

IS TECHNICAL SERVICES BEING DEPROFESSIONALIZED?: A REPORT OF THE ALCTS ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL IN ACADEMIC TECHNICAL SERVICES DISCUSSION GROUP MEETING, AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., JUNE 1998

Over the years more and more technical services work has moved from the professional to the paraprofessional realm. Some areas, such as original cataloging, subject analysis, vendor negotiation, etc. have only recently begun the shift and are doing so accompanied by a great deal of debate among library workers at all levels. The three speakers at this meeting focused on answering from their own perspectives the question "Is technical services being deprofessionalized?" and presented their views on the effects that recent trends are having on libraries and the library profession.

Virginia Gillham, University Librarian at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, started the session with a look at the question "what is the nature of duties of a professional?" She took the view that today's technology, plus high levels of performance by staff at all levels, has allowed libraries to shift work once done by professionals down to the paraprofessional level without an accompanying lowering of quality or standards. This is not, in her view, deprofessionalization. It is instead merely a shifting of tasks to different personnel. The planning and management of these operations are still, or should be, taking place at the professional level and those tasks which even today require professional input will, or should, continue to receive this level of attention.

Gillham brought for consideration definitions of several words relevant to this discussion, among them "profession", "professional", and "manage". In addition, she offered her own definition of the term "deprofessionalize", which is "to reduce from professional standards." In her mind, the concept of "professional standards" is not related to who actually performs specific tasks but rather involves issues of quality. The trick is to determine which functions are or are not truly necessary, which tasks can and cannot be shifted to paraprofessionals, which standards are or are not expendable in today's environment, and to do so without unnecessary sacrifices in the realms of service and quality.

Gillham defines the role of the professional in technical services as one of management. The professional's job is to ensure that tasks which fall under their purview are performed to the appropriate professional standards. Professionals are decision-makers, trainers and supervisors. They decide how tasks are to be performed, and by whom. They evaluate and re-evaluate the work which takes place in their units and how this work effects the library as a whole. They define standards, set goals, design systems, initiate and tweak workflows.

In Gillham's view, this shift of professional staff to a planning and management role is the result mainly of advances in modern technology. It is not being brought about by an administrative focus on "the bottom line" but rather by new, mechanized ways of performing old

functions and increasingly sophisticated methods of automating complicated procedures. The fear which many of us feel in response to this trend is not because of an eroding profession but is instead simply a fear of change.

Gillham left us with the following thought: The term "professional" should not be used to mean the person who performs a particular activity. It should instead be used to identify the "standard of the end result," and the goal should be a "professional quality outcome."

Marilyn Lewis, currently the Director of Library Technical Services for Bryan Wildenthal Library at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas, was the second speaker. With her presentation, entitled: "Fact or Fiction? Professionalism Lives in Technical Services," Lewis brought to the discussion an "analysis of the professional in a small academic library environment." She began with a brief recap of her 20+ years of library experience, including brief glimpses of how library work was performed at various points in time. From there she asked the question: Is there a place for the professional librarian in today's technical services arena?

In Lewis' experience, the first thing that most obviously identifies a professional is that they have gone to the trouble of obtaining the professional degree. They have entered librarianship not as a job, but as a career. Their degree gives them entry into the profession, but experience, continuing education, and dedication are required in order to truly make them "professional." Many library functions, regardless of department, may be performed by paraprofessionals, often with a higher level of productivity and an equal level of quality as when performed by professionals.

The other criteria which set professionals apart are often not immediately clear because of a blurring of lines between the functions of the paraprofessional and the professional; however, one thing that is normally expected is that the professional will go "the extra mile," making sure the job is done right and on time, staying extra hours without extra compensation, doing whatever is necessary in order to gain proficiency in their area of the profession, and all the while displaying a professional dedication and attitude. Both professionals and paraprofessionals may be involved with hiring, training and evaluating staff; however, professionals are expected to view these things from the "library perspective", keeping in mind how the various departments work together and how the library fits into the larger educational framework, while paraprofessionals may consider their responsibilities to stop at the department door.

Lewis went on to discuss in greater detail the blurring of lines between professionals and paraprofessionals that is occurring to a greater or lesser extent in all libraries. This trend, which in some cases has resulted in technical services departments that do not have any professional staff, has in large measure occurred because of advances in automation and because of the nature of the activities that previously defined our positions in libraries. The result is that even we, technical services professionals ourselves, do not know what our role is or should be.

In Lewis' view, the role of the technical services professional is mainly managerial and administrative. Professionals manage people and resources, prepare and implement strategic plans, and always keep in mind the mission of the library as a whole. They must have certain types of knowledge and be able to communicate this knowledge to their staff, other librarians, library administrators, and those outside the library walls. They are expected to have a long-term commitment, not mainly or solely to their particular institution but to libraries as a whole. They must keep up with what is happening in the profession and actively participate in making it happen. They are expected to provide leadership and enthusiasm for the library and to be

innovative in providing solutions to problems. Professionals do not do production line work. That is the responsibility of paraprofessionals.

Lewis feels that while automation and budget constraints have caused a reduction in the number of professional staff needed in technical services, there is still a need for some such positions because of the unique qualities, theoretical knowledge and perspective that the professional brings to the institution. The professional technical services librarian is a necessary middle manager, mediator, communicator and improviser. Blurring the lines between the professional and the paraprofessional is a disservice to staff at all levels, to the library, and to library patrons.

The final speaker was Marsha Hamilton, Head of Monograph Acquisitions at the Ohio State University Libraries, who titled her talk: "Is Technical Services Being Deprofessionalized? An Opinion From the X-Files: The Truth Is Out There." Hamilton came forth with a challenging stance that provided impetus for the lively and interesting discussion that followed. She took the position that technical services is most certainly being deprofessionalized, as this is by definition what is happening when paraprofessionals are given duties previously performed by professionals. This trend can be said to have both good and bad ramifications, depending on how it is viewed.

Hamilton feels that libraries have given up on providing in-depth cataloging, subject analysis, and authority work as students or paraprofessional staff take over duties once performed by professionals. Library professionals have drastically altered their view on which elements of cataloging are considered essential. Cataloging is now faster and cheaper, but less in-depth and no longer as tailored to the needs of individual libraries and their patrons. Large cataloging backlogs are disappearing and fully processed volumes are put out on the shelf much faster, but the quality of catalog access provided for these volumes is lower than was provided by catalogers in the past. In her experience, most of the professional catalogers displaced by this trend are not going into other areas of the profession, as is often stated, but are instead losing their jobs, quitting, taking early retirement, etc.

According to Hamilton, there is no question that technical services is being deprofessionalized and that we, as a profession, are simply in denial about it. We have allowed the deprofessionalization to occur, have in fact actively helped it along. We have done so knowing quite well what the tradeoffs would be, but without honesty and an open statement of intent. The real question, she says, is not whether it is happening but who has benefited from it. The patron hasn't benefited because (1) advances in technology are not eliminating the patrons' need for professionals, but rather are giving birth to new support needs in addition to those still required for older types of media, and (2) lost technical services positions are not, in most cases, going to other library departments.

Instead, the true beneficiaries have been the privates, for profit businesses that have taken over functions once performed in the library. This has been allowed to happen because librarians are confusing "cooperation" with "surrender." We who are in an altruistic profession are "partnering" with those who are in profit-making professions and so are "giving away the field." In addition, library administrators place a higher value on trying things that others have done, often without first knowing what the effects will be, rather than coming up with unique solutions centered around the needs of their library and its users. The end result is the erosion of the core

values of librarianship, the privatization of libraries, the commercialization of information, and the library mission becoming more and more synonymous with the mission of private, for profit, business.

Hamilton feels that the areas of librarianship being deprofessionalized are those in which private business can make a profit and the functions that will remain the purview of librarians are only those which cannot be made profitable for the private sector. This state of affairs, which parallels that found in many other fields in the U. S. (for instance schools, hospitals and prisons), has come about because of a crisis in library leadership, an increasing belief that "one size fits all," and the replacement of lofty ideals with a bottom-line mentality. It is a change that is not rooted in library values, and as such is one that allows us to be manipulated by those with other values and ideals and causes the erosion of the most basic principles of librarianship.

The presentations were followed by a lively and invigorating discussion in which many of the approximately 115 attendees voiced their own opinions and argued some of the more controversial points raised by the speakers. Early on, the group was propelled towards the issue of whether or not libraries should be considered to be businesses and what the effects are of doing so. Opinions ranged from a firm belief that libraries are not and should not be businesses, to the equally firm belief that they are and should be. Those that were for the idea of libraries as businesses argued that this is the only way to remain competitive, and thus functional, in today's environment. To do otherwise is not only foolish but results in far less being accomplished or even possible. Those that were against the idea argued from the standpoint that it is not possible to successfully privatize the "public good" because it can never be equal to the "private good." Businesses are aimed at making a profit. Libraries are inherently altruistic. We cannot maintain our philosophy and ideals (for instance, free and equal access for all) while functioning more and more like the private sector (for instance charging for printing). Altruism can never be the same as making a profit. They can work together, but they are not the same thing.

Also discussed was the larger subject of academic institutions as businesses. The larger institutions of which we are a part are being forced to act like businesses in order to function within their funding levels or obtain higher funding and, as a result, we are forced to act like businesses.

Most participants agreed libraries are indeed being run more and more like private companies, whether we like it or not. This trend, like the shifting of work down to paraprofessional staff that some considered to be evidence of the larger issue, inevitably involves making "trade-offs." Certain things are given up in order to ensure that other things are accomplished. Serious problems occur when the professionals who are making these types of procedural and policy decisions do not do so in a professional manner and with a full and up front acknowledgement of exactly what the trade-off will be.

In addition, some participants felt that many of these decisions are not being revisited when they are found to fall short in some way. Reassessment, and subsequent alteration of unsuccessful policies and procedures, should be an essential part of any professional's job. In this way, only those management decisions which work in the local institution will be retained, with others being reworked or discarded as they are seen to fail.

All agreed that there are obviously fewer professional positions in technical services today than there used to be. Opinions varied widely, however, as to the reasons behind this fact. Some felt that it was not an issue in and of itself and that the quality of our end product should be

the concern. The problem, however, is that quality is a subjective concept involving a variety of different factors. What one person views as high quality, another may see as mediocre.

While no consensus was reached regarding the majority of the issues and questions that were raised, attendees and speakers alike seemed to greatly enjoy the thought-provoking discussion.

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