

The Future is Not Just for Librarians, It's for Staff Too. Who Will They Be, and Where Will We Find Them?

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Abstract

The coming crisis in the recruitment of librarians also has implications for staff recruitment. This paper will discuss how staff responsibilities have dramatically changed over the past several decades. It also examines the barriers that need to be overcome to successfully recruit and retain the kinds of staff that contemporary libraries need, and makes recommendations for improved recruitment strategies.

Recent library literature is rife with articles and reports about the growing crisis in recruiting and retaining librarians. The excellent studies by Stanley Wilder and others document not only the dwindling supply of librarians, but the changes in the types of librarians being recruited to work in libraries. Those librarians who were part of the enormous cohort who entered the profession in the 60's and 70's (including this author) can testify about how radically their jobs have changed over the past three decades. When many of today's librarians entered the profession, the lines between staff and librarians were clearly delineated. Librarians did the "professional" work such as cata-

logging and reference, with the staff performing a support or clerical role. A high school education was sufficient to qualify for a staff position in most academic libraries.

However, to adequately study their changing profession, academic librarians need to take a more holistic approach. The transformation in the roles and responsibilities of professional librarians has been paralleled by corresponding changes in the roles and responsibilities of staff (for the purposes of this paper, "staff" refer to all employees other than librarians). As librarians engage in discussions about where they'll find new librarians to fill their shoes, they also must focus attention on the new cadre of staff who will populate our libraries. ARL statistics indicate that the greatest increase in professional hiring over the past two decades involves "functional specialists," defined by ARL as "...media specialists, or experts in management fields such as personnel, fiscal matters, systems, preservation, etc." Only 55 percent of functional specialists possess that badge of professional librarianship, the MLS degree.¹ This is empirical evidence of how dramatically the staffing in academic

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libraries has evolved. The libraries of the future are likely to be more flexible organizations with a different equation of librarians and staff. Staff positions will continue to change and evolve, and the recruitment of qualified staff could become as important an issue as the recruitment of librarians. Who will these employees be? What qualifications will they need?

The Changing Roles of Staff

One way to study the role changes that have occurred for library staff is to examine the terminology used to describe these employees. From the 1930s through 1950s, library employees were of two types: professional librarians and clerks, whose jobs consisted of typing and filing. Clerk's job descriptions were often composed of tasks that were routine, time-consuming, and repetitive. In academic libraries, it was not uncommon to find student employees performing clerical functions, with one omnipresent support staff member—the library director's secretary, who handled a myriad of administrative details, ranging from typing to hiring students to preparing the annual report. In 1939, an ALA report advocated for a three-tier staffing system, consisting of professionals, sub-professionals, and clericals.² The sub-professionals were likely precursor to what today we call paraprofessionals. Mid-century, terminology such as support staff and classified staff emerged. Academic library staff was classified similarly to clerical staff in other collegiate departments. Most clerical employees worked in technical services, although professional staff still dominated in number. Other terms that have been used to describe library staff include library technicians, para-librarians, library associate, and library assistant. According to the outcomes of a series of focus groups conducted by the American Library Association in 1991 with library staff, many resent the terminology of "non-professional," which they find to be demeaning and not descriptive of what many of them do.³ For more information on paraprofessionals in libraries, academic librarians should consult two important articles by Larry Oberg published in 1992.⁴

The rise of automation spurred major changes and diversification in staff functions. No where was this more evident than in cataloging departments, where staff not only assumed responsibility for copy cataloging, but began to take on responsibility for original cataloging, long the domain of professional librarians.

Budgetary pressures and the need to streamline processes encouraged administrators to find ways to streamline cataloging operations. They discovered that they could teach staff the standardized rules and guidelines of cataloging, first copy cataloging and later of original cataloging, especially if the staff member had appropriate subject background. Increasing reference departments also moved staff out of "back room operations" and into front-line service. This meant that staff had to be instructed in effective use of basic reference tools, the online catalog and databases, thus moving these staff into another knowledge domain traditionally occupied by librarians. The word paraprofessional had become a permanent part of library vocabulary.

By definition, a paraprofessional is someone who gives support to a professional person, such as a lawyer, physician, or in this case, an academic librarian. However, "para" is a Greek word meaning beside, rather than subordinate. In the new information environment, a growing number of staff contribute specialized skills and talents to the workplace, and instead of being in a subordinate or even in support role to librarians, have become *partners* with librarians in the information process. In many ways, their skills complement those of librarians. The technological specialist serves along side librarians on committees charged with implementing a new system. The instructional designer works with librarians on the creation of online tutorials. The staff assistant lends his or her proficiency in the use of software applications to the development of webpages and presentations. Allen Veaner believes that all employees of academic libraries have been transformed into "knowledge workers," a far cry from the clerical positions that staff occupied a few decades ago.⁵

To better understand how these changes had impacted my own institution, I took an historical look at how professional positions had shifted from the time I joined the Penn State faculty to present.

The decrease in professional positions in Access and Technical Services is due to both automation and to staff assuming responsibilities previously assigned to librarians. For example, in 1978, the following positions at Penn State were filled by professional librarians: Manager, Facilities; Chief, System Development; Personnel Librarian; Head of Lending Services; Head of Reserves, Head of Interlibrary Loan.

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Table 1. Penn State University Libraries at University Park

Type of Position	1978	2002
Technical services librarians	23	9
Public services librarians	31	41
Access services librarians	5	1

Today, all are filled by highly qualified staff (albeit with some title changes), in some cases by staff who possess better qualifications than the librarians who occupied the positions 25 years ago.

Academic libraries are dependent on talented staff. The level of education and skills needed by nearly every level of staff are much higher than they were twenty years ago. Staff not only must master a variety of electronic tools, but think creatively and independently, and increasingly, participate in system-wide planning. Many assume leadership and supervisory responsibilities. The staff of fifty years ago only needed a clerical high school education to succeed in their jobs. This kind of background is no longer adequate for most library positions.

Thinking Strategically about Staff Positions

Academic Library administrators should begin to think strategically about the variety and qualifications of staff that will be necessary in the future. The profession's current focus on the looming shortage of librarians is actually opportune, in that it creates a sense of urgency and pushes administrators to think more creatively about their staffing requirements and how they will meet them. There is no better time than now to do a systematic examination of our overall staffing needs and of how staff positions are structured in academic libraries. This is not meant to imply that staff positions have been static for twenty years. Obviously, they haven't. But the changes have been incremental and not directed by a forward looking vision for the future of academic libraries.

In restructuring their staffing, academic libraries should not be afraid to think creatively and to redefine the core competencies needed for each position. For example, many academic libraries place an emphasis on subject specialization and actively recruit librarians with appropriate subject degrees and backgrounds; often these librarians work in specialized libraries devoted to major subject areas. Now is the time

to engage in discussions on how to redefine the roles and qualifications of staff who will work in subject libraries or with subject specialists. If an increasing number of reference hours are being handled by staff, should they not also have a subject background? Why not hire recent college graduates with an aptitude and enthusiasm for electronic resources to help librarians to orient students to the riches of our collections? Are there roles for staff with appropriate backgrounds to play in fostering collection development, one of the few areas of academic libraries that have remained the exclusive domain of librarians? These questions become more critical as the shortage of librarians looms. Academic libraries may be forced to delegate more responsibilities to staff; if so, what skills will those staff need and will there be qualified staff available?

Like many academic libraries, the Penn State Libraries have hired or established new staff positions. A review done for the Libraries' recent strategic plan found that over a five-year period, more than 70 positions (librarians and staff) had been re-described or reallocated. Many of these changes had been opportunistic or done to address an immediate need, such as the construction of a new library. In many cases, existing staff had been moved into new positions. Among new staff positions that have been created in the past few years are:

- Annex Supervisor
- Cataloging Specialist
- Collections Care Specialist
- Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts
- Database Administrator/Web Developer
- Development Assistant
- Head, Public Relations and Marketing
- Information Technology Consultant
- Instructional Developer
- PC Support Specialist
- Preservation and Scanning Specialist

In tandem with re-describing staff positions, library organizational structures need to become more flexible. As library staff have accepted accountability for decision making and supervision, it is only reasonable that they want to be consulted on planning and policy issues. If they are managing front-line operations, they want the authority to influence these operations. This added authority contributes to their sense of professionalism, their job satisfaction, and ultimately, to their retention.

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What are the Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining the Best and Brightest Staff?

To recruit and retain excellent staff, academic libraries must provide a work environment that is conducive to their positive job satisfaction and growth. In 1997, the Support Staff Interests Roundtable (SSIRT) of the American Library Association conducted a study to determine the primary concerns of library staff. Over 2,000 library staff were surveyed. The issues of greatest concerns of staff were found to be: a) lack of a career ladder, b) compensation not appropriate to responsibility and education and c) poor access to continuing education and training.⁶ These issues are neither new nor surprising, but the current concerns about recruiting and retaining staff might finally push libraries to take these issues seriously.

Career Ladders. Many satisfied library employees, especially those with longevity, consider themselves to have a career, and not just a job. They deserve the opportunity to pursue promotion and recognition by moving along a career track. Librarians, especially those with faculty status, already have a clear track along faculty ranks and are also able to seek rewards and recognition within their profession. In 1999, the 1st Congress on Professional Education created the Personnel Stratification Task Force, later renamed Library Career Pathways Task Force. They updated the Library Education and Personnel Utilization Policy Statement that had been adopted by ALA Council in 1970. Among the major revisions they made to the document included adding "the acceptance of support staff as integral contributors to and participants in the Library professions" and "the recognition that the Library and Information Studies realm of practice includes several professions at various levels of entry." The Task Force endorsed the concept of a "Library Career Lattice" based on skills and education.⁷ Some innovative models of staff career tracking already exist at institutions such as Duke University and the University of Connecticut. Unfortunately, the greatest barrier to creating such a lattice system in academic libraries is the relatively inflexible staff classification systems in use at academic institutions.

Compensation. Staff members are too often an "undercompensated segment of an undercompensated profession."⁸ Compensation for staff is usually tied to position classification. Again, the difficulty in correcting this problem is the lack of influence library

administrators have to influence the staff classification systems in use at many academic institutions. In 1997, the SSIRT conducted two surveys to determine educational and compensation levels of their membership. They found that more than half of their members have bachelor degrees or higher. Even with an average worklife experience of 14.7 years, most staff earned less than \$25,000 year.⁹ In 2002, the California Library Association (CLA) found serious equity issues when it compared library employee salaries against other comparable positions. In California, library employees make less than entry level park maintenance employees. Unions have not been helpful in solving the problem because they do not understand the complexity of library jobs. The CLA study found that librarians also did not aid the cause because too often they were willing to sacrifice staff pay increases in order to maintain book budgets and other needs.¹⁰

Five years ago, the Penn State University Libraries committed to review every staff position held at the University Park campus. Never had a project of this type or magnitude been pursued at the university. Two hundred positions were described, inventoried, and reviewed by the job analysts at the university's Human Resources Office. The Libraries administration lobbied hard for upgrades for most of the positions, citing the changing nature of the jobs in an automated environment and the need to attract employees with higher educational levels. We were successful in getting most positions upgraded, and we committed to corresponding salary increases. However, the job ratings are still close to the lower end of the University's classification system, probably still reflecting the incorrect perception that library staff functions continue to be predominately clerical in nature.

Continuing education and training. All staff in academic libraries need training. Most staff training tends to be experiential, or on the job training. Despite academic libraries' increased commitment to training, especially in technology, staff training is rarely systematic nor does it follow a curriculum. In addition, staff want to be assured of growth opportunities through appropriate and continuing education; this is especially true of staff who consider their work to be professional. It is important to recognize that many staff do not want to become librarians, but still want to develop and grow within their own areas of exper-

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tise. As libraries face shortages of staff, it is even possible that libraries might be forced to “grow our own” in order to ensure that they have staff with the appropriate qualifications and skills. This will require far more commitment and funding to professional development activities than currently exists.

Participation in professional associations is an extension of continuing education and professional development. Despite budget cutbacks, academic libraries should identify support to enable interested staff to participate in professional associations and to attend their workshops, conferences, etc. Not only is such participation a form of reward and recognition, but it benefits the libraries by ensuring that staff possess high level skills and an understanding of the values and goals of librarianship. Correspondingly, professional associations in librarianship should ensure that library staff have a voice. A positive step in this direction is the American Library Association's new priority on staff issues. On May 16–17, 2003, ALA will sponsor the *3rd Congress on Professional Education: Focus on Library Support Staff*. The Congress will address the three issues identified by SSIRT of primary interest to staff, the changing role of staff, and concerns about staff recruitment. For the purpose of the Congress, its planning committee decided to define support staff as all non-MLS employees with the exception of specialists such as human resource officers, etc., who they believe identify more strongly with their areas of expertise than with the broader field of librarianship. Every academic librarian concerned about recruitment of staff should watch for the outcomes of this conference.

A final word about a work climate issue that needs focused attention from all librarians. Unfortunately, there continues to be a palpable division—some say a caste system—between librarians and staff. It's the diversity issue that no one likes to talk about. There appears to be a generalized feeling among paraprofessionals that they are not recognized and respected for their contribution to libraries and librarianship. One has only to browse through *Library Mosaics*, the journal devoted to library support staff, to note an underlying tone of frustration about the lack of respect that some staff perceive from librarians. It's likely that this divisive problem has been exacerbated by staff assuming work that previously had been performed by librarians. Why, they wonder, have they assumed in-

creasingly professional responsibilities but have not received the salary or other benefits that should go with it? Staff advocates such as Larry Oberg and Paul Veaner have appealed for more discussion on this issue for years, but not much has changed. Ten years ago, Larry Oberg warned that librarians will fail to obtain full professional status until they come to grips with library staffing dilemmas.¹¹ In a tightening job market, this is an issue that can cause problems with recruitment and retention of good staff. Staff should not be treated as second class citizens. Elevating their status could have a powerful impact on also elevating the status of librarians.

Recruiting and Retaining the Best and Brightest Staff

The professional literature bemoans the competition for librarians that libraries face from companies and non-profit organizations that can offer more lucrative salaries and benefits. Doesn't it stand to reason that the staff who libraries would like to recruit are also being attracted to these same employers? Not long ago, we were fortunate to hire a technical support specialist away from an academic department in the College of Engineering. His friends and colleagues questioned why someone of his talents would consider applying at the libraries; what challenges could they offer? He took the risk, and was surprised to discover the size of the server farm, the 1,500 microcomputers, the complex network, and the opportunity for creative work that awaited him. How do we encourage others to take the same risk? Libraries have to take steps to actively attract employees; they can no longer sit back and expect good candidates to appear on our doorsteps.

1. Academic libraries need to do a far better job selling the benefits and challenges of library employment. Carolyn Sheehy found that librarians liked the work environment of higher education, citing its intangibles such as cooperation and collegiality, intellectual stimulation, variety, and job security.¹² Can we sell this message to prospective staff?

2. Libraries need to create staff positions that have meaningful titles with professional job descriptions, and to advertise where qualified candidates will see the description. Generic, clerically-oriented job descriptions—the kind that exist in too many academic job classification programs—no longer describe the complexity and challenges of the jobs available in libraries.

3. Staff positions should be crafted in parallel to the kinds of jobs that are being created for librarians. For example, the emphasis on subject expertise for librarians could also lead to subject-oriented positions for staff. Such jobs could be attractive to recent college graduates looking for applications of their majors. College and university towns, which tend to have an educated and often under-employed population, could be a rich resource for college-educated job candidates. An academic library that capitalized on the availability of an educated populace is Texas A&M, which created popular paraprofessional reference positions in subject specialties.

4. Academic libraries should consider recruiting individuals who are seeking second career opportunities. Many new librarians are starting second careers. The same could hold true of staff. For example, a teacher who had not found satisfaction in the classroom might find it in a challenging position in an education library, where his knowledge of curriculum and instruction could be applied in different ways.

5. Library administrators should look beyond skills to the behavioral attributes needed in library staff. Lynch's and Roble's analysis of advertisements for a librarian position found an increasing emphasis on behavioral skills, such as flexibility, creativity, and leadership. They surmised that this is due to the expectation that staff will be required to interact with users. "The library as a passive warehouse of collections is no more. The library is an active agency providing information services to users."¹³ Can we also send this message to prospective staff? Advertising positions that specify behaviors such as flexibility and creativity makes an important statement about the dynamism of the academic contemporary library, and may make it far more attractive to the kind of employees that libraries seek to hire.

6. Just as librarians are the best recruiters into their profession, staff who are happy with their jobs can be excellent recruiters into the staff ranks. Jobs in libraries should not be considered dead end jobs, but jobs that offer new challenges and opportunities for growth.

Ultimately, our goal should not be to "save" librarianship. The discussion about the future of librarianship should move away from simple self-preservation to focus on what the libraries of the future will need in terms of employee skills and talents and

characteristics. If this means the demise of librarianship as we know it, then so be it. Academic libraries of tomorrow will be dynamic, responsive institutions if they are populated by the best and brightest librarians and staff who share the common values of the profession.

Notes

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13. Beverly P. Lynch and Kimberly Robles Smith. "The Changing Nature of Work in Academic Libraries." *College and Research Libraries* (September 2001): 418.