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# Profession, Vocation, and Calling: The Predicament and Mission of Library Science Education (Postprint)

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## Abstract

This year marks the centennial anniversary of the School of Information Management at Wuhan University (its predecessor being the Library Science Department of Boone University, founded in 1920), signifying that library science education in China has passed through a century of development. In retrospect, while fully recognizing the contributions of library science education to the development of China's library profession, we must also confront the current predicaments facing library science education and face its difficult choices. The core issue of this dilemma is how library science educators and library practitioners understand and manage the relationship among profession, discipline, and vocation, and shoulder the due responsibilities and missions of China's library science education.

## Full Text

### Vocation, Profession, and Career: The Dilemma and Mission of Library Science Education

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This year marks the centennial celebration of the School of Information Management at Wuhan University (originally founded as the Boone Library School at

Wuchang Wenhua University in 1920), signifying that library science education in China has traversed a century-long developmental journey. While looking back at history and fully acknowledging the contributions of library science education to the development of China's library profession, we must also confront the current dilemmas facing library science education and address its difficult choices. The core issue of this dilemma lies in how library science educators and practitioners understand and manage the relationship among vocation, profession, and career, and shoulder the proper responsibilities and mission of Chinese library science education.

### **Contributions and Challenges of Library Science Education**

Looking back over the past century, Chinese library science education has made tremendous contributions, cultivating a large number of library directors for the nation's library profession. These expert leaders with library science educational backgrounds hold irreplaceable insider roles and status within the library workplace. It has also trained numerous professional backbones for the library industry who have played core and pivotal roles in the innovative development of library services. Notably, library science education has laid the foundation for the "professional" nature of library work, distinguishing the "professionalism" of library work from the "routine nature" of other occupations, thereby enhancing the social recognition, status, and value of the library profession.

Undeniably, not all practitioners in libraries come from library science programs, yet the employment advantages of library science graduates are evident. Library science graduates demonstrate strong sense of belonging and high loyalty to the library profession; they tend to be relatively stable after employment and possess greater professional dedication. They maintain continuous learning capabilities in library science, along with innovative consciousness and capacity. Their specialized disciplinary background provides incomparable advantages and professional competitiveness in library science research and academic achievement. Graduates from library science programs also show greater emotional investment in library development and are more likely to pursue library work as a lifelong career. These various employment advantages have been confirmed through practice and existing surveys. For instance, graduate students in library and information science indeed master core competencies significantly better than non-LIS graduates, a superiority recognized by library directors and professional backbones in domestic employing institutions [1].

However, library science graduates also face certain disadvantages in employment. For example, the employment field for library science is not broad, with limited career expansion space. The relatively low-pressure and comfortable working environment in libraries can easily lead to professional burnout among graduates, lacking strong motivation and competitive vitality. Due to the institutional nature of libraries as public service units, compensation packages lack sufficient attractiveness and competitiveness, which further causes practitioners to develop feelings of inferiority and makes it difficult to obtain adequate pro-

fessional honor and sense of achievement. If practitioners have studied library science exclusively from undergraduate through graduate levels, their single-disciplinary background may limit in-depth collaboration with users from other disciplines.

While we should recognize the contributions of library science education and the advantages and disadvantages of its graduates in employment, we must also reflect on the existing problems in Chinese library science education: the positioning of library science education is not clear enough, training objectives are not well-defined, and there is insufficient understanding of the characteristics and trends of library development. Teaching content constitutes the core of education, yet current curricula are not sufficiently cutting-edge and have become disconnected from practical development and frontline needs, leaving students' knowledge structures ill-adapted to the current and future development requirements of libraries. Teacher quality is crucial to education, yet some faculty members currently lack practical library experience, resulting in rigid, textbook-based teaching. Worse still, some do not understand or love libraries enough, even disparaging them to some degree, which profoundly influences library science students through their words and actions. The "money-oriented value system" in society has also misled employment choices for a considerable number of library science graduates, making professional ideology education in library science a long and arduous task.

### The Vocational vs. Professional Education Dilemma

Whether library science education constitutes vocational education or professional education has been extensively debated [2]. We believe that vocational and professional education differ in the following five aspects: (1) **Educational objectives**: vocational education emphasizes skill development, while professional education focuses on cultivating professional theory and capabilities. (2) **Teaching content**: vocational education primarily transmits existing knowledge, whereas professional education, beyond knowledge transmission, places greater importance on developing innovation capacity. (3) **Faculty requirements**: vocational education only requires instructors to have expertise in a specific field, generally with a master's degree; professional education demands that faculty be experts in their field, typically holding doctoral degrees. (4) **Student competencies**: vocational education requires students to possess proficient professional technical application abilities, while professional education demands solid professional knowledge and scientific research capabilities. (5) **Educational levels**: vocational education mainly operates at the associate and undergraduate levels, whereas professional education primarily functions at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Whether library science is vocational or professional education also influences graduates' career choices. Library science students face multiple career options upon graduation, with current primary employment destinations including government agencies, enterprises, and libraries. Clarifying the characteristics of

these three career paths helps in objectively understanding and evaluating library science education and graduates' employment choices. The main influencing factors include five dimensions: professionalism, social recognition, compensation, stability, and sense of achievement (as shown in Table 1). Beyond these factors, career choices are also influenced by various other considerations such as institutional status, household registration (hukou) availability, professional title evaluation opportunities, and children's educational environment (kindergarten, primary, and secondary schools). Choosing to work in a library means selecting a vocation, but also a profession, and potentially shaping a lifelong career. The distinctions among vocation, profession, and career can be analyzed from four aspects: basic nature, motivational drivers, operational characteristics, and goal orientation.

First, regarding **basic nature**, a vocation generally refers to a position with fixed working hours; a profession implies breaking the eight-hour limit and whole-hearted commitment; while a career involves investing immense time and energy into designing one's entire professional life. Second, in terms of **motivational drivers**, a vocation is primarily employment-driven, with practitioners playing the role of employees; a profession is interest-driven, with practitioners having a sense of ownership; while a career is mission-driven, with practitioners possessing a spirit of responsibility. Third, concerning **operational characteristics**, tasks in a vocation are typically skill-dominated, where practitioners only need to consider what they can do themselves; tasks in a profession are generally knowledge-dominated, requiring practitioners to consider what users need; while tasks in a career are innovation-dominated, requiring practitioners to have a higher perspective and consider what society needs. Fourth, regarding **goal orientation**, a vocation emphasizes a clear input-output relationship and highly values compensation; a profession values professional achievements, such as academic contributions; while a career requires facing more risks and challenges and values the social value of work output. Thus, different perceptions and goals will determine different career planning, professional growth, and career development paths.

### The Responsibility and Mission of Library Science Education

Library science education must learn from its painful experiences. We should take the decline of Western library science education as a warning to avoid repeating the same mistakes. In recent years, the closure of library schools in several Western universities has triggered transformation trends. The development of domestic library science education is also not optimistic, and we should reflect on existing problems, find timely solutions, and correct deviations. We must re-examine the development environment and demand characteristics of library science education—today's library science education is not merely oriented toward traditional library science fields, but toward the new era of digitalization, networking, and intelligence. We need to re-conceptualize the positioning and objectives of library science education: what problems should library

science solve, and what talents should it cultivate? These questions require in-depth and systematic consideration. We must re-establish the knowledge and competency system for library science education, constructing an educational framework with international vision grounded in China's national conditions to develop student capabilities. We should redesign training systems aligned with library industry needs, encompassing curriculum, research, and practice—all of which require further strengthening.

Library science education must embark on a new journey. Grounded in the present and oriented toward the future, it should cultivate professional technical and managerial talents for the library profession. Library industry practice and the development of the library cause represent the original aspiration and ultimate destination of library science education. Library and information science education must prioritize human needs, technology, management, and policy as essential teaching elements, with personalized library practice as the starting point. We must "emphasize the undergraduate foundation"—that is, prioritize undergraduate education while strengthening academic and professional graduate education in library science, establishing a hierarchical professional talent training system covering postdoctoral, doctoral, master's, professional master's, and undergraduate levels. We should further enhance modular education in "humanities," "technology," "data," and "intelligence" to improve students' specific knowledge structures and capabilities. We must further develop strongholds of library science education: in addition to educational centers such as Wuhan University, Nanjing University, and Renmin University of China, we should strengthen library science discipline construction in other universities to form powerful and distinctive bases for training library science professionals.

In 2018, the "Nanjing Declaration on Library Career Development" was issued [3]. This declaration, from the perspective of library development in the new era, expresses the library community's expectations for the library science cause. Item 8 of its consensus and recommendations proposes further strengthening library science education and research. Library development depends on the capacity of library science education and the capabilities of library practitioners. Library science education should be grounded in providing professional education for libraries, not merely vocational education. Professional education aims to help students break free from vocational thinking limitations after employment, enhance the sense of mission in library science, and provide innovative support for library development. Library practitioners should view libraries not just as a vocation, but as a profession and even a career, approaching and shaping their library work with greater vision and perspective. Library science faculty and students should strengthen their professional confidence, cultivating graduates' confidence in the library profession, sense of professional honor, and career achievement. Good libraries require good library science education, which places higher and more demands on faculty. Library practitioners must also make efforts to continuously innovate and progress based on the foundation laid by previous generations. We must always be clear that the ultimate goal of library science education is to promote the development of the library

cause. Library science education exists for the library cause, and library science graduates contribute to library transformation, reform, innovation, and revitalization.

### Conclusion

Library development depends on the capacity of library science education and the capabilities of library practitioners. Library science education should be grounded in providing professional education for libraries, not merely vocational education. Professional education aims to help students break free from vocational thinking limitations after employment, enhance the sense of mission in library science, and provide innovative support for library development. Library practitioners should view libraries not just as a vocation, but as a profession and even a career, approaching and shaping their library work with greater vision and perspective. Library science faculty and students should strengthen their professional confidence, cultivating graduates' confidence in the library profession, sense of professional honor, and career achievement. Good libraries require good library science education, which places higher and more demands on faculty. Library practitioners must also make efforts to continuously innovate and progress based on the foundation laid by previous generations. We must always be clear that the ultimate goal of library science education is to promote the development of the library cause.

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### The Development Trend of Postmodern Archival Theory

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Postmodern archival theory generally refers to new research fields, topics, and emerging archival concepts and ideas proposed by the archival community since the 1990s under the influence of postmodernist thought, 主要包括档案记忆观、档案信任论、档案与身份认同、档案正义论、档案多元论、社群档案、档案情感价值、档案第五维度等 [1]. Postmodern archival theory represents a critique and innovation, deconstruction and reconstruction of classical and modern archival theories represented by Hilary Jenkinson and T.R. Schellenberg, exerting tremendous influence on the development and transformation of contemporary archival undertakings. Although

archival science has long been immersed in postmodernist thought, postmodern archival theory continues to deepen and innovate. The author believes that future research on postmodern archival theory will unfold in the following three directions.

### Reflecting on the Logical Starting Point to Adapt to Current Archival Theory Systems

“We need to find ways to transform the self-satisfied, closed archival world into one that is synchronized with contemporary society, beneficial to society, and full of vitality; otherwise, we will become useless fossils in the digital age.” [ ] The impact of postmodernism on traditional archival foundation theories is enormous, having almost altered the original definitions and application scopes of core concepts such as documents and archives, making them unable to meet current communication and research needs. Therefore, it is necessary to push archival science back to its logical starting point and renew the definitions and expressions of its core concepts.

The so-called logical starting point refers to the first link in the logical process of moving from abstract to concrete in human thinking. The logical starting point of archival science is the “destiny of records” [ ]. Terry Cook believes that the core change in archival science in postmodern society is: “Archives are no longer viewed as static entities, but as dynamic, virtual concepts; archives are no longer passive products of human activity, but active manifestations of social activities undertaken by individuals or organizations; archives are no longer produced within stable, vertical administrative systems, but within dynamically balanced systems in modern networks” [ ]. Therefore, the value of records determines their destiny, making the logical starting point of archival science essentially the “value of records,” and the archives that evolve from it.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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