



CREDENTIALS AND CREDIBILITY

A survey and candid discussion of whether or not law librarians should show off their educational degrees

by Christine L. Sellers



Doctors list MD and board certifications in their signatures. Attorneys use Esq. Some law librarians include MLS and/or JD. Most, however, do not.

How law librarians think about the degrees they have or do not have reveals a lot about how they think about their positions. It also reveals how they choose to represent themselves to the outside world and the profession.

In law librarianship there is no set course of education or degree attainment to become a law librarian. Therefore, there is also no set way that we deal with revealing or not revealing our degrees and/or training.

As a new librarian working for a law firm, I was curious as to whether other law librarians listed their degrees (whatever they may be) or not. My experience had been largely limited to academic law librarians, and I had formed the general impression that degrees were usually listed. However, in my new job at a law firm, it seemed the typical practice was to not list degrees, with some concern about the impression of practicing law (caveat: I have my law degree, so the concern about the impression of practicing law was justified).

I conducted a brief survey of law firm librarians on the lawlib online discussion forum, which only made me more curious about what broader opinion might be. After having no luck finding articles about the subject, I decided to conduct my own survey of the law librarian community.

Ultimately, the majority of law librarians who completed the survey do not list their degrees. However, there were some who did list their degrees or could see the need for others to do so. Oddly enough, the underlying reasoning for these competing results were similar. Or perhaps that's not so odd after all. Running underneath all of the reasons for listing or not listing degrees include instinct, observation, experience, personal decisions, and office politics.

Methodology

I posted the survey on the lawlib discussion list, with a reminder after one week. The first three questions were mandatory, asking about participants' degrees, organizations for which they worked, and if degrees were ever listed after their names.

The next questions were divided into two different tracks: one for those who listed their degrees somewhere and one for those who did not. The last five questions of the survey were the same for all respondents. Three of them ask for feedback regarding why the respondents listed their degrees or why they did not, and the last two questions solicited any research or background

information obtained and any additional comments.

For those who listed their degrees, there were a total of 12 possible questions, including the three mandatory and the last two. The questions specific to those listing degrees were about placement of the degrees in e-mail signatures, business cards, and letterhead.

Those who did not list their degrees were not asked these questions, but skipped from the mandatory three to the last five.

Results

A total of 328 people responded to the survey. All 328 respondents answered all three of the mandatory questions. The number of responses then varied for the remaining questions.

Among the survey respondents, 308 (93.9 percent) held master's degrees related to the field of library and information science; 41 (12.5 percent) had master's degrees unrelated to the field of library science; 142 (43.3 percent) had JDs; 2 (6 percent) held a PhD; and 11 (3.4 percent) listed their degree as other.

Most of the respondents worked for a law firm library (137 or 41.8 percent). Second to that were respondents who worked in an academic library (106 or 32.3 percent). Other respondents worked in a state, court, or county law library (57 or 17.4 percent); 4 (1.2 percent) worked for a vendor; and 24 (7.3 percent) worked under the other category. Employers listed under this include a prison library, the federal government, a corporation, and independent contractors, among others.

Of the 328 respondents, 238 (72.6 percent) never list their degrees after their names. Only 90 respondents (27.4 percent) list their degrees sometimes or all the time. All responses were given anonymously. Therefore, there were no names or personal characteristics associated with the feedback.

Why Degrees Not Listed

As seen above, the overwhelming majority of law librarians who responded to the survey do not list their degrees in any way. The responses varied as to why degrees were not listed but fall into four major categories.

Not Standard Format or Policy. Some reasons were as mundane as that the format for business cards was standard and did not

include degrees or that it was not the organization's policy for which they worked. A few had never even thought of listing degrees. And some do not do it simply because other librarians in their organizations do not. Sometimes this sensitivity was a result of having a graduate degree that a librarian's superior did not hold.

Not Practicing Law. Others stressed more practical reasons for not listing their degrees. "I worry that by listing my degrees I will be approached for legal advice," says one respondent, "and I am not admitted to practice law in the state I am currently working in."

Unnecessary, Irrelevant, and Tacky. Some did not find it necessary or relevant to list degrees. Need or necessity is mentioned at least 56 times in the 203 comments as to why degrees were not listed. Pretentious is mentioned 32 times, and relevance mentioned four times. For example, "I figure that nobody outside the library world

is too familiar with an MLS degree," says one participant. "At my previous job in a public library, it was seen as pretentious."

The sentiment is echoed by the comment that "[m]ost people don't even know what a law librarian is—so putting the degrees would make no sense."

An academic law reference librarian says: "Mentioning that I have [a JD] more opens the question whether I do than not listing one...As for the MLS, it's a degree that gets so little respect in this context, that mentioning it would be like referring to where I went to high school...There's a presumption that we belong here and listing our credentials only encourages others to speculate as to why we need to prove it."

Some respondents were not in favor of ever listing degrees. "I guess I just feel I didn't have to justify my professional skills by listing my degrees or posting copies of them in my office," says one law librarian.

In the same vein, two respondents added that "[t]hey will learn my background if necessary" and "[d]egree titles are not an issue outside of academia."

Position or Service Record More Important than Degree. Some respondents stressed the importance of listing their positions rather than their degrees. "My card reads 'Law Librarian,' which is more to the point of what I DO," says one respondent. "What I do is more relevant (to the business card target) than where I came from or what degrees I have collected."

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Another says, “I believe that my job title is more relevant as an identifier than my degree.”

Some survey participants agree with the following sentiment that “[m]y job title is sufficient to reflect my credentials and

Survey Results At-a-Glance

328 respondents

Educational Background*

- 93.9 percent hold master’s degrees related to the field of library and information science.
- 12.5 percent hold master’s degrees unrelated to the field of library science.
- 43.3 percent hold JDs.
- 6 percent hold a PhD.
- 3.4 percent list their degree as “other.”

Library Type

- 41.8 percent work for a law firm library.
- 32.3 percent work in an academic library.
- 17.4 percent work in a state, court, or county law library.
- 7.3 percent work under the other category.
- 1.2 percent work for a vendor.

Do You List Your Degree?

- 72.6 percent *never* list their degrees after their names.
- 27.4 percent list their degrees *sometimes or all the time*.

Where Do You List Your Degree?*

- 61.5 percent list their degrees on their organizations’ Web site.
- 60 percent list their degrees on their business cards.
- 53.9 percent list their degrees in presentation material.
- 41.1 percent list their degrees in their e-mail signature block all of the time.
- 10 percent only list their degrees outside of the organization.
- 5.6 percent have letterhead that reflects their degrees.

*Total results equal more than 100 percent because respondents could choose more than one option.

responsibility,” while others think that their work should prove their qualifications. “I like colleagues and lawyers to respect my competence, not my degree,” says one law librarians.

One respondent says that “[t]he best librarians I’ve ever worked with were those who put their emphasis on high quality service rather than on titles or/and educational degrees.”

Another agreed, relaying “[a] wise uncle of mine once told me his clients weren’t interested in his pedigree, only in the quality of his work.”

Where Degrees Are Listed

The responses of those who do list their degrees were more varied because law librarians who list their degrees do so in different ways, in different places, and for various reasons. The 90 respondents (27.4 percent) who list their degrees sometimes or all the time were asked where their degrees might possibly be listed.

Of these respondents, 37 (41.1 percent) list their degrees in their e-mail signature block all of the time. No one chose to only list his or her degrees inside his or her organization, but nine (10 percent) only list their degrees outside of the organization. Thirty-five (38.9 percent) don’t list their degrees in their e-mail signature block. The 10 (11.1 percent) other responses focused on a varying signature block depending on the circumstances.

Of that same group, 54 (60 percent) listed their degrees on their business cards and 32 (35.6 percent) did not. A small portion chose other—seven (less than 1 percent)—indicating that they didn’t have business cards or that the organization didn’t list degrees or that they had cards both ways.

In response to whether degrees were listed on letterhead, most people (52 or 57.8 percent) indicated that they did not have letterhead. A small percentage (5.6 percent) do have letterhead that reflects their degrees. A third group (30 or 33.3 percent) indicated that their letterhead does not reflect their degrees. A small percentage, (3.3 percent) answered other to indicate they used generic, library, or no letterhead.

A total of 65 of the 90 respondents who designate their degrees indicated that they list their degrees somewhere else. Most (40 or 61.5 percent) had their degrees listed on their organizations’ Web site. Some (35 or 53.9 percent) listed their degrees in presentation material. Keep in mind that more than one answer could be chosen on this question. Thirteen respondents (20 percent) indicated various other reasons: more respect, publications, newsletters, orientation handout, client projects, library brochures, resume, and commencement program.

Why Degrees Are Listed

The reasons that people always or sometimes list their degrees also fall into broader categories.

Complexities of Law Librarianship.

Some respondents stressed the importance of communicating the complexities of law librarianship. “Often, people comment on the MLIS designation, which opens a dialogue about the behind the scenes work librarians really do in terms of not only librarianship, but administration, such as budgeting, personnel, contract negotiations, product licensing issues, etc., etc.,” says one respondent.

This is in direct contrast to a comment from one who doesn’t list his or her degree(s). “The average person—be he attorney, judge, lay-person, etc.—doesn’t understand the credentials or abbreviations, and I don’t have the time to explain that MLS or MSL does NOT refer to the multiple listing service.”

Some of the comments were for listing degrees, no matter what the situation. “I am in favor of anything that enhances the appearance of the professionalism of librarians and librarianship to the public,” one participant says.

Another example is an answer to the question, “Is it pretentious or displaying low self-esteem to include degrees in the signature? No... Librarianship is not even a profession—there is no uniform test of qualifications or knowledge, required certification, nor even uniform experience—but the degrees show an educational baseline.”

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Legitimacy and Credibility.

Respondents say that legitimacy and credibility were reasons that they listed their degrees. For example, one person says, “It makes me more legitimate, it makes the advice I give more legitimate, and it increases the respect I get from both faculty and students.”

Echoing that sentiment, another respondent says that “[s]ince I work with judges and attorneys, I feel it is important that they know that I am also an attorney. I find it lends credibility to my position.”

These motivations seemed to focus on the qualifications of the law librarian. “I

want to convey to my clients that a law librarian is a professional and that I am qualified to address all issues concerning legal and business research, as well as law library management issues,” one person says.

Another says listing degrees also “helps to remind people of what is required in this field.”

All of that can be summed up in the comment from one respondent who listed the degree “[b]ecause I have found that people listen more carefully to what I have to say.”

The majority of these pro-degree comments suggested there were multiple sides to the issue, as shown by this example: “Ultimately, the possible down side of listing my degree (the perception I may be pretentious or else insecure) outweighs the down side of not listing them (ignored because I lack credibility).”

Another example posits that “I do believe it is a personal choice and that there are probably librarians who, unfortunately, work in situations where it would be helpful to display their educational background.”

Marketing Yourself. Marketing oneself as a law librarian is very similar to proving legitimacy and credibility with degrees. Law librarians who are part of an organization where they need to be recognized or utilized more advocate this tactic. Even law librarians who do not feel the need to use the tactic advocate it for others who do. “I think some people who list them feel insecure; however, I believe many people who list them need to because their organizations don’t recognize them as much as they should,” says one respondent.

Some law librarians mention their degrees within the first sets of communication, but discontinue it after a while. “In communicating with a client for the first time, I may mention my JD to provide some comfort level with my search expertise and understanding of the law,” says one participant.

Another says, “Generally, I try to get that information to those who have not met me or heard of me before. Otherwise, I don’t feel a need to continuously reiterate to those familiar with me.”

A lot

of people list their degrees for works of scholarship: authoring articles or presentations. “I feel that listing the degrees on letterhead or business cards is not necessary, since they are used merely as a source of contact information,” says one law librarian. “However, when I put my name to a piece of written work, I want my credentials to speak to add to its authoritativeness.”

Others use their degrees “in formal situations.” For example, on business cards, but not in an e-mail signature. “Based on the relative informality of e-mail, I don’t use my degrees, but for more formal contexts, such as business cards and Web sites I do,” says one respondent.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some care more about informal situations. “I have added the degrees whenever I am allowed to add them, which is primarily for internal documents,” says one participant. “That’s okay with me because the JD is much more important to the attorneys I serve than to other librarians.”

Some of the comments approached the issue with more complex feelings, sounding as if they would like to never see a need to list degrees, but in the end realized its possible necessity. “I guess I support folks including the degree—it might make the general public recognize that librarians really do have a lot of education, which might change some of the stereotypes,” says one law librarian.

Another respondent says that “I feel the need to assert my education and capacity. Professors’ tendency to underestimate people who are women, and therefore, because of

the gendered nature of the profession, to underestimate librarians may be unintentional, but it is nevertheless very real. I’ll use any tool I can use in order to gain their respect—no matter how silly it seems to me. Listing the degrees would seem quite silly to me, were it not for their serious purpose.”

Observations

For me, these are better and more reasoned responses than “it’s tacky.” As much as I love Miss Manners and etiquette, I think that’s a reason without any underlying strength. Perhaps that’s because I’ve been in situations where the title of research librarian does not adequately indicate my degrees. On the other hand, saying “it’s tacky” does give one pause to wonder that there are people out there who can be obnoxious with their degrees. Just because we have them or don’t, doesn’t make us better or worse librarians.

In regards to the survey, I do wish I had included a question regarding the respondents age. After reading the responses and comments, I wondered if there was some sort of generational divide that the survey had failed to address.

In the end, I ultimately decided to leave off my degrees entirely for e-mails outside the firm. My degrees are not included on my business cards, but that is more firm policy than a personal decision. However, I do sometimes include my degrees in my e-mail signature line in internal e-mails, depending on the recipient. I also list my degrees in scholarship and presentation materials.

All of these decisions echo the reasons stated by others. I try to market myself when needed, but at the same time try not to include them when it might not be appropriate. It’s a fine line to walk, and in the future I can only try to be understanding while others try to do the same. ■

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