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The role of paraprofessionals in public libraries is in flux, and is a source of debate among library and information professionals. The present study offers empirical illumination to this discussion by employing a web-based questionnaire survey inquiring into the relationship between job responsibility and turnover rate for paraprofessional positions. While this study was exploratory in nature, analysis of the results uncovered evidence for a negative correlation between the turnover rate for a given paraprofessional position and that position's level of resemblance to MLS-requiring positions. Implications of this finding and limitations of the survey are discussed, and avenues for future research are suggested.

Headings:

Library technicians -- Job descriptions

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JOB DUTIES AND TURNOVER RATES FOR PARAPROFESSIONAL POSITIONS
IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

by
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Introduction

The role of paraprofessionals in public libraries is in flux, and scrutiny is due to issues concerning this class of library workers. As managers of public libraries face increasing economic pressure and expectations to do more with less, vacated positions are often left unfilled, leading to heavier workloads for existing staff. In this environment, retaining quality paraprofessional employees who can enhance an organization's commitment to its mission becomes ever more crucial. Yet just what their contribution should entail has become a subject of controversy. While the literature illustrates the importance of assigning challenging responsibilities in maintaining job satisfaction and mitigating turnover (Preenen et al., 2011), the act of taking duties out of the hands of librarians with formal professional training can have unavoidable political implications (Litwin, 2009). The present study was undertaken in order to offer guidance to public library managers determining how to most effectively assign responsibility among the professional and paraprofessional members of their staff, and to provide a modicum of empirical illumination to the debate surrounding the role of professionalism in librarianship. It sought to accomplish this through examining the effect of job responsibilities on the turnover rate of paraprofessional positions.

The author's hypothesis at the outset of this study was that the more closely a paraprofessional position resembles a professional (MLS-requiring) position in job responsibilities, the lower the turnover rate for that paraprofessional position will be. As little research had been done on this particular relationship, the study took an exploratory

approach, building on methods used in studies of other disciplines and professional settings. This study did not propose to evaluate the political desirability or long-term ancillary effects of assigning greater responsibility to non-professional employees, which have been a subject of concern among some librarians and authors (Crowley, 2003). The author's intention was rather to shed light on one concrete aspect of varying paraprofessional job duties: the effect on turnover. By doing so the study sought to aid the managers of libraries and library systems in designing positions that are likely to attract and retain quality staff, thus increasing the effectiveness of their libraries' services. While the political and economic implications of blurring the line between professional and paraprofessional staff will and should continue to be discussed, the present study endeavors to help to place this conversation in the context of empirical research.

Literature Review

A brief review of the literature produced on library paraprofessionals is presented below, including empirical studies as well as commentary on the political aspect of paraprofessionals' increased role. While the present study does not directly address the political implications of this trend, such literature is worthwhile to note, both as background and to underline the importance of paraprofessionals in contemporary public libraries and theories of librarianship.

Perhaps the harshest critic of the so-called de-professionalization of librarianship has been Library Juice Press editor Rory Litwin. In his 2009 article "The Library Paraprofessional Movement and the Deprofessionalization of Librarianship", Litwin identifies the trend toward increasing status for library paraprofessionals, as exemplified in developments such as the American Library Association's 2005 establishment of the ALA Policy on Inclusiveness & Mutual Respect and the ALA Allied Professional Association's development of a certification program for library workers without an MLS, as representing attempts by library management to undercut librarians' autonomy by forming a "false alliance" with paraprofessionals (p. 55). Litwin sees evidence for the hollowness of this increased recognition for library workers in the lack of accompanying material benefits: "A certified paraprofessional, it is reasonable to expect, will continue to earn an hourly wage rather than a salary and will continue to perform her work in a relatively tightly managed way" (pp. 47-48). The ultimate result of this trend is the undercutting of the fruits of librarianship's status as a profession:

> Librarianship's claim to professional status, and the knowledge base that underpins that claim, are what give librarians the limited degree of autonomy that they have in an institution. It is in management's interest to shift the job function of librarians to a paraprofessional group for the purpose of gaining greater control (as well as saving money). (p. 48)

Litwin does acknowledge not only the fact that library managers are frequently librarians themselves, and thus occupy dual roles in the conflict he portrays (p. 57), but that paraprofessionals can be as or more competent than their MLS-holding counterparts (p. 48). With this caveat Litwin touches upon the importance of what Michael F. Winter (1988, pp. 97-98) has termed the "role of normative order" in policing the standards of a particular community of professionals—that is, "internalized general norms of conduct" that operate separately from formal structural controls such as legal regulation. Such a normative order has the potential to inculcate certain practices in library workers lacking an educational background in said practices. Despite these qualifications, Litwin concludes with this distillation of the objections to handing more duties to paraprofessionals:

> To the extent that service to clients by institutions ceases to be given by individuals who have a mastery of theory, a motivation focusing on intrinsic rewards, a commitment to the service objectives of the organization, a sense of accountability toward colleagues, and who are monitored by their professional peers, institutions are able to operate with greater economic efficiency, but are less helpful to the people who encounter them. (p. 56)

Bill Crowley (2003) has also strongly objected to the transfer of duties traditionally reserved for librarians to paraprofessionals in the public library context. He notes the porous boundary separating management from front-line librarians, but in a different context from Litwin: he argues that relegating professional librarians to purely supervisory roles is particularly unsuitable, as union contracts often allow even managers to continue reference desk work to maintain their professional skills (p. 49). Crowley

ultimately posits library unionization as a potential bulwark against this brand of de-professionalization (p. 49). Research has demonstrated that unionization tends to correlate with higher wages for paraprofessionals in public libraries ("The Union Difference," 2008). The question of whether unionization has an effect on the distribution of responsibilities among professional and paraprofessional workers in a public library, and what that effect is, is worth exploring in future research.

Many studies on employee retention also focus on measurements of job satisfaction. Locke's (1976) study of the nature of job satisfaction provides several potentially useful lenses through which to view the present study. Locke emphasized that the relationship between an employee's values and their self-reported job satisfaction varied depending on the importance the employee placed on the value in question. So, the satisfaction of an employee who places high importance on pay will be more greatly affected by pay than the satisfaction of one who gives pay a low importance (p. 1305). The present study was limited in that it could not measure the intensity of each employee's valuing of challenging job responsibilities, as the respondents were managers rather than individual employees. However, in summarizing the work of Herzberg, Locke noted and concurred with Herzberg's conclusion that not only is psychological growth a precondition of job satisfaction, but that such growth stems directly from the nature of the work itself (as cited in Locke, 1976, p. 1318). While Locke, citing Ford, did draw a distinction between job involvement and job satisfaction—increased involvement resulting from enriched job responsibility may lead to increased or decreased satisfaction, depending on other variables (as cited in Locke, 1976, p. 1319)—he ultimately found

"mentally challenging work with which the individual can cope successfully" to be among the top conditions conducive to job satisfaction (p. 1328).

Preenen et al. (2011) have given recent empirical credence to this assertion with their finding that turnover intention is negatively related to challenging job assignments. While their tool for measuring the degree of challenge in a position is more subjective than that employed by the present study—Preenen et al. asked employees directly whether they found their assignments challenging (p. 333)—their observation that "challenge is foremost in the eye of the beholder" (p. 330) illustrates both the advantage and the limitation of the method used by the present study. Identifying actual job duties, and their similarity to the duties of professional positions, provides a more concrete but less direct method of measuring the challenge provided in each position. Nevertheless, the conclusions Preenen et al. reach regarding challenge and turnover agree with the hypothesis with which the present study began.

Murray (1999) studied discrepancies between professional and paraprofessional job satisfaction in academic libraries, and found that pay and promotion were consistently areas in which satisfaction levels differed between the two groups (p. 25, p. 28, p. 34). Murray built upon the work of Kreitz & Ogden (1990), who in addition to comparing job satisfaction between the two classes of employees in an academic library setting (and finding results similar to Murray regarding pay and promotion [p. 310]), focused on the role that lack of distinction between professional and paraprofessional duties played in satisfaction; they found that paraprofessionals with more librarian-like responsibilities rated their satisfaction with the nature of their work higher, while having lower ratings of satisfaction with pay and promotion (p. 310). This suggests that while the complete job

satisfaction picture may be more complicated, greater responsibility is a motivating factor specifically for paraprofessionals in academic libraries. Public libraries, which vary in size more widely than academic libraries and where smaller branches may have only one or two full-time employees, have not as frequently been the subject of such studies. While the present study does not replicate the methodology of Murray or Kreitz & Ogden, it is intended as a starting point for further research into similar questions regarding the public library realm.

The value of any research which measures employee turnover hinges on how that measurement is accomplished within the study. Unfortunately, there are almost as many operational definitions of turnover rate as there are studies measuring it. Castle (2006), in his study of caregiver staff turnover in nursing homes, drives this point home by helpfully cataloging the varied methodologies employed just within studies of a single industry (pp. 211-212). The number of studies Castle lists for which no explicit definition of turnover was given underlined the need for the present study to begin with a clearly defined method of defining and measuring turnover, and to explicitly incorporate this definition into the questionnaire used to gather data. Turner (2010) provides a method of turnover measurement rooted in survival analysis, a technique drawn from the life insurance industry. While Turner posits this method as a solution to the inconsistency plaguing turnover studies, it presents problems when applied to a survey of institutions that have not already implemented the employee-classification and record-keeping methods required for survival analysis. Because of the additional variables required for its use—data for which there may be no record—Turner's tool is ultimately better-suited to managers within organizations rather than to outside researchers.

As for turnover studies in the library and information science field, Christopher and Tucker (2008) found a limitation of their study of health sciences librarians to be the inability to determine all reasons for a particular employee's departure from a position, given their reliance on administrators rather than the former employees themselves to supply the data (p. 234). In Rubin's (1989) study of public librarian turnover, the same limitation applied, and while reasons for leaving were coded on the questionnaire itself, a catch-all "other" category (to include "unknown") was necessary and highlighted this limitation (p. 36). The present study sought to elide this pitfall by avoiding altogether the attempt to gather data on self-reported reasons for a position being vacated (though layoffs and retirements were excluded). Rather, it simply gathers data on an independent variable (job duties) and measures whether or not a significant correlation is present with turnover rate. This type of study has precedence in Henry, Caudle and Sullenger's (1994) study of the relationship between tenure requirements and turnover rates among academic librarians.

A crucial component in the development of the present study was forming a clear, useful and precedence-based definition for "librarian-like" job duties. Priestly (2009) provides a helpful framework to follow in her study comparing librarians' duties with equivalent responsibilities in other jobs based on U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. All six of Priestly's duty categories for reference librarians were incorporated into the questionnaire used in the present study, with the exception of "Professional development", as the nature of such activities can vary widely and it would be difficult to determine the level of development being indicated. Aspects of Priestly's more granular breakdown of these duty categories were incorporated into the general categories used in

the questionnaire, such as including the phrase "using any medium" for reference activities to indicate that email, phone, and in-person queries all fall under this heading.

Kreitz & Ogden (1990) noted the difficulty in designing their study of distinguishing between professional and paraprofessional duties when attempting to describe a landscape in which the line between the two is increasingly blurred (p. 301). Despite this valid concern, the author of the present study employed not only Priestly's standard but the author's own experience with the emphases of LIS education to determine the responsibilities that are most closely associated with the work of a master's degree-holding public librarian.

Methods & Limitations

Early in the process of developing this study, the primary research question of inquiring into the relationship between turnover and job duties and the basic methodology of a web-based questionnaire emailed to participants became clear. Beyond this, the process of developing and distributing the questionnaire was highly iterative. Some limitations of the study are inherent to its design, while some are artifacts of the questionnaire's multiple incarnations reflecting the various stages in the study design's evolution. It will be helpful to briefly review this evolution in order to illuminate some of these limitations and the decisions that underlie the final study design.

Once email distribution of a web-based questionnaire was determined to be the most effective method for the study, the primary difficulty was locating lists of email addresses for managers of all branch libraries in the states of North Carolina and Ohio. The original and ultimate study designs looked at positions within individual library branches, rather than library systems. This choice was made due to the fact that despite common position descriptions and administrative structure, branches within large library systems sometimes differ in practice from each other in regard to distribution of job duties. Branches of varying sizes within a single library system also may have significantly different practices regarding job duty distribution; these differences would be obscured by a study of library systems, and correlations of practice with branch size would be impossible. Furthermore, managers of individual branches are likelier to have knowledge of practice within their branches than are system directors or human resources

administrators. Despite this reasoning, for a period during the research design phase entire library systems were considered for study due to difficulties in locating comprehensive lists of library branch manager email addresses as opposed to those of system directors. This period was briefly concurrent with the development of the questionnaire, leading to an error described below.

Ultimately, lists of all branch managers in North Carolina and Ohio which included email addresses were located, having been made available on the open web by the respective state libraries of the two states, and from these the distribution list for the questionnaire was constructed. Duplicate email addresses (e.g. for individuals who are managers of more than one branch) were eliminated prior to distribution. To aid in response rate, the chairwoman of the North Carolina Public Library Directors Association offered to make all library directors in that state aware of the survey at the time of distribution. One limitation of using these lists is that they may not provide the most up-to-date information; the North Carolina directory used was dated 2011. Cross-checking and correction was done for some library systems, such as Wake County Public Libraries, which make branch manager contact information available on the open web. However, this was not possible in all cases.

The questionnaire was created and distributed using UNC's instance of the Qualtrics software. In addition to being freely available to UNC affiliates and designed with data privacy concerns in mind, this software also allowed the creation of a questionnaire that facilitated longer responses without requiring a cumbersome interface for all respondents. Since many of the study's operational definitions are directly

explained in the questionnaire itself, a review of the contents of the questionnaire is instructive. The entire questionnaire is included in text form in Appendix A of this paper.

To preclude confusion for respondents who manage multiple library branches, following the introductory screen a note was included clarifying that such managers should respond with information for the branch with the greatest number of employees, as larger branches are more likely to have a greater number of paraprofessional positions. The option to enter an alternate job title from "Branch Manager" was included to record instances in which someone other than the intended recipient responded to the survey (or if the intended recipient was no longer a branch manager). Following this are two measurements of library size: number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees, and population of service area. While the present study did not investigate correlations between library size and practice regarding paraprofessionals, this data was collected so that future analysis might be performed in this area.

The next section of the questionnaire was prefaced by an explanation of the operational definition of paraprofessional positions: "permanent paid positions that do not require a master's degree in library science, do require a high-school diploma or GED, and involve library-specific duties (thus excluding facilities maintenance staff)". Professional positions were defined as any position requiring a master's degree in library science. Respondents were asked how many paraprofessional positions existed in their library branch, and to list these positions. Since the survey sought information regarding each paraprofessional position, the questionnaire was designed so that the response to the former question determined how many fields were displayed to the respondent in the latter question. The remaining portions of the survey were then repeated for each

position the respondent entered. For instance, if a respondent entered "2" for number of paraprofessional positions, they would be given two fields to enter titles for each position. The rest of the questions would then be repeated twice, once for each position, with the title for the appropriate position being piped into the text of each question. Qualtrics software thus afforded respondents a way to easily keep track of which position they were entering information for. Additionally, if the respondent entered "0" for the number of paraprofessional positions, this response was recorded and the survey concluded. The questionnaire allowed for a maximum of 30 separate positions to be entered.

The final portion of the questionnaire, repeated for each paraprofessional position title entered by the respondent, gathered data pertaining to the primary research question of the relationship between job duties and turnover rate. The respondent was first asked whether the position in question was full-time or part-time. Following this, two methods were used to ascertain the degree to which the position's responsibilities were "librarian-like". First, the respondent was given a set of job responsibility categories (partially adapted from Priestly, 2009) in a checkbox format and asked to select which categories applied to the position in question. Reference and readers' advisory were grouped together, with the language "using any medium" included to cover all types of electronic, telephone, and in-person interactions. The category for program development was less clearly defined by a single word (like "reference"), so more examples of duties were included, with children's activities explicitly named to cover youth services. Likewise, categories were included for selection and de-selection duties, and for original and copy cataloging. The user instruction category was designed, similarly to reference, to be

inclusive of activities in multiple media. The term "formal" was used to exclude off-the-cuff help with computers or resource location; such activity would fall under the reference category.

The final category ("Negotiating or reviewing…") represents administrative duties that require knowledge of library best practices and current trends, and are included in LIS educational curricula. It can be argued that an additional category is missing: development of library technology and digital tools, inclusive of programming, web development, and maintenance of social media. Such responsibilities are increasingly important in librarianship; however, the literature on the unique job duties of librarians has not yet fully accounted for this shift. Since there may be variation between libraries as to whether these responsibilities are carried out by librarians or information technology professionals, and whether such IT professionals are employees of the library directly or the sponsoring municipality generally, no such category was included in the questionnaire for the present study.

Following the checkbox section, respondents were given a single-answer multiple choice question which provided the opportunity for a more subjective response. This question was included in order to record the respondent's own sense of the "librarian-likeness" of a position's responsibilities, and to provide for responsibilities that directly overlapped with those of paraprofessional positions which were not listed in the preceding question. The question was worded to provide as precise and concrete a response as possible, asking about overlap with the lowest-salaried MLS-requiring position only, and providing a "less-than-half/about half/more-than-half" framework.

The final section of the questionnaire was equally crucial. This study defined turnover rate as the number of individuals who vacated a given position due to voluntary resignation or termination (retirements and layoffs were excluded) during the previous two completed fiscal years, divided by the number of instances of such positions extant in the respondent's library during the same two fiscal years. The final questions recorded these two numbers for each position. The wording of the question regarding number of instances is discussed below in the "Limitations" section.

An email containing a unique link to the questionnaire was sent to branch managers in North Carolina and Ohio along with a personally addressed invitation explaining the purpose of the survey. The survey was open for thirty days. By providing unique survey links to each potential respondent, Qualtrics software was able to keep track of who among the survey panel had and had not completed the questionnaire. Reminder emails were sent to those who had not completed the questionnaire at one and two weeks after the start of the survey, and at thirty-six hours prior to the survey's end. Once respondents submitted a completed survey, they received a thank you email and were excluded from all ensuing reminder emails.

The most significant limitation to the study is due to an error in the language used in the questionnaire. Question 9[1] asks "During the two most recently completed fiscal years, how many instances of the X position existed in your *library system* [emphasis added]". The word "system" should have been excluded from the question. It is reflective of an iteration of the questionnaire written at a time when the study was intended to focus on the library administrative system, rather than the individual library branch or location. As the error was discovered after the survey was open, when several

dozen responses had already been recorded, a decision was made by the author to leave the questionnaire unaltered.

As it stands, if a respondent answered Question 9 precisely as it was asked, data regarding turnover would reflect a different unit of analysis from the data regarding job duties, and the study would be invalid. However, several factors limit the probability of this outcome. Due to the inconsistency the single word "system" creates within the questionnaire, many respondents likely either disregarded or failed to notice the shift in unit of analysis, and answered regarding their library branch. Two respondents contacted the author directly regarding this issue: one had already answered the question as if the word "system" was not present, and notified the author of this; the other asked how they should respond, and the author indicated to them that they should enter numbers for their branch, rather than their system. The concern raised by this latter respondent indicates a reason why others may have entered numbers for their branch: branch managers do not generally have access to such data for the entire municipal library system. Lacking access to the particular data requested and lacking clarity as to the meaning of the questionnaire, many respondents may have simply entered data that they both had access to and which was consistent with the data requested in other portions of the questionnaire. Nevertheless, there is no way to verify this, and the oversight represents a significant flaw in this study.

Requesting information from managers about the nature of their supervisees' jobs may potentially provide less accurate information than would asking each employee directly about their own job. However, this would not be a feasible method given the resources available for the current study and the ease with which paraprofessionals can be

directly contacted at work as compared with managers. While the survey requests

concrete data rather than opinion, the porosity of the barrier between professional and

paraprofessional positions within libraries is, as outlined in the literature review,

politically sensitive; respondents who work in a library where there is less distinction

between the two may feel less inclined to take the survey.

The two-year window built in to the survey's operational definition of employee

turnover rate is a potential limitation. It may miss long-term trends; alternatively, it may

inordinately highlight brief anomalies. Given the problems highlighted by Castle (2006),

however, the author felt that a lack of clarity in defining turnover or an inconsistency in

applying this definition were greater threats to the validity of the study.

<div align="center">Notes</div>

[1] For clarity of presentation, questions have been renumbered as 1-10 in the order they appeared

to respondents. Qualtrics software numbers questions according to the sequence they were

created within a questionnaire, inclusive of discarded questions. Therefore, in the original

codebook question numbers are neither consecutive nor sequenced in accordance with their

appearance on the final questionnaire. Question numbers were not shown to respondents.

Results

Unique links to the questionnaire were emailed to a total of 750 potential respondents. 131 questionnaires were completed, and 41 questionnaires were begun but not completed, for a total of 172 returned surveys, or a response rate of 22.9% and a completion rate of 76.2% among returned questionnaires. Completion in this case was defined strictly as the respondent clicking through to the final screen of the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires may not contain responses for all questions; by the same token, if a respondent entered data for all questions but failed to click through to the final screen, all their question responses would have been recorded, but the questionnaire itself would have been recorded as partially complete. For these reasons, question responses from questionnaires recorded as partially complete were included for analysis.

For the first half of the questionnaire, the unit of analysis was the respondent's library branch. 139 responses were recorded for Question 2, "How many employees (FTE) are there in your library?". The mean response was 10.1, with a median of 7 and a mode of 1; the standard deviation was 10.2. The proportion of responses to this question indicating a low FTE (15 reported 1 FTE, while 12 reported 2 FTE) likely reflects small branch libraries staffed by only one or two employees, neither of whom may work full-time. The frequencies for responses to Question 2 are illustrated below in Figure 1. Some of the higher responses to this question (including the outlier of 190, which was removed for analysis) may be the result of the respondent misinterpreting the question to refer to their library system, rather than their individual branch. This error would have

been in spite of the note located just above Question 2 explicitly instructing the respondent to answer regarding their branch, not system. Some respondents may also have experienced confusion over the definition of FTE; one respondent indicated such confusion in correspondence with the author.
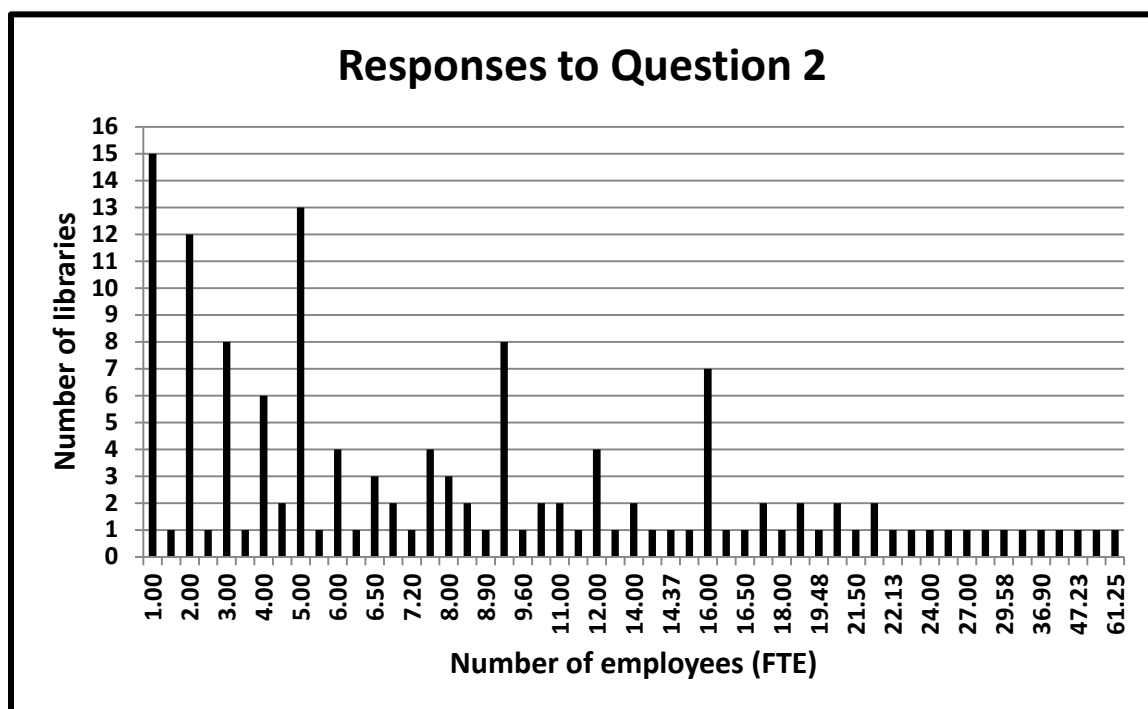

Figure 1. Frequencies for Question 2 Responses

Question 3, "What is the population of your library's service area?", received 124 responses. This question was apparently frequently misunderstood: 55 single-digit responses were recorded, and all responses under 200 seem unlikely. The mean response was 13,761, with a median of 145.5 and a mode of 20. The questionnaire could have provided a clearer definition of library service area, to ensure that respondents used a consistent methodology, and to guide those unfamiliar with the term and concept.

Question 4, "How many separate (with a unique written job description) paraprofessional positions currently exist in your library?", received 135 responses. The two outlying responses of 47 and 45 may have been the result of error or a

misunderstanding of the question, as both of these respondents entered fewer than 30

position titles for Question 5 (which asked respondents to enter titles for each of their

reported paraprofessional positions). The respondent giving the third-highest response of

19 did enter complete data for 19 positions. The mean for this variable (inclusive of the

two previously noted outlying responses) was 5.4, with a median of 4, mode of 3, and

standard deviation of 6.2. The frequencies for responses to Question 4 are illustrated
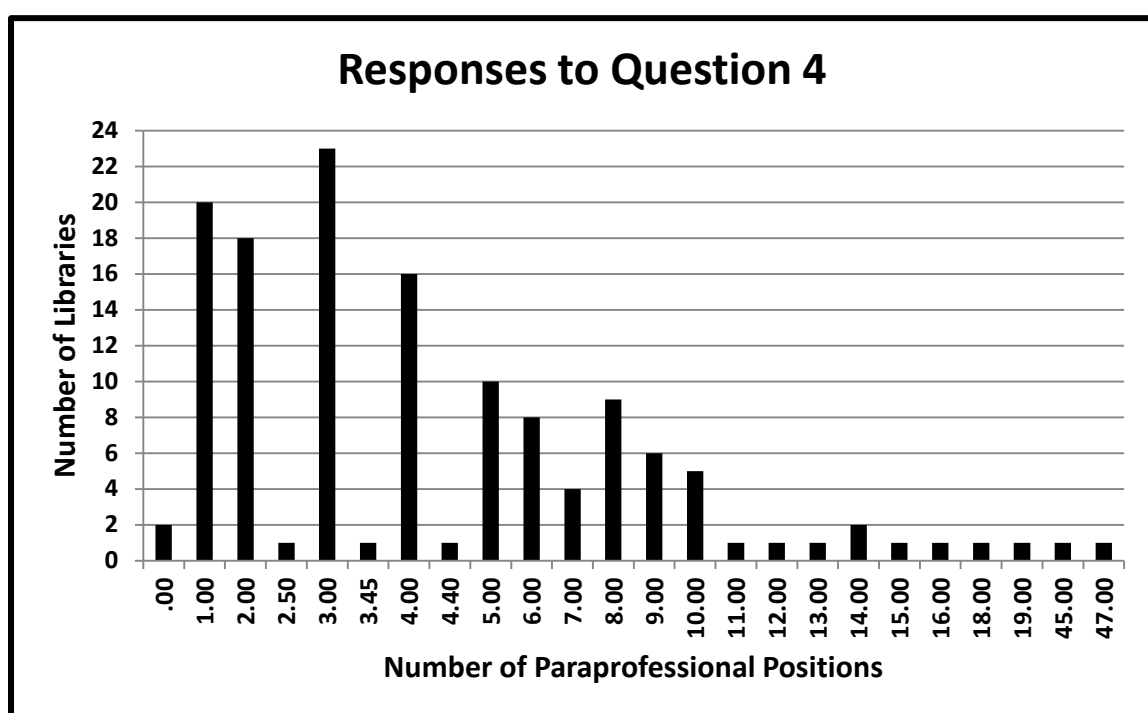
below in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Frequencies for Question 4 Responses

For the first half of the questionnaire (Questions 1-5) the unit of analysis was the

library branch. For the second half of the questionnaire (Questions 6-10) the unit of

analysis was the paraprofessional position. Because multiple paraprofessional positions

may exist within each library branch, respondents were asked Questions 6-10 repeatedly:

once for each position they identified in Question 5 (respondents reporting only one

paraprofessional position were asked Questions 6-10 only once). This meant that many

single questionnaires contained multiple responses for Questions 6-10. For the purposes

of this particular analysis of the data collected in the survey, each position is treated as a

separate response, independent of the library it is located within (i.e. independent of the

returned questionnaire it was a part of). The number of positions for which respondents

answered at least one of Questions 6-10 totaled 538.

Question 6 asked whether the position being considered was typically a full-time

or part-time position. Out of 533 responses received for this question, a majority of 338

positions were full-time, with 195 being part-time. Responses to this question are
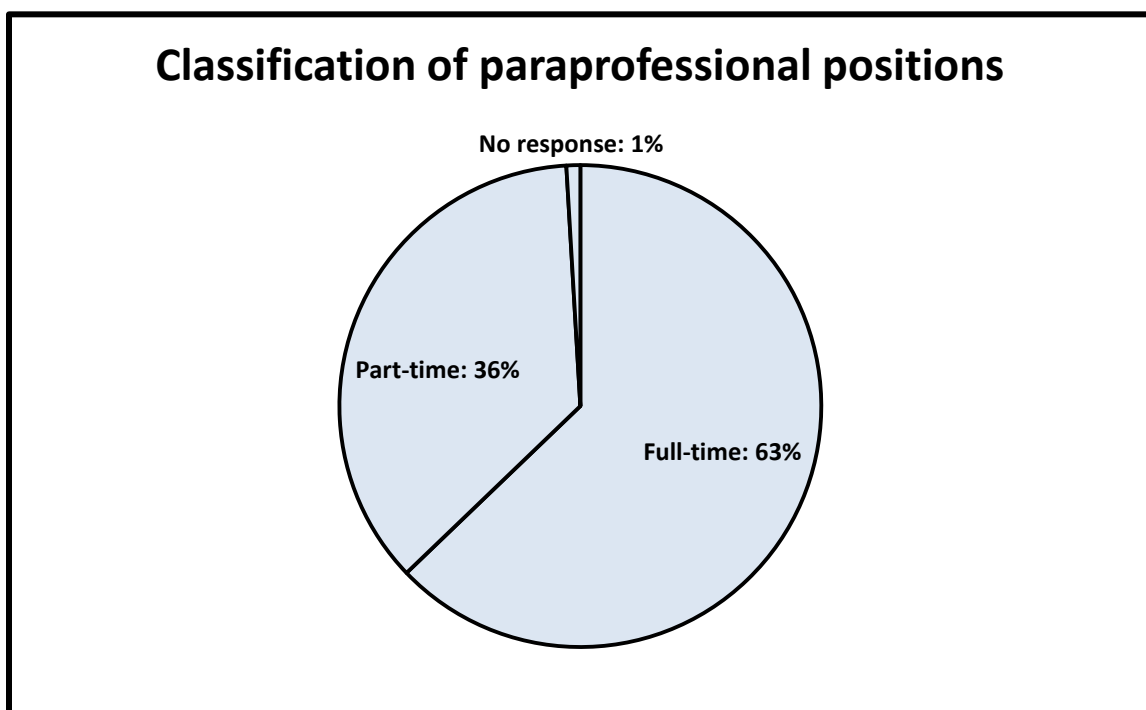
illustrated below in Figure 3.

Classification of paraprofessional positions

No response: 1%

Part-time: 36%

Full-time: 63%

Figure 3. Percentages for Question 6 Responses

Question 7 allowed respondents to select up to six categories of job duties which a

given position incorporated, along with a "None of the above" option. Question 7

appeared to respondents as follows:

Regardless of the written position description, <u>in practice</u>, which of the following does the [position title] position typically entail? (check all that apply)

❑ *Responding to reference queries (including readers' advisory) using any medium*

❑ *Designing or leading programming, which may include leading book discussion groups, selecting and liaising with outside presenters, or supervising children's activities*

❑ *Formal user instruction, either through teaching classes or composing written materials (print or web-based)*

❑ *Making selection or weeding decisions*

❑ *Performing original or copy cataloging duties*

❑ *Negotiating or reviewing written agreements between the library and third party vendors, such as approval plans, licensing agreements for e-resources, etc.*

❑ *None of the above*

For analysis, responses to this question were coded as 0-6, with 0 indicating "None of the above", and 1-6 indicating the sum of the job duty categories selected. 534 responses were received for this question. 64% of responses indicated 2 or fewer job duty categories for which the position in question qualified. 72 responses indicated "None of the above". 150 positions only incorporated one of the job categories; 122 incorporated two, 97 incorporated three, 67 incorporated four, 17 incorporated five, and 9 positions were reported to incorporate duties from all six categories. It should be noted that since these job duty categories spanned a variety of library domains (such as adult reference, youth services, and technical services), positions—professional or paraprofessional—at all but the smallest libraries were unlikely to qualify for all six.

Responses to Question 7 were also analyzed to determine the number of times each job duty category was selected. By far, the category of job duties the most paraprofessional positions incorporated was Category 1, "Responding to reference queries (including readers' advisory) using any medium". 432 positions incorporated job duties from Category 1. Following this at 220 positions was Category 2 ("Designing or leading programming"), with 182 positions in Category 4 ("Making selection or weeding decisions"), and 139 in Category 3 ("Formal user instruction"). Few paraprofessional positions performed cataloging duties, and few were involved in license or contract negotiation with vendors (72 and 47, respectively). As reported above, only 72 positions had no involvement in any of the activities identified in Question 7.

Question 8 used multiple-choice to ask about the overall overlap between the paraprofessional position in question and the most closely-related professional position. In contrast to Question 7, respondents could only apply one description to each position. The question appeared to respondents as follows:

How many of the [position title] position's job duties are shared by the lowest-salaried professional position within the same department?

❍ *No overlap*

❍ *Less than half of [position title] 's duties are shared with professional position*

❍ *About half of [position title]'s duties are shared with professional position*

❍ *More than half of [position title] 's duties are shared with professional position*

❍ *No functional distinction from professional position*

Question 8 received 524 responses. When responses were coded as 1-5, with 1 indicating "No Overlap" and 5 indicating "No functional distinction from professional

position", the mean response was 2.28, with a mode of 2 ("Less than half of this

position's duties are shared with professional position"). Consistent with the finding that

64% of positions incorporated two or fewer of the job duty categories from Question 7,

68% of responses to Question 8 indicated either no overlap or a less-than-half overlap,

while only 16% reported a more-than-half overlap or no distinction between

paraprofessional and professional job duties. 131 positions were reported to have no

overlap, with 224 reporting less than half, 85 reporting about half, 61 reporting more than

half, and 23 positions reported to have no distinction from their professional counterpart.

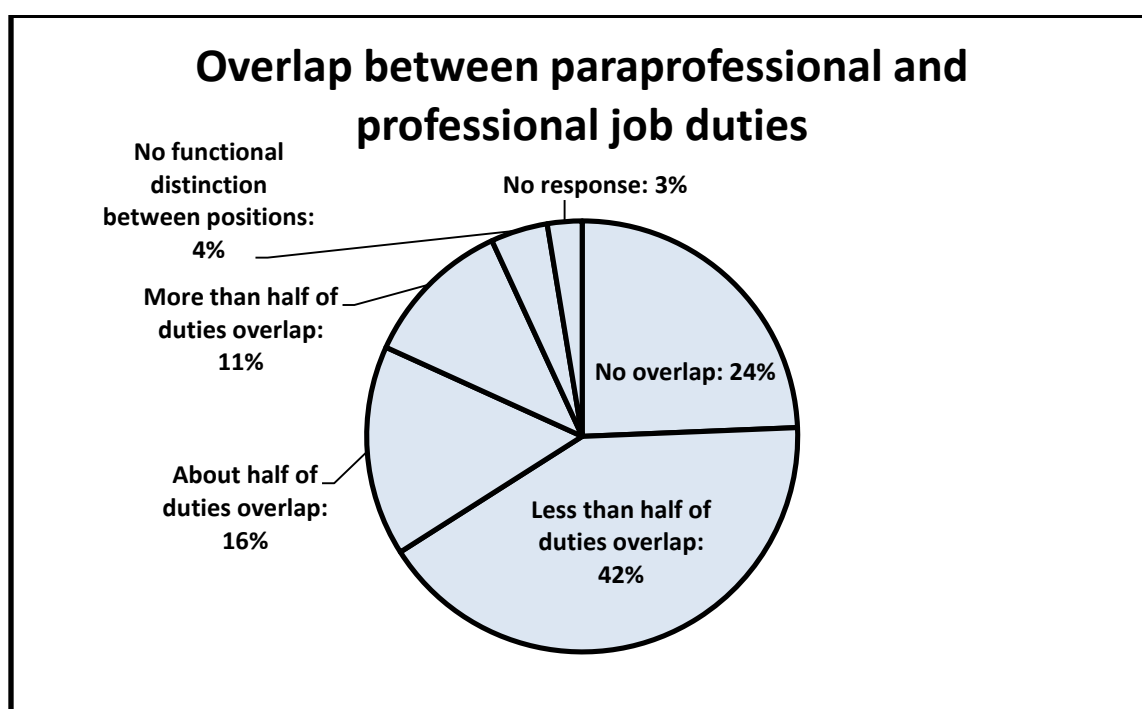The percentages for each response are illustrated below in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Percentages for Question 8 Responses

Questions 9 and 10 measured the turnover rate for each position. Question 9 read

"*During the two most recently completed fiscal years, how many instances of the*

[position title] position existed in your library system?", while Question 10 asked

"*During the two most recently completed fiscal years, how many times has the [position*

title] position been vacated due to voluntary resignation or termination? (exclude retirements and layoffs)". A new variable of turnover rate was calculated for each position by dividing the response to Question 10 for a given position by the response to Question 9 for the same position. 476 positions reported data for this variable. The mean turnover rate was .22, with a standard deviation of .364. The mode and median were both zero, indicating no turnover. 293 positions, or 62% of positions for which turnover rate was recorded, reported no turnover for the two most recent fiscal years.

Finally, the data was analyzed to identify possible relationships between Question 8 ("less-than-half/about half/more-than-half") responses and turnover rate, and Question 7 (job categories) responses and turnover rate, with Question 7 responses coded 1-6 based on the sum of categories selected, as described above.   When examining the relationship between a position's turnover rate and its level of responsibility as measured by Question 8, a Pearson correlation coefficient (*r*) of .065 was calculated. The level of statistical significance for this correlation was calculated to be .162, indicating a lack of statistical significance for this result. Turnover rate and level of job responsibility as measured by the sum of boxes checked for Question 7 were calculated to have a Pearson correlation coefficient (*r*) of -.092. This correlation was slightly statistically significant, with a calculated significance level of .045.

Discussion

      The responses to Questions 2, 3 and 4 (number of employees, population of library service area, and number of paraprofessional positions) indicate that many of the respondents were managers of small branches, even when taking into account the likelihood of errors and misunderstandings in many of these responses. This may be due to the fact that managers of smaller libraries have fewer demands on their time and attention, and thus found it easier to set aside time for the survey. Future studies should take this potential bias into account when developing their methods.

      Question 7 provided a useful window into just which job duties paraprofessionals are most frequently assigned. While it may come as little surprise that reference work is the most common librarian-like responsibility given to paraprofessionals, it should be noted that this activity, no less than cataloging or user instruction, has a substantial body of professional literature devoted to best practices, is emphasized in LIS educational curricula, and is closely identified with professional librarianship. In general, it appears that library responsibilities which could be construed as more "pure" or "traditional" are more likely to be assigned to paraprofessionals, while paraprofessionals are less likely to be assigned jobs that overlap with other disciplines (user instruction with education, contract negotiation with business). This may indicate an undervaluing of tasks which are associated exclusively with librarianship and do not require education or experience associated with other professions. Cataloging was the exception to this trend. Further research into this question would be worthwhile; qualitative studies could have particular

usefulness in capturing the attitudes of librarians and managers toward different types of library tasks.

The responses to Questions 7 and 8 broadly indicate that while the number of paraprofessional positions encroaching on job responsibilities traditionally reserved for professionals is not so small as to be insignificant, such situations are still the exception rather than the rule. While this might appear to negate widespread perceptions that the line between professionals and paraprofessionals is blurring over time, a study such as the present one cannot be the final word on the matter, especially given the "snapshot" limitations discussed above. A productive avenue for future research would be longitudinal studies to determine whether actual trends exist in the direction of increasing or decreasing overlap between professional and paraprofessional positions.

One notable finding was the preponderance of positions experiencing no turnover for the time period in question. This may reflect the high number of small branches surveyed, at which all employees are likely to have a greater sense of indispensability; it may be the result of particular policies enacted in the states or regions surveyed; or it may be indicative of broader trends in the economic environment. Future studies could be designed to tease out the significant factors contributing to the overall turnover rates they discover, and to investigate the relationships among turnover and the variables mentioned above.

While the finding of a negative correlation between turnover rate and job responsibility as measured by Question 7 technically confirms the hypothesis with which the present study began, the level of statistical significance for this correlation was low. The practical importance of this particular finding may be negligible in a managerial

context. Nevertheless, it does offer sufficient evidence for the hypothesis to warrant further research into the issue of paraprofessional responsibilities in public libraries generally, and the relationship between job duties and turnover rate specifically. A more rigorously designed study which takes additional variables into account may yield results with greater practical use for working managers and librarians invested in the issue. The present study serves as an exploratory first step toward a fuller understanding of the factors affecting paraprofessional turnover and job satisfaction.

Both a more rigorous sampling method and a more highly developed questionnaire could improve upon the present study if a similar design were to be used in the future. While the response rate indicates some success in the aspects of survey design relating to dissemination, the high number of responses which indicated a misunderstanding of one or more questions warrants a reevaluation of the questionnaire. Additionally, the previously noted error in the wording of Question 9, which confused the unit of analysis for the data being gathered, should be remedied. The use of a convenience sample could be improved upon in future studies, and the possibilities for selection bias both in the survey panel and among the respondents could receive greater scrutiny. The data collected in this survey, as well as data collected in a similarly designed hypothetical future survey, lend themselves to more detailed and varied analysis than was conducted as part of the present study. For instance, correlations between turnover rate and the particular area of a paraprofessional's work could be analyzed, as could correlations between turnover rate and the breadth of responsibility given to a position. Such analysis may reveal trends highly relevant to the discussion concerning paraprofessionals.

Studies with a narrower sampling frame, or which are more qualitative in nature, could also be valuable. The present study surveyed library managers in part because of the infeasibility of surveying each paraprofessional working at hundreds of libraries. With a smaller group of libraries, surveying both paraprofessional and professional library workers themselves about their positions would be possible. Qualitative data, gathered with a questionnaire or even in interviews, could be more easily incorporated into a small-scale study. A before-after study of a library or library system undergoing a policy change regarding paraprofessional job duties would be extremely valuable, if researchers could gain access to such a situation; such a study could incorporate the above-mentioned qualitative elements to produce a holistic picture of this type of transition.

Conclusion

The role of paraprofessionals in public libraries remains a highly disputed issue among library and information professionals, both in particular instances at the local level and as a general issue within the broader field. While commentary on and anecdotal evidence for the perceived trend of de-professionalization of librarianship has been present in the professional literature for many years, empirical research into the question should be a greater priority going forward for any librarians concerned with this issue. The present study's finding of a slightly significant negative correlation between a paraprofessional position's turnover rate and its degree of resemblance to MLS-requiring positions is suggestive enough to warrant further inquiry into this particular relationship.

The present study's focus on employee retention was based on an assumption that, regardless of other factors, patrons are ill-served by a library experiencing turmoil among its personnel; a high turnover rate would be one indication of this. This is not to say that the trend of de-professionalization, if real, might not also ultimately lead to less desirable outcomes for the patrons of libraries where it takes place. High turnover is frequently an indicator of poor service; low turnover is not necessarily an indicator of excellence. The need to retain qualified, enthusiastic and motivated staff at all levels is a place where the interests of library management, workers, and patrons overlap. The discussion over paraprofessionals hinges, then, on the definition of qualification.

Ultimately the debate over library paraprofessionals is a debate over the value of a graduate degree. Does it derive its value from what the student learns about the everyday

activity of the profession, and through facilitating opportunities for apprenticeship; from the student's exposure to the practices of a wide variety of library contexts, and interactions with professionals from varying library backgrounds; from their understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of modern professional practice; or does it come from the student's inculcation in and critical examination of the values that drive and have driven the profession at both an individual and a collective level? No one of these experiences is the sole province of library school graduates; taken together, they present a potential challenge to the notion of a degree as a mere credential. Authors conducting future research into paraprofessional library workers, professional librarians, and the consequences of library managers' decisions regarding both might well place their findings in the broader context of the national debate over the true value of higher education, and how best to calibrate it to the benefit of all members of society. Such questions of social good are at the core of decisions policy makers, library administrators, branch managers, professional librarians and indeed paraprofessionals make each day.

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Appendix A: Text of Web-Based Questionnaire

Page 1

Thank you for participating in this study on staff retention in public libraries. Your participation is voluntary and your answers are completely confidential. You may skip any question you choose not to answer.

Please click the arrow button below to begin the survey.

Page 2

Note: if you are manager of more than one branch library, please provide answers relating to the branch with the highest number of staff (FTE). Bookmobiles DO count as a branch.

Q1 If you have a job title different from "branch manager" or similar, please enter it below. Otherwise, you may leave this question blank and continue to the next page.

Page 3

For the questions below, give answers for your branch location (not your entire library system).

Q2 How many employees (FTE) are there in your library?

Q3 What is the population of your library's service area?

Page 4

The next several questions will ask about **positions**, rather than individual employees.

For the purposes of this questionnaire, *paraprofessional positions* are defined as permanent paid positions that do **NOT** require a Master's Degree in Library Science, **DO** require a high-school diploma or GED, and involve library-specific duties (thus excluding facilities maintenance staff). *Professional positions* are those requiring an MLS.

Q4 How many separate (with a unique written job description) *paraprofessional positions* currently exist in your library?

Page 5

Q5 Please list these positions. You do not need to use official job titles; use names that will help you remember which position is which.

Example position title: Circulation Clerk

Page 6

Q6 Is the Circulation Clerk position typically full-time or part-time?

❍ Full-time
❍ Part-time

Q7 Regardless of the written position description, <u>in practice</u>, which of the following does the Circulation Clerk position typically entail? (check all that apply)

❑ Responding to reference queries (including readers' advisory) using any medium
❑ Designing or leading programming, which may include leading book discussion groups, selecting and liaising with outside presenters, or supervising children's activities
❑ Formal user instruction, either through teaching classes or composing written materials (print or web-based)
❑ Making selection or weeding decisions
❑ Performing original or copy cataloging duties
❑ Negotiating or reviewing written agreements between the library and third party vendors, such as approval plans, licensing agreements for e-resources, etc.
❑ None of the above

Q8 How many of the Circulation Clerk position's job duties are shared by the lowest-salaried *professional position* within the same department?

❍ No overlap
❍ Less than half of Circulation Clerk's duties are shared with professional position
❍ About half of Circulation Clerk's duties are shared with professional position
❍ More than half of Circulation Clerk's duties are shared with professional position
❍ No functional distinction from professional position

Page 7

The next two questions ask for information about individual employees, or "instances", of which there may be several for a given position.

Q9 During the two most recently completed fiscal years, how many instances of the Circulation Clerk position existed in your library system?

Q10 During the two most recently completed fiscal years, how many times has the Circulation Clerk position been vacated due to voluntary resignation or termination? (exclude retirements and layoffs)

Appendix B: Text of Survey Invitation and Follow-up Emails

Survey Invitation:

Dear FirstName LastName,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study that will help identify effective retention methods for paraprofessional staff in public libraries. As a student at the University of North Carolina's School of Information and Library Science, I am conducting this research as part of my Masters Paper project. You have been specifically selected to receive this invitation, and your participation is key for identifying effective staff retention methods. The results will contribute to research benefiting public library managers such as yourself.

The online survey will only take approximately twenty minutes to complete. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary, and the information you provide will be kept confidential. You may skip any question for any reason. Results will be reported only in aggregate form; your name will never be associated with your data. There are no anticipated risks for participation and you will not receive anything for completing the survey. You may keep a copy of this email for reference.

If you have any questions about the research project or the survey itself, please contact me at sumerlin@live.unc.edu.

By clicking the link below, you indicate your consent to participate and will be connected to the survey.

Follow this link to the Survey:
[*unique hyperlink to questionnaire*]

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
[*unique URL for questionnaire*]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 and mention study number 13-1526.

Thank you for your participation in this important study.

Sincerely,

Daniel Sumerlin
MSLS Candidate 2013, UNC-Chapel Hill
434-509-3194
sumerlin@live.unc.edu

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:
[*link to unsubscribe*]

One and two week reminder:

Dear FirstName LastName,

One [*two*] week[*s*] ago we invited you to complete a survey on retention of
paraprofessional staff in public libraries. If you have not already done so, please consider
participating. You have been specifically selected to receive this invitation, and your
participation is key for identifying effective staff retention methods. We hope you will
take a few moments now to improve our research by clicking the link below and
completing the survey.

Follow this link to the Survey:
[*unique hyperlink to questionnaire*]

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
[*unique URL for questionnaire*]

The survey will only take approximately twenty minutes to complete. Your participation
is completely voluntary, and the information you provide will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions about the research project or the survey itself, please contact
me at sumerlin@live.unc.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research
participant, you may contact the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board
at 919-966-3113 and mention study number 13-1526.

Sincerely,

Daniel Sumerlin
MSLS Candidate 2013, UNC-Chapel Hill
434-509-3194
sumerlin@live.unc.edu

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:
[*link to unsubscribe*]

Final reminder:

Dear FirstName LastName,

This is your final chance to participate in our survey on staff retention in public libraries! The survey will close at 6:00 PM EST tomorrow, April 30. You have been specifically selected to receive this invitation, and your participation is key for identifying effective staff retention methods. We hope you will take a few moments now to improve our research by clicking the link below and completing the survey.

Follow this link to the Survey:
[*unique hyperlink to questionnaire*]

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
[*unique URL for questionnaire*]

The survey will only take approximately twenty minutes to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary, and the information you provide will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions about the research project or the survey itself, please contact me at sumerlin@live.unc.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 and mention study number 13-1526.

Sincerely,

Daniel Sumerlin
MSLS Candidate 2013, UNC-Chapel Hill
434-509-3194
sumerlin@live.unc.edu

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:
[*link to unsubscribe*]

Thank you email (sent to respondent after submitting questionnaire):

Dear FirstName,

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in our survey! The research you've contributed to will benefit public library managers such as yourself.

If you have any questions about the research project or the survey itself, please contact me at sumerlin@live.unc.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 and mention study number 13-1526.

Once again I offer my personal thanks for your participation.

Sincerely,

Daniel Sumerlin
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