarian had altered. Students' perceptions post- module fell into three categories: *Verified*, *Broadened*, and *Changed*, as shown in Fig. 2.

Perception of the Role of Librarian After Completing Module



The *Theory of Information Intent* states,

**...people engage with information in purposeful, deliberate, and selective ways to get expanded, and/or changed and/or clearer and/or verified pictures (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005),**

This helps to understand students' perceptions. Each student's post-module task was analysed and divided into the three categories to determine whether their perceptions of the role of librarian had changed, were broadened/expanded, or verified after engaging with the information in the module.

Most students described their view of the client services librarian's role as

broadened by learning acquired through the module. The students who fell into the Broadened view category described a very narrow view of librarianship before completing the module. Many of them originally thought of the client services role as the stereotypical librarian as seen on film, sitting quietly at a desk ordering and cataloguing books and performing administrative tasks. Throughout the module, many guest speakers were invited to tell the students about professional work in public, academic, and special library contexts. Students reported that they discovered a wide variety of libraries and the range of skills needed in each library type. As one student stated:

**I have been struck by a general misconception held by the vast majority of people about the work undertaken by those working in the profession... I am consistently impressed by the myriad of roles and tasks performed by those in the LIS profession.**

And another common student response was as follows:

**I found it deeply informative to hear about the wide variety of skills and responsibilities that one takes on in this line of work, often of a much more technical nature than I would have first assumed.**

This was also true for the students who fell into the Changed view category. They were impressed to find so many areas in which information professionals' work.

The students whose views were Verified, or remained the same, already had a background in information and library studies or were already working in the sector. Their perceptions were reinforced, because they already had a high engagement with the profession.

Importantly, students' perception of the role of the client services librarian shifted from an administrative to professional core. As one student summed up:

**I had a narrow view of the role of librarian as someone who orders, catalogues and lends material. I now better understand the multifaceted role that a librarian plays.**

## Changing Perceptions and the Profession

The future of client services is often a topic of discussion. Some argue that library users no longer need directions to the facts and figures they used to need, because they are available online. Additionally, while some believe that queries, such as finding a book within the library or accessing the Internet, may be easily handled by a paraprofessional, the client services role may be considered much wider, with librarians uniquely qualified to negotiate clients' needs and to help clients evaluate the information they have found themselves (Watstein & Bell, 2008).

For students hoping to take up the client services role, there would seem to be important responsibilities and opportunities both for educators and the profession. For instance, greater connections between work experience opportunities and professional outcomes through education could help better prepare students for postgraduate training. In addition to learning through a range of activities in their client services module, students were enthusiastic about meeting librarians and information professions from the field who specialised in client services during the client services module and noted these interactions as a valuable learning point. Introducing prospective students to the varied library types and professional roles in the workplace in advance of study could help students take advantage of learning opportunities offered in the classroom.

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