

# SAMI GRAHAM

## **I. Introduction**

Today, I have been given the honor and privilege of introducing Ms. Sami Graham – Mayor Bronson’s nominee to serve as Director of the Anchorage Public Library. As you are aware, Ms. Graham’s nomination has been the subject of some controversy. So, I would like to take some extended time in my introduction to explain and clarify why Mayor Bronson has nominated Sami for this position – a position for which she is eminently qualified. Sami has graciously ceded to me some of the time she otherwise would have taken in her opening statement so that I can communicate our Mayor’s position on this nomination. I want to thank the Assembly, in advance, for your thoughtful consideration of the reasons behind this Administration’s support of Sami, as well as for your consideration of the many statements of support on her behalf from the general public, including from former Governor Bill Walker. I understand he recently sent you a letter of support on Sami’s behalf. If I may, I would like to read a couple excerpts from the letter he sent you because I think they wonderfully encapsulate why Sami is such an excellent nominee for Library Director and they beautifully describe who she is as a person.

Gov. Walker writes that Sami:

[H]as an incredible work ethic, integrity, compassion, embraces and befriends many people who do not share the same faith or political affiliation, and has dedicated her professional career as a teacher, counselor and principal to improving the educational opportunities for Anchorage’s diverse student population. Sami wants every child to succeed.

Now *that* is a Library Director for every citizen of Anchorage.

Gov. Walker concludes with these words:

Sami’s strong communication and interpersonal skills, her decades of work with Anchorage’s diverse population of students and families, her excellent organizational skills, staff management and administrative skills and her strong character all contribute to making her a solid candidate for this position and I hope you will . . . confirm her appointment.

With that sterling recommendation from a former Governor in mind, I’ll provide a short summary of what I intend to cover in my introduction of Sami today. My remarks are divided into three parts – *First*, I will address the mistaken view that Mayor Bronson is bound by the Minimum Qualifications established for the Library Director position in the relevant job class specification. *Second*, I will provide you some helpful context that demonstrates the Mayor’s nomination of Sami to this position is neither unique nor an aberration, but rather is part of a documented and growing trend in the hiring of professional librarians and directors across our nation. *Third*, and finally, I will conclude with Sami’s exceptional qualifications and how they wonderfully dovetail with our library’s three-fold mission – “[c]onnecting people to education, information, and community.”

## II. A Master of Library Science is Not Required

Some have expressed concern that Sami does not meet the Minimum Qualifications to serve as Library Director because she does not possess a Master of Library Science (MLS). I have been advised by our Legal Department that the Mayor is not bound by the Minimum Qualifications for this particular position. Specifically, Section 3.30.024D of our Municipal Code provides as follows:

The qualifications statements in each class specification establish requirements that must be met by an individual before consideration for appointment or promotion to a position in the class. Common alternative combinations of education, training or experience are specified in the class specifications. *However, other combinations may be qualifying, if deemed equivalent by the director.* (emphasis added).

Let me repeat that last sentence: ... “other combinations may be qualifying, if deemed equivalent by the director.” In other words, as the Chief Executive of our Municipality, the Mayor has the authority to nominate Sami as the next Library Director because he has determined her experience is “equivalent” to the Minimum Qualifications set forth in the class specification for this position.

I also think it is important to note that the Library Director’s Position Description, which was updated and approved by the previous Library Director in March 2014, does *not* require a Master of Library Science. Item #20 in the Position Description asks for a list of any “license” or “certification” that is “identified in the job class specification as necessary to perform the duties and responsibilities of the Position.” It further states “[p]lease be specific.”

In response to this question, the Position Description makes no mention of an MLS degree, but rather states a mere “preference” for a “second degree” in “Business, Public Administration, or Human Resource Development.”

If we were going to be technical about Sami’s qualifications, we would be compelled to recognize that there is a clear conflict between the Minimum Qualifications set forth in the general job class specification and the Minimum Qualifications set forth in the specific Position Description. So, even *if* the Mayor were bound to follow a wooden reading of the Minimum Qualifications for this position – which I’ve already demonstrated is *not* the case – he still would need to decide which document to follow: the job class specification or the Position Description? My staff has informed me that HR practice and procedure is to follow the Position Description over the job class specification, if there is a conflict or inconsistency between the two. In short, even if the Mayor were subject to the Minimum Qualifications for appointing a Library Director, an MLS degree currently would not be necessary because it is not required by the Position Description (again, a Position Description that was written and approved by the previous Library Director).

Regardless, Mayor Bronson is confident the Assembly already is well-aware that he is empowered by our Municipal Code to consider professional qualifications he deems “equivalent” to those set forth in this particular class specification, because this and previous Assemblies routinely have confirmed nominees to serve as department heads who neither met the relevant Minimum Qualifications set forth in their job class specification nor those set forth in the Position Description.

The Mayor simply requests that this Assembly continue a long-held tradition that it and its predecessors have adhered to and honored – namely, that Anchorage’s Mayors are authorized and empowered by our Municipal Code to appoint their teams, even if some of them do not satisfy certain Minimum Qualifications, so long as they otherwise possess “equivalent” qualifications relevant to the position at issue. For the sake of this and future Mayoral Administrations, Mayor Bronson respectfully submits that ending this unbroken tradition in his Administration could have far-reaching and unintended consequences for future Mayoral Administrations and Assemblies.

### **III. Library Directors In Other States Do Not Always Have MLS Degrees.**

That said, Mayor Bronson understands some folks are simply concerned that, as a general matter, a person who does not possess an MLS degree is not equipped to manage a library. So, he directed me to perform some research to address this understandable concern because public input and concerns are important to him. The results of my research have been revealing, to say the least. Bottom line? There is a heated debate between and among professional librarians as to the necessity of an MLS degree for Library Directors or for those who otherwise serve as executives within the librarian profession.

For example, the American Library Association, which is the world’s largest and oldest library association, recently debated whether its Executive Director should possess an MLS. Ultimately, it determined that an MLS should only be a “preferred” qualification, not a required one.

That outcome is worth contemplating for just a moment – the American Library Association – which, in its own words, is dedicated to “provid[ing] leadership for the development ... and ... improvement of ... the profession of librarianship” – does *not* require that its Executive Director possess an MLS. This begs the rhetorical question: Why would we require of our Library Director a degree that even the world’s oldest and largest library association does *not* require of its chief executive?

Furthermore, surveys of the professional landscape reveal a lack of consensus as to whether an MLS degree is necessary for a Library Director. For example, a survey of Directors of the Association of Research Libraries was performed in 2017 (the Association of Research Libraries is a non-profit comprised of 125 research libraries). Forty-two percent of the Library Directors who responded to the survey believed an MLS degree *was* necessary for a Library Director. However, 33% believed it was *not* necessary and 25% did not even have an opinion either way. In other words, 58% of the Library Directors either did not believe an MLS degree was necessary or did not have an opinion either way. It is significant that there was near parity between those who believed in the necessity of an MLS degree and those who did not.

Equally interesting are some of the Library Directors’ survey comments. One Library Director, who had been a librarian for well-over 2 decades, said this:

My MLIS training . . . did not provide me with any of the skills that I consider to be essential in my role as the library director.

Another study published by the American Library Association found that 63% of library directors surveyed said that an MLS degree was *not* a requirement for all professional librarian positions at their respective libraries. *Sixty-three percent!* The study concluded: “survey data indicate that in public libraries hiring non-MLS librarians is common practice and in academic libraries, this type of hiring is gaining momentum[.]”

In other words, Mayor Bronson’s nomination of Sami Graham is neither unprecedented nor uncommon in modern-day librarianship; rather, it is consistent with a growing national recognition and trend that an MLS degree is not the *only* means of evaluating a person’s professional qualifications to serve as a Library Director.

#### **IV. Sami Graham Is Qualified To Be Anchorage’s Next Library Director.**

Finally, it is important to note that no one with an MLS degree applied for the position of Library Director during the Bronson Administration’s month-long transition. Regardless, Sami Graham is exceedingly qualified for this position. While she does not possess an MLS degree, the purpose of a library extends far beyond the organization of information, the maintenance of physical and digital resources, or the philosophy of information dissemination – it encompasses the promotion of literacy, learning, education, and the facilitation of community connection.

In fact, the Anchorage Public Library’s 2019-2021 Strategic Plan has “three community focus areas,” which include education – especially supporting literacy for our young children and continuing skills development for teens and adults; serving as a bridge to information and resources for our Municipality; and building community among the citizens of Anchorage.

Sami’s educational degrees and professional experiences have well-prepared her to advance not only our public library’s current strategic plan but also to advance the core purpose of any public library, which is to promote literacy, education, and community. Specifically, Sami holds a Master of Educational Leadership from UAA *and* a Master of Science in Counseling from Long Island University. Prior to her recent retirement, she also held state education certifications for Type A: Teaching, Type B: Administration, Type C: Counseling, and Type C: Professional Teaching. As a teacher and educational leader, she has dedicated the last three decades of her life to advancing all three core components of our public library’s mission – education, information, and community.

For example, Sami has leveraged her classrooms, as well as the schools and libraries she has managed, to serve as storehouses of information and resource for our Municipality’s diverse student population:

- She has facilitated college-level classes on Reading and Math instruction;
- She has taught and invested in our children;
- She has developed curricula to promote learning;
- She has brought community members together to promote the well-being of our young people by teaching social and emotional learning to students, staff and families;
- She has managed, supported, and advocated for school libraries, which are the libraries *most accessible* to our Municipality’s children and youth;
- She has worked and collaborated with parents to help their children attain to their highest potential;

- She has received trauma-informed training;
- She has pursued continuing education in Technology, Reading, and Social & Emotional Learning;
- She has training in emotional, psychological, and physical workplace safety;
- She has been a presenter at local, state, and national conferences;
- She has overseen academic libraries and has written and administered library grants; and more.

Sami's hard work, diligence, and excellence in her profession have not gone unnoticed. In 2007, she was honored with an "Excellence in Education" award. She even has been honored by the Alaska Association of School Libraries, which recognized her with its "Outstanding Administrator" award in 2015. In short, Sami is a successful and experienced administrator, leader, curriculum developer, teacher, and counselor – all of which are skills that are critically important to the success of our public library's mission.

In a time when almost 60% of Anchorage's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders are illiterate – a number that, sadly, swells to well over 70% for our school district's African American and Alaska Native/American Indian students – a Library Director with extensive experience in education and literacy is not just a "nice-to-have," it is a "need-to-have." Our literacy crisis likely has grown significantly, due to the year of learning loss many of our Municipality's young children have experienced, which makes Sami's skillset all the more valuable.

Furthermore, given the diversity of our population and the social-emotional needs of members of our community, having a Library Director with a Counseling degree, subject matter expertise in social and emotional learning, and trauma-informed training will be tremendously beneficial in cultivating a library environment that *is and feels* safe for all its patrons, and that respects the dignity of the diverse community it serves.

Fortunately, Sami has staff who possess MLS degrees and who can apply that subject matter expertise, as needed, to the library's operations. A leadership team that includes an individual with an MLS degree and one with a Master's in Educational Leadership and a Master of Science in Counseling will bring a more holistic and effective approach to advancing our library's mission than would a bunch of folks with the same degree and similar experiences. Our library will be richer and stronger if its leadership team includes a diversity of qualifications and professional experiences that are relevant to its work, values, and mission.

The Mayor understands that some folks also are concerned about possibly losing state grants because Sami does not have an MLS, but the Alaska State Librarian has informed us the only grant our library currently receives that would be subject to the MLS degree requirement is a Public Library Assistance Grant of \$35,000 per year. This amounts to approximately .004% of the Anchorage Public Library's \$9.2M budget for FY 2021 – a fraction of a fraction of the budget. Regardless, we can still apply for a waiver that would enable us to continue receiving that grant.

To conclude: Our Mayor has the utmost respect and appreciation for professional librarians and for the MLS degrees they have obtained. His nomination of Sami Graham in *no way* is intended to minimize or dismiss the import of those degrees. He simply has nominated an excellent leader and administrator whose professional background and experience in all three components of our library's three-fold mission will only enhance its success and the public good it provides our community.

Mayor Bronson views our public library as an invaluable repository of human civilization, knowledge, and culture; as an important gathering grounds for communal connection and engagement; and as a critical center for learning and literacy.

Jorge Luis Borges, the famous Argentine writer and essayist, wrote that he imagined paradise would be like a library – a welcoming place of wonder, knowledge, beauty, community, mystery, and adventure. Sami Graham is the most qualified person to bring that metaphysical vision to life for all our library's patrons. I imagine each of us could use a little more "paradise" in our lives these days.

Please confirm this wonderful Alaskan as the Anchorage Public Library's next Director.

Thank you.