Competencies and Certification
WHERE THE PROFESSION STANDS

by Sandy Brooks

Competencies are a perennially hot topic in career and education discussions. To be “competent” is to be capable and well qualified. Therefore, a “competency” is an expression of a skill or characteristic needed by a worker to be capable and well qualified to do their job. A list of competencies for a certain job or career can be used in a number of ways.

Job descriptions – established competencies can be used in job descriptions to define the role of that worker, and what skills or characteristics are needed to do that job well.

Compensation/Career Ladders – establishing proficiency in various competencies can be used to assign steps to a career ladder or pay scale. (For more information on developing a library worker career ladder, see the document on ALA’s “Library and Information Studies Education and Human Resource Utilization” – or LEPU – at http://www.ala.org/hrdr/lepupdf.pdf).

Education – established competencies can be used to construct educational opportunities, such as certificate or degree programs for that job. On a smaller scale, a group of competencies can be pulled from a longer list to be addressed in continuing education workshops, conferences, and other training.

Evaluation – established competencies can be used as part of an annual job evaluation. Do you possess all the skills necessary to do your job (based on your job description)? Have you received training during the year to review or update these skills?

Consistency – established competencies allow for some sort of consistent, objective consideration of a class of jobs or a career track on a national or regional level.

“Skill Standards” is another trend attempting to meet some of the same goals of competencies. “Skill Standards” are devised to answer two questions, according to Washington State Skill Standards: What do workers need to know and be able to do to succeed in today’s workplace, and how do we know when workers are performing well? Sample skill standards for library technicians can be found at http://flightline.highline.ctc.edu/library000/SkillStandards.htm.

In August 2001, the Connecticut Library Association executive board adopted a set of competencies for library support staff, as presented by C.L.A.S.S. (the Connecticut Library Association Support Staff section). It is very difficult to define competencies for a class of jobs as varied as “library support staff.” Particular job descriptions in this class range from shelve, page, and secretary, to department heads and even directors of small libraries or branches. In Connecticut we tried to assume the most minimal competencies needed for the whole spectrum of support staff jobs. We hoped that competencies established by other organizations would cover more specific support staff jobs. For example, the American Library Association’s (ALA) Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) has developed a set of competencies for children’s librarians (http://www.ala.org/alsc/competencies.html), which should more closely reflect appropriate skills needed by children’s staff than anything aimed at library support staff in general. The Public Library Association is working on a program to certify public library administrators (http://www.pla.org/projects/certification/certification.html). Their program should more closely reflect appropriate skills needed by a library director or branch manager, regardless of whether they hold an MLS or not.

The Connecticut LTA Competencies cover the areas of General Competencies, Personal/Professional Competencies, Technology Competencies, Public Services Competencies, and Technical Services Competencies (complete list available at http://www.lib.uconn.edu/clia/new/class.html). C.L.A.S.S. developed this list by searching the Internet for existing support staff competencies, then using them, along with our own first-hand knowledge of the work support staff do, to construct the qualifications.

(C.L.A.S.S. was prompted to take on this task to help a statewide continuing education committee target workshops to the needs of various library workers.)

Some of the criteria gleaned from the Internet were actually objectives for certificate programs, whether voluntary, mandated by state or region, or for formal education programs. Some of these resources include:

Minnesota Voluntary Library Certification Program: A Program for Library Employees at http://www.arrowhead.lib.mn.us/certification/comp.htm


Library Supportstaff.com Competencies – Web sites for Library Staff/Information Professionals at http://librarysupportstaff.com/4competency.html. (This collection of links by Mary Niederlander is by far the most
of all workers in the library
industry.” (http://www.ala.org/hrdr/
apa_certifita.html)

The ALA/APA is the new Allied
Professional Association of the
American Library Association, which is a
service organization that was formed to
advocate for improved status, pay equity
and salaries for librarians. For more
information see
http://www.ala.org/hrdr/ala_ap.html.

A Position Paper on Skill
Certification for Library/Media
Support Staff at http://library.ucr.edu/
COLT/coltcert.html

According to ALA/APA
information
(http://www.ala.org/hrdr/
apa_certifita.html), “The ALA
Committee on Education
historically has had responsibility
for the policy statement Criteria for
Programs to Prepare Library
Technical Assistants. This policy
was last revised in 1979. A revision
of this criteria statement was
recently forwarded to ALA Council
but returned to the Committee for
review after the completion of
the four task forces associated with the
Congress on Professional
Education.” (see the proposed
revision at http://library.ucr.edu/
COLT/alaedu.html)

Also according to ALA/APA
information, “The ACRL/CICLS/
Library/Media Technician Training
Committee is largely made up of
educators from two-year LTA
training programs. This committee
has had more interest in working
toward accrediting programs than in
certifying individuals.”

Where does the profession currently
stand on competencies and certification
for library support staff? There are no
national competencies or certifications
in place at this time. However, a number
of organizations are increasingly
concerned about and looking at these
issues. You can make your opinions on
this topic known by contacting
representatives of LSSIRT and/or
COLT. (Visit http://www.ala.org/ssirit/ -
click on “Steering Committee” under
Organization for contact information
for LSSIRT board members, or click on
“Council on Library/Media
Technicians” under Resources to reach
COLT board members.) You can also
work towards getting competencies and
certification programs established in
your state or region. Together we can
then “connect the dots” toward a unified
national program that best meets the
needs of the library profession and its
stalwart workers.