THE CERTIFICATION OF LIBRARIANS
IN THE UNITED STATES, 1907–1924

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ABSTRACT

This is a review paper dealing with the certification of librarians in the United States during the years 1907–1924. After a brief introduction, the preliminary history of certification, ALA actions, and Charles C. Williamson’s activities are summarized. The reasons for the delay in the national certification of librarians are discussed. Finally, a proposal for a further study on the topic is recommended. A list of some historical events of the subject is appended at the end of the paper.

Introduction

Recently, evidences in library literature have indicated that the subject of certification of libraries is being revived in the library profession. Elinor Yungmeyer, Accreditation Officer of the American Library Association (ALA), claimed, in an article, that one of the major roles of professional associations in achieving excellence is the certification of their members, though she did not elaborate on this topic.1 Ralph W. Conant, President of Unity College at Unity, Maine, in his study prepared for ALA, suggested that “renewed consideration should be given to a system of individual certification (administered by the states)

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as an additional means of distinguishing professional and subprofessional and paraprofessional librarians."² He stated that a certification system should contain incentives for continuous professional development, and that "state certification of individual would provide the public with an additional procedure for assuring the competency of professional librarians..."³ Along with these views, Tony Gardner, a librarian at California State University College in Northridge, disclosed that the National Library Association "has made significant steps towards establishing a national certification program."⁴ As judged by Gardner, "there is little doubt it will be eventually implemented as the first all-inclusive national certification program for librarians."⁵

The subject of the certification of librarians is not new in this country. Literature on the subject can be traced to the turn of the century. In the past decades, there were many discussions and opinions on the topic. In fact, there is a Master's thesis on the certification of librarians found in library literature.⁶ The purpose of this paper is to review briefly the major activities of the certification of librarians, highlighting the events occurring in the years 1907–1924 in order to present the historical development of the subject. The paper will exclude the aspect of standardization, since, in many occasions, this term was used interchangeably with the term of "certification" in literature. For the convenience of reviewing, a list of Some Historical Events of the Certification of Librarians is appended at the end of the paper.

**Preliminary History**

It is said that the certification of librarians in this country was influenced by teachers' certification, which was originated in 1654, when the Massachusetts Education Act was adopted.⁷ As early as 1907, Mary W. Plummer, then Director of Pratt Institute library school, began to express her opinions on the matter of the state certification of librarians. She suggested at the
Fourth Meeting of the League of Library Commissions that the League should prepare qualifying tests for librarians. She believed that the tests should cover general education, technical knowledge, personal character and reputation as a librarian.8

Later, in 1908, the Ohio Library Association introduced a bill for the appointment of a State Board of Library Examiners in order to examine libraries and library employees, and to grant grades of certificates. The bill was not passed.9 In 1916, a committee of the New York Library Association recommended to the Association a tentative plan for the certification of librarians. This recommendation was favorably considered and referred for further discussion.10

ALA Actions

One of the very important milestones in the consideration of the certification of librarians was the action taken by ALA in 1917. In the beginning of the year, Electra C. Doren, then Chairman of the Ohio Library Association Committee, was invited to the ALA Midwinter Meeting to present the information gathered in 1916 by the OLA Committee on the matter of certification of librarians.11 Following Doren's report, the Committee on Standardization of Library Service made a recommendation that a special committee of five to be appointed to take up the question of standardization of libraries and certification of librarians.12 The special committee was appointed, with Doren as one of the committee members.13

Based on Doren's report, the new Committee on Standardization of Libraries and Certification of Librarians presented a statement at the ALA Annual Conference in 1917. As reported in the statement, the purpose of the statement was "to give publicity to the plans of the Committee, to invite discussion of the various proposals... , and to bring out suggestions concerning... the problem."14
Because of this statement, the proposal of applying the civil service system to librarians was rejected. It was believed that the system of certification of librarians would result in better library service than the civil service system would. The statement pointed out the function of the state certification of librarians and presented a long list of reasons for certification. It declared that the public library was a part of the educational system and should have a very definite relation to all other public education agencies, that a system of certification would prevent the appointment, for political and personal reasons, of unprepared and incompetent librarians, and that certification was in harmony with the practice in other professionals and callings.15

The activities of certification of librarians were interrupted for a period of time because of World War I. After the war, in 1919, ALA established an Enlarged Program, in which, the certification of Librarians was one of the major activities proposed for ALA.16

It was in the year of 1919 that the activities of certification were highlighted. In this year, Charles C. Williamson of New York Public Library was invited to the ALA Annual Conference to present the paper, Some Present-Day Aspects of Library Training. In this paper, Williamson proposed that all training activities and facilities be organized into one system under the general direction of an ALA Training Board, which would be provided with a permanent staff and a competent expert as its executive.17

As projected by Williamson, the tasks of the ALA Training Board would be to formulate a standard scheme of grading library positions, to determine the minimum standard of qualification in the way of training and experience for each grade, to issue certificates of the appropriate grade to all applicants who qualify, and to examine and approve training agencies according to an established standard.18 According to this paper, Williamson was in favor of "a simple system of certification for the whole country," and would prefer to confine the function of the Training Board "to examining, approving, and certifying."19
In the same year, Williamson was also funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to undertake the enquiry of the training for library service.\(^{20}\) The result of this study brought out several points on the certification of librarians, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Also in 1919, Emma Baldwin of Brooklyn Public Library made several comments on library training and certification of librarians. She said that the state certification of librarians "would give prestige and establish a pattern of standardization at the state level which could serve as a guide for equal salaries for all grades of library training and classes of library work."\(^{21}\)

In response to the proposals made by Williamson and Baldwin, the Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training was appointed by the ALA Executive Board.\(^{22}\) The Committee was charged to draw up a tentative scheme of certification and to take up several other functions. At the ALA Annual Conference in June 1920, the Certification, Salaries, Recruiting for Librarianship and Enlargement Bureau made a report on certification, which was a part of the report made by the Committee on an Enlarged Program. In this report, the Bureau suggested that the establishment and maintenance of a national system of certification should include a survey of training facilities, and the preparation of schemes to test and grade fitness.\(^{23}\)

Accordingly, the Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training made a five-point recommendation to the ALA Council. One of the points in the recommendation was that a National Board of Certification for Librarians should be established.\(^{24}\) The five-point recommendation was accepted but partially adopted by the ALA Council in 1920.\(^{25}\)

In the following year, the Special Committee chaired by Williamson submitted a proposal of national certification plan for discussion. It stated that the plan was based on the principle that "it is not only the right but the duty of the ALA to formulate standards of fitness for professional library work."\(^{26}\) It pointed
out that the emphasis of the certification would be laid on voluntary rather than compulsory methods, that it would be desirable to certify without examination the graduates of approved training schools, that the tentative scheme should categorize library workers into four classes, and so on.27

At the ALA Midwinter Council Meeting in 1921, the Special Committee, still chaired by Williamson, offered a resolution that ALA approve, in principle, the plan and purpose of voluntary certification. The resolution recommended that a special committee be appointed. It suggested that the committee be charged with the specific duties of preparing articles of incorporation for state or federal charter for a national certification board for librarians.28

It seems that, in this time, the idea of national certification of librarians had been approaching realization. Indeed, the requirements for certification were not unusual, and the proposed scheme of certification was only on the voluntary base. In spite of these, the resolution offered by the Midwinter Council Meeting was only a dream of Williamson’s committee.

After this meeting, Williamson resigned as the Chairman of the Special Committee on National Certification and Training, and therefore, “owing to the resignation of the Chairman, no report has been prepared”29 from the committee at the ALA Annual Conference in 1922. On the other hand, there was a sign implying the resistance to the plan of certification. In this year, the Special Committee on Certification of the Special Libraries Association reported at the SLA Annual Convention that “...the subject of certification of librarians... has not sufficiently developed to warrant specific recommendations at this time.”30

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Williamson was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1919 to undertake a study on the training for library service. The result of this study was reviewed by an advisory committee appointed by the Corporation31 and was officially published in 1923.32 The published study was entitled Training for Library Service, and is generally
referred to as the Williamson Report. In this study, Williamson urged the establishment of a National Board of Certification for Librarians, which had been proposed to ALA in 1920. As expected by Williamson, some of the functions of the board would be to set up fundamental courses in library schools, to work out a unified admission tests for library training agencies, to award fellowships, to provide employment information, and so forth.

No matter what Williamson had proposed in his report, the resistance to the idea of certification became very clear in 1923. In this year, at the ALA Annual Conference, the Committee on Library Training remarked that the matter for promoting better training for librarianship was entirely apart from any connection with certification, although the Special Committee on National Certification and Training, after reorganizing, was still making continuous recommendations.

The activities of the national certification were hindered in 1924. In this year, the Special Committee, headed by Frank W. Walter, a new Chairman, who also served on the Committee of Library Training as a member, began its annual report with a sad tone: “Progress toward any really constructive action on the part of the Committee on National Certification and Training has been discouragingly slow.” It reported that the uncertain economic and political conditions had made librarians unwilling to advocate certification, and that, in Massachusetts, there was no librarian who would be in favor of certification. Finally, the Special Committee proposed that “the subject of national certification and library training... be henceforth considered a part of the field to be covered by the permanent Training Board, and that... the Committee on National Certification and Library Training shall be discontinued.”
Reasons for the Delay of National Certification

According to Williamson, certification would provide benefits for librarians, and the establishment of a National Board of Certification for Librarians would solve many problems of the library profession. Williamson was, indeed, very active in campaigning for the ideas of national certification during the years around 1920. Despite these facts, the result of the activities of the national certification of librarians was very discouraging. About a decade later, in 1934, the ALA Board of Education for Librarians was still “not prepared at this time to submit a basic scheme of certification...” It could only urge states to adopt certification laws. Why then has the idea of national certification stagnated such a long time without any real progress?

One obvious fact was that there was overwhelming opposition when the idea of certification of librarians was first introduced. In the statement made by the Committee on Standardization of Libraries and Certification of Librarians in 1917, there were several opinions against certification, along with the reasons for certification.

In ALA, as mentioned earlier, even though the five-point recommendation made by the Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training was first supported by the Committee on Library Training, and accepted by the ALA Council in 1920, it failed to receive continuous support from the Committee on Library Training at the ALA Annual Conference in 1921. In the meantime, the Library Workers’ Association charged that the proposed certification scheme would place its members in a disadvantaged position. In addition to the lack of support from the Committee on Library Training and the opposition of the Library Workers’ Association, another important factor was that there was no money available for the proposed board and its activities. It was due to these facts that the proposal for the establishment of a National Board of Certification for Librarians was postponed at the ALA Annual Conference in 1921.
While there were differences at the ALA Conference, there was also various dissenting opinions in the rank and file of librarians on the matter of certification. One opinion was made in 1921 by John Cotton Dana, the Librarian of Newark Public Library, who opposed the idea of certification by saying that it was a system of control. According to him, by the control of this certification system, library assistants would be selected, not by the librarian for whom they would work, but by the state Commission; this practice was ignorant of local library conditions.47 Another opposing opinion was expressed also in 1921 in a reprinted article in the Library Journal. The article charged that “certification of librarians, with all deference to its promoters, is an undesirable thing.”48 It warned that “there is a ‘real danger’ that certification is likely to place too much value and emphasis on mere technical taining and thus make the operation of libraries more a process of machinery than an expression of ideas and personality.”49

When the Williamson Report, prepared for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, was published in 1923, it also drew a host of criticism on the idea of reforms. Dana, again, showed “no faith in the theory” of government interference.50 Asa Wyncoop, then Head of Public Libraries Section of the New York Library Extension Division, in supporting the idea of certification, summarized several concerns of the profession: (1) States would dictate standards for libraries. (2) Tests would not be necessarily workable for effective library service. (3) Small libraries would have difficulty hiring qualified librarians. (4) Certification would shut out natural-born librarians. And (5) certification would not create a supply of needed librarians.51

Along with this current of resistance to the idea of national certification, another factor is that library service, by its nature, could be better or worse. It will not have direct effect, unlike medical operations, on human lives. In other words, library service does not have an immediately tangible social impact, and therefore, there is no real social pressure on, or demand for,
the certification of librarians. The matter of whether librarians should be certified or not is entirely dependent on the library profession itself; but, as the above discussion has shown, opinions on certification have been divided in the library profession.

The total environment surrounding the idea of certification and the nature of library service may have explained why the long-term proposed national certification of librarians has been stagnant and without any real progress. One more point, which needs to be explored, concerns the relationship between Williamson and library educators during the years around 1920. This relationship could have been one of the factors which affected the delay of the idea of national certification in becoming a reality. Although a further study would be needed on this assumption, some of the clues for the further study are discussed as follows:

During the years when Williamson was campaigning for national certification and promoting the establishment of a National Board of Certification for Librarians, he remarked repeatedly and explicitly that library schools were incapable to handle, and improper for supervising, the matter of standardization and certification.⁵² Even though the remark might be true, library educators in those years must have felt, at the very least, uneasy and uncomfortable.

As discussed earlier, the Committee on Library Training first supported the proposal of establishing a National Board of Certification for Librarians in 1920. In the next year, the Committee changed its mind and withheld its endorsement for the proposed certification plan. The reverse decision may have been affected by the pressures from library schools, as well as from the general apprehension in the profession.

In 1924, when the Committee on National Certification and Library Training was proposed to be discontinued, Williamson had already stepped down from the chairmanship of, and left, the Committee. When the proposal was made, serving on the Committee was a new Chairman, who was also a member of the
Committee on Library Training. This fact might explain that, in this time, Williamson might have already lost his support before the proposal was made to the meeting.

Moreover, when the Williamson Report was published in 1923, a majority of library educators responded with either disapproval of, or indifference to, the recommendations of reforms made by Williamson. These responses might illustrate the feeling of library educators towards Williamson's ideas. With regard to the responses of library educators, reference is made to Charles Darrett Churchwell's work,\textsuperscript{53} in which there is a concise summary of these responses.

Proposal for a Further Study

The certification of librarians is not a simple topic. It is difficult for this paper to deal with this subject extensively. Therefore, it is proposed that a thorough study on the subject of certification of librarians would be appropriate, especially when there are indications that the topic of certification is now revived in the library profession. In addition to a review of the historical development of certification, the proposed study would explore: (1) The influence of teachers' certification on the activities of certification of librarians. (2) Williamson's personal activities on the matter of national certification. (3) The causes affecting the realization of national certification especially the effect of Williamson's relationship with library educators in the years around 1920. (4) The result of the activities of national certification.

Summary

In conclusion, I will sum up some of the major points reviewed in this paper. Evidences have shown that the subject
of certification of librarians is being revived. The purpose of this paper is to review briefly the historical development of the subject, highlighting the events occurring in 1907–1924. It was said that the certification of librarians was influenced by the teachers’ certification, which was originated in 1654. The library profession began to consider the matter of certification in 1919, when Williamson was invited to the ALA Annual Conference to deliver the paper, *Some Present-Day Aspects of Library Training*. Also in 1919, Williamson was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to undertake a study on the training for library service.

Based on the recommendations made by Williamson and Baldwin, the Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training was established to draw up a scheme of certification. The activities of national certification survived to 1921, when Williamson was active on the Special Committee. The activities of national certification was set back in 1922, when Williamson left the Special Committee. In 1923, the Williamson Report made for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, entitled *Training for Library Service*, was officially published. In 1924, the Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training was discontinued and its activities were incorporated into the realm of the Training Board.

The requirements set for certification were not unusual, and the proposal for certification was on the voluntary base. In spite of these facts, the idea of national certification of librarians has been stagnant for a long time without any real progress, due to the overwhelming resistance in ALA and from the library profession, and the nature of library service. It is difficult for this paper to deal with the subject of certification of librarians extensively; therefore, it is proposed that a full and further study on the subject is needed. For the convenience of reviewing, a list of Some Historical Events of the Certification of Librarians in the United States is appended at the end of the paper.
References

27. Ibid., pp. 885–889.
33. Ibid., p. 23.
34. Ibid., p. 29.
35. Ibid., p. 52.
36. Ibid., p. 106.
38. Ibid., p. 197.
40. Ibid., pp. 239–240.
(January, 1921), p. 66.
Appendix

Some Historical Events of the Certification of Librarians in the United States

1654  Massachusetts Education Act was adopted.

1907  Mary W. Plummer remarked that the League of Library Commissions should prepare tests for librarians.

1908  Ohio Library Association introduced a bill to examine librarians. The bill was not passed.

1916  New York Library Association recommended a plan for certification of librarians. The recommendation was referred for further discussion.

1917  Electra C. Doren was invited to the ALA Midwinter Meeting to present the information gathered on the certification of librarians.

ALÁ established the Special Committee on Standardization of Libraries and Certification of Librarians; a statement was made by the Committee at the ALA Annual Conference.

1919  ALÁ established the Committee on an Enlarged Program, in which, certification of librarians was one of composed areas of activity.

Charles C. Williamson presented at the ALA Annual Conference the paper, Some Present-Day Aspects of Library Training.

Williamson was invited by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to undertake a study of the training for library service.

Emma Baldwin presented at the meeting of the American
Library Institute the paper, *The Education of Librarians*.

1920 ALA appointed the Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training.

The Committee on an Enlarged Program made a report at ALA Annual Conference; it proposed to have a survey of training facilities and to prepare schemes to test and grade fitness.

The Special Committee on Standardization, Certification, and Library Training proposed to establish a National Board of Certification for Librarians; the proposal was accepted but only partially adopted by the ALA Council.

1921 The above Special Committee chaired by Williamson made a proposal of national certification plan.

The Committee requested ALA to approve the proposed plan and purpose of voluntary certification.

1922 Williamson resigned as the Chairman of the Special Committee on National Certification and Training.

No report was made at the ALA Annual Conference from the Special Committee.

The Special Libraries Association reported at its Annual Convention that time had not come for any recommendation on certification.

1923 Williamson Report, *Training for Library Service*, was officially published. The report urged the establishment of a National Board of Certification for Librarians.

The Committee on Library Training reported at the ALA Annual Conference that certification was not an important matter in training librarians.
1924 The Special Committee on National Certification and Training was discontinued. Its activities were incorporated into the realm of the Training Board.

1934 ALA Board of Education for Librarians urged states to adopt state certification laws.