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Recommended Citation

Smith Schlinck, Olivia, "Academic Law Librarian Credentials and Student Loan Debt" (2022). *Library Staff Online Publications*. 10.

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Academic Law Librarian Credentials and Student Loan Debt

Posted on [August 30, 2022](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)

When [Joe Biden announced some student loan debt forgiveness last week](#), borrowers everywhere let out a collective (if muted) sigh of relief: *finally*. The student loan debt crisis and resulting debate is well-documented and I won't go into more detail on it in general. But I've been thinking about the relationship between student debt and librarian credentials and the emerging crisis in academic law libraries: too many job openings, not enough qualified candidates. It's all connected. But how?

First, the emergent crisis. Most of us have noted the dramatic increase in jobs posted to the AALL Career Center in the last several months. Currently there are 78 jobs posted to the site, and a quick skim shows many of the academic jobs are entry-level or open to applicants with less than 5 years' experience. Certainly, other law schools have had failed searches and removed their postings but still have open positions. Anecdotally, librarians at universities with open positions often comment on how difficult it has been to hire—let alone find and interview—qualified candidates. At least part of this issue stems from a wave of COVID-related retirements and (perhaps burnout-related) career changes away from law librarianship. The field is begging for lawyers and law students interested in joining the profession. Without that necessary growth, a crisis of understaffed libraries ensues.

How do we grow the profession and avoid the crisis? We need to convince more people to become law librarians. We need to recruit; we need to talk to our students and our graduates and those *we* graduated law school with and say, *do you like research? Are you interested in academia?*

But recruiting is, of course, not enough. Imagine in your legal research class you have a very bright, engaged student who is interested in law librarianship. They come to you to talk about the profession and to get advice. They ask you: *how do I become a librarian like you? What do I need to do?* Of course, this is when you must tell the student that for most jobs in an academic law library, they will need a Master's in Library Science before their application is even *considered*.

This credentialing hurdle is not insurmountable—if you're reading this blog, there's a good chance you cleared it. But your student is burned out on school and eager to enter the workforce. And then there's the elephant in the room, of course: of the cost of *another* advanced degree.

Enter student loan debt.

Estimates vary slightly, but [the average law student graduates with about \\$130,000 in debt from their law school and undergraduate educations combined](#). Estimates on MLS degree debt are less readily available, but the average cost of attendance at the top 20 programs (as rated by U.S. News) is about \$33,000 for in-state students and \$41,500 for nonresident online programs. I'll emphasize those numbers are only the *cost of attendance* and do not take into account textbooks, professional organization memberships, or actually living (rent, food, etc.).

Let's do some math. The average starting salary for an academic law librarian is about \$65,500—determined via the AALL 2021 Salary Survey, using the average salary of those with less than 5 years experience in an academic position requiring a JD and MLS. Tax obligations vary by state but assume a post-tax take-home salary of \$48,000, or about \$4,000 per month. Add some graduate program debt to an average of \$130,000 in undergrad and law school debt and a new law librarian is staring down the barrel of a \$1,600 monthly loan payment.

Of course, that new law librarian needs a place to live. The average rent in the country is somewhere between \$1,800 and [\\$2,000 per month](#). That's at least \$3,400 of monthly expenses, leaving \$600 remaining for *everything else*: food, health care, transportation, utility bills, savings, retirement accounts. Money for travel or having some fun? Out of the question. Work in a high cost-of-living state? Get some roommates, I guess.

Ten thousand dollars in student debt forgiveness brings *some* relief. [The Biden administration has also directed the Department of Education to make income-based repayment plans more effective by reducing the percentage of income used to determine monthly payments to 5%, down from 10%](#). Those income-based plans are useful for academic librarians who typically will be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness after 10 years working in education. I want to stress that all of this is *good*. The relief from the federal government will eliminate debt for millions and make things a bit easier for those with greater debt burdens. But for many academic law librarians, ten thousand dollars forgiven from six figures of debt is a drop in the bucket. And keep in mind that federal loan forgiveness does not help those with private student loans, of which Americans owe nearly \$140 billion to lenders like Sallie Mae, Earnest, and Discover.

The debt burden facing a new graduate is bleak. Let's talk solutions.

First, what can we do as an organization under AALL? We can offer more scholarships for those interested in law librarianship to help offset the insane cost of education. We can advocate for broader debt forgiveness on Capitol Hill. If those solutions seem too big, the least we can do is make student AALL memberships free.

But the solution that will make the biggest impact while remaining (at least somewhat) within librarian control is to **pay people more**. I know, I know, this is absolutely shocking [coming from me of all people](#). But a law student or lawyer with six figures of debt is just not going to be interested in joining a profession where they *know* they can't make ends meet from day one. We need to increase entry-level salaries, and then give existing staff a raise to incentivize them *staying* in the profession. (Mid-career law librarian defection is another issue for another day).

We need to make sure our colleagues can not only afford to survive but to live a comfortable life on their salaries. We owe that to them, to ourselves, and to our profession.

This entry was posted in [Career, employment & reference librarians](#), [Issues in Law Librarianship](#), [Issues in Librarianship \(generally\)](#), [Work/Life Balance](#) and tagged [academic law libraries](#), [loan forgiveness](#), [salary](#), [student loans](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

9 Responses to *Academic Law Librarian Credentials and Student Loan Debt*



Julie Graves Krishnaswami says:

August 31, 2022 at 1:19 am

Brilliant post — I agree 100% Most institutions seem to come up with the funds to pay faculty to stay or for hot, in-demand hires. The money is usually there. Also, tenure and unionization of law librarians would help, too. Research shows that

tenured and unionized librarians are better compensated (and usually have better working conditions and thus, fewer instances of burnout-related resignations, I imagine).

[Reply](#)



Charlie Amiot *says:*

August 31, 2022 at 12:11 pm

Wholehearted agreement, but continuously disappointed that concerns like these seem to be heard only in an echo chamber. There more days that not when I think that the goal of most academic institutions is to push librarians out altogether, particularly law librarians, as the law library is often seen as the easy target for budget cuts. Until we see a massive change in management styles and actual, broad leadership—both in law schools and law libraries—which isn't likely to happen any time soon, I don't expect any change beyond lip service. Just continual disappointment, burnout, and employers holding the scraps over our heads expecting us to jump for them and not understanding why some would rather leave than subject themselves to the humiliation of being treated like the second class citizens they want us to be.

[Reply](#)



Beth Williams *says:*

August 31, 2022 at 1:36 pm

Wonderful and important post! On retention and sustainability, I wanted to add a plea for law librarians to pursue the Public Service Loan Forgiveness and the Temporary Expanded Public Service Loan Forgiveness programs if you work in higher ed or in the public sector. The latter – <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/public-service/temporary-expanded-public-service-loan-forgiveness> – remains available for those who started paying back loans in a non-qualifying PSLF program. And if you hurry there is a way to have even more payments qualify under the current waiver program – <https://studentaid.gov/announcements-events/pslf-limited-waiver>. See also <https://www.reddit.com/r/PSLF/>.

[Reply](#)



Anonymous *says:*

August 31, 2022 at 2:38 pm

And there's another aspect of this to think about. While I think most of us agree that more diversity in the profession is a positive thing, is it ethical to recruit from historically disadvantaged groups when the job's entry fee is high and compensation comparatively low?

[Reply](#)



Leslie A Street *says:*

August 31, 2022 at 3:03 pm

I also want to add, that today's labor shortage in the entry-level law librarian market means that good library directors SHOULD be pushing starting salaries considerably higher than what they have been. And when people say, "no, you can't do that, because of internal salary compression," the appropriate response is to say, "Okay, why can't I get salary increases for all of the people already here too?" Maybe I am just lucky, because my Dean is outstanding, but that is exactly what we have done at my institution. In this tight labor market, right now is the time that those of us with administrative power SHOULD be pushing our universities to compensate our library staff better. I am not a library director that believes decredentialing our profession is the answer – because that will make labor costs cheaper and it devalues the work that we do. What all of us with any power should be doing is campaigning hard for higher salaries.

[Reply](#)



Anonymous says:

August 31, 2022 at 6:57 pm

Much needed discussion here. Thank you! I wonder if the shortage of entry-level law librarians is real, or a reluctance to consider laterals at anything but an entry-level salary.

[Reply](#)



RP says:

September 1, 2022 at 10:28 am

I realize that your post is written from the perspective of an academic law librarian, but as a government law librarian who never went to law school I would like to put in a plug for hiring people who don't have JDs. From a purely economic perspective it makes zero sense for someone who has the credentials to be a practicing attorney to take a job as a librarian when they could make significantly more money doing what they were actually trained to do in law school. On the other hand, salaries for law librarians are still higher than the average librarian salary, so people like me who are used to making even less money are more than happy to accept a job in a law library. I would also strongly recommend hiring people with a background working in archives because a significantly amount of legal research involves the same skillset archivists use to do their job.

[Reply](#)



Barbara Ginzburg says:

September 21, 2022 at 10:19 am

I am glad RP brought up hiring individuals who don't have JDs. I have been in academic law libraries for over 25 years and do not have a JD. I began in Tech Services, but worked in a library that encouraged me to participate in Reference. I had wonderful mentors who helped me learn what I needed to know. 25 years later I am Head of Access Services and part of a team of librarians who teach advanced legal research classes. I am frequently approached by library students asking why a JD is required to work in a law library when a medical degree is not needed to be a medical librarian. Even now, when I consider applying for jobs I am blocked even though I have 25 years of experience simply because I do not have a JD.

[Reply](#)

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