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PROFESSIONALISM AND LIBRARIANS

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The term professionalism is defined in the dictionary as "the qualities or typical features of a profession or of professionals."[1] But how does a librarian know when she or he has acquired the qualities or typical features? How do you know when you got 'IT'?

In library literature there are general guidelines on how to be a professional, including such things as behavior in the library, attire and appearance, and service delivery techniques. If one asks a librarian to define professionalism, the answer will be that individual's ideas on what professionalism should be, which may or may not coincide with the general guidelines that have been established by the employer. A favorite answer is that professionalism is being professional, and other librarians, your peers, will let you know if and when you have 'IT'.

The answer expands a hundred times if the question is asked, "What is not professionalism?" Suddenly personal names are inserted into the conversation and the term is defined as the opposite of what – she or he who shall not be mentioned – does all the time. Talking about professionalism in general tends to be an acceptable conversation, but touching on an individual's professionalism can bring the devil out of a person. Be forewarned.

Nonetheless, hearing these answers is an advantage in setting a personal standard and knowing when one has 'IT', whether your peers have commented so or not. Librarianship has a broad enough base to support differing opinions and those with different backgrounds. If every librarian had to adhere to one prescribed version of professionalism, then each would be wearing the nametag 'Mini-Me'. Since there is not one prevailing definition, we tend to assume that there is a positive and shared understanding of what it means to be a professional librarian.

One should exist, because professionalism is a major component used to determine the complexion of a librarian's career and standing among peers. It should be an ideal that all professionals want and continuously strive for throughout their careers, but with enough flexibility to change when needed.

Librarians Jamie Larue and Darlene Severance believe professionalism is attitude.[2] Well, librarians do have attitude; it is the thing that allows us to stand apart from other professionals. It can also be the thing that sets us apart from each other when it is used as another 'ism'.[3] The masters of malarkey have been known to swing professionalism around like a double-edged sword. Get too close and it is off with your head. Once you lose your head it is all over, unless someone comes to your rescue with a handful of mentoring.

Mentoring is a helping-hand used to direct a junior librarian toward becoming a senior librarian, in scope and with promotion and tenure. According to the Australian Library and Information Association, group mentoring allows the mutual exchange of ideas, while individual mentoring clarifies personal issues.[4] Mentoring is one method for developing and helping to maintain individual and organizational professionalism. But as Roma M. Harris points out, if mentoring is used to advance only a chosen few, then the method becomes a tool for exclusion.[5] Along these same lines, mentoring will be of little use to an employer who uses it to reprimand employees.

From the Librarian's Lao Tzu: "A good soldier is not violent. A good fighter is not angry. A good librarian is not proud or haughty. A good administrator listens to everyone. This is known as Professionalism."[6] Library professionalism is a two way street. It is a living and shared process; everyone contributes something.

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IMAGE CENSORSHIP

To this day, librarianship as a profession suffers under the stereotypical image of "Marian the Librarian".[1] Unfortunately, this image of a librarian as a demure, shy, reticent individual, not only influences how the general public views librarians, it also may influence how librarians view themselves and their colleagues. This could result in competent, effective librarians being the subject of character assassination, purely because they do not fit into the model to which these librarians ascribe. In the academic realm, this could result in "eccentric" librarians having difficulty receiving promotion and tenure since senior librarians could base their decisions not on the quality of work the junior librarian does, but rather on the rumors they hear at the water cooler about what happened at the last KLA conference.

Actually, these types of value judgments occur every day, and this from a profession that supposedly believes "We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees at our institutions."[8]

One topic mentioned in the literature concerning professional image is dress.[9] In a recent interview, a caseworker in the Department for Social Insurance noted that in her local office an administrator announced a new dress code policy. Women would be required to wear dresses and heels, men suits and ties. The policy died quickly when a caseworker pointed out that being dressed so formally might intimidate those individuals coming to the office who were in desperate need of financial help. Neat, clean, apparel was deemed to be sufficient.[10]

Librarians should also keep this message in mind when they dress for work. If the majority of your job is administration, then perhaps ties and dresses would be the order of the day. However, if you are responsible for working directly with patrons, this type of dress may be intimidating. A good rule of thumb might be to observe the prevailing dress of the patron base and dress accordingly. In an academic library, for example, dressing along the lines of the faculty in your department or college would be an appropriate response to maintaining professionalism and accessibility.

Yes, this may be a bit much for those librarians who see their profession in the same light as accountants or lawyers, but perhaps a better model for viewing the profession is seeing it in the light of engineers. As Andrew Abbott points out, "It [librarianship] has always worked for organizations. It has always consisted of a loose aggregation of groups doing relatively different kinds of work but sharing a common orientation. Like engineering, it has also involved multiple types of credentials, accepting not only its own several levels of credentials but also the credentials of other fields."[11] Perhaps this more flexible view would allow librarians to be more accepting of diversity in their ranks.

CONCLUSION

Librarians have a long and honorable history of supporting freedom of speech and access to information. Opposition to censorship has been a criterion of our profession for many years. As such, it would seem to be imperative that our profession embraces the concept of respect for diversity in image. We are not all cut from the same cloth and, that is not a bad thing. Diversity of opinions, experiences, and attitudes keeps our profession dynamic, exciting and growing. Let's all join together in promoting our acceptance and tolerance of the "eccentrics" in librarianship!

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