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Invisible Labor, Invisible Value: Unpacking Traditional Assessment of Academic Library Value

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Academic libraries face mounting pressure to demonstrate their value to stakeholders, yet traditional assessments of their financial value ignore the work of librarians and library staff in producing usable collections and services for patrons. Through a survey of US academic library workers, we examine the range, scope, and financial value of labor performed in US academic libraries. Our findings reveal ways in which traditional assessment mechanisms render this labor invisible to stakeholders. We argue that making this labor more visible will help better communicate the value of academic libraries and ignite conversations about reducing workload and stress for library workers.

Introduction

The value of the academic library has long been held unquestioned as the “heart of the university.”[1] However, as higher education funding increasingly faces threat, academic libraries have faced further pressure to actively demonstrate their value to a variety of stakeholders: the government, their own institutions, users, and librarians.[2] As libraries are pressured to demonstrate value, one predominant tactic is to develop quantifiable measures that demonstrate the value of libraries in financial terms as well as other measurable factors that correlate positive outcomes with library collections and services.

Library collections and services are products produced and supplied by academic librarians and library workers. They would not be present and usable without the labor of library staff performing a diverse variety of tasks. Yet few calculations of library value consider the labor necessary to design, facilitate, supply, and provide these products to library users, essentially rendering library labor invisible. To explore this missing aspect of value assessment in academic libraries, we investigated the range and scope of labor performed in US academic libraries, the financial value of that labor, and what, if any, aspects of that labor are invisible. Through this investigation we aim to surface previously ignored aspects of value calculations that can ultimately help academic libraries communicate value in more effective ways.

Literature Review

Value in the academic library community can be measured in many ways, depending on the context of the community and the stakeholders to which said value is being communicated. Discussions of library value have strong roots in economics. The original motto of the American Library Association—"*The best reading, for the largest number, at the least cost*"—explicitly connects economic value to the mission of libraries. Since demonstrating economic value has historically been directly connected to receiving funding, many library assessment schemes are foundationally quantitative and economics-based. Oakleaf defends these choices as knowing what metrics will resonate with external stakeholders, because "financial realities take precedence," thus economic and impact assessment is "proactive, rather than defensive" in demonstrating library value.[3] However, in a typical library value assessment framework, library labor is missing.

Library Assessment Frameworks

Starting with ACRL's *Value of Academic Libraries* (VAL) in 2010, academic library assessment focused on two specific valuations: financial value, such as return on investment (ROI), and impact value, such as correlation with student success. [4] ACRL's follow-up systematic review of library assessment in 2017, named *Academic Library Impact* (ALI), finds four types of valuations: static measurements, such as collection and budget; usage measurements, such as circulation statistics; outsider perceptions, including user satisfaction and ROI studies; and user-centered outcomes, measuring the impact on student success and on information literacy.[5]

Most static measurements, such as collection size, circulation, and budget, are useful for peer comparison, but those counts have diminished as services like electronic resources have grown and funding has been cut, leading to perceived loss in valuation. The only instance of labor in these measurements is the portion of the library budget allocated to salary costs. User satisfaction, such as LIBQUAL+ measurements, evaluates customer service satisfaction in services and spaces[6] without the library work behind the scenes.

In financial valuation, such as in the Lib Value project, scholars used four surrogates for value (collection size, usage statistics, faculty grant income, and contingent valuation survey results) to establish an ROI of 4.43:1 for Syracuse University Library.[7] Thus financial value of the library is calculated based on the value of resources and services—that is, the products provided to library users and related stakeholders. For example, in the Lib Value ROI study, the value of time spent using library services was measured in the average hourly value of time of faculty and student users, not library salaries or expertise.[8] None of these surrogates for value quantitatively considers the value inherent in the labor necessary to provide those resources and services and make them available.

Typical measurements of academic impact and user-centered success were correlation between library usage and retention, GPA, degree attainment, information literacy skills, and graduation rates.[9] As evidenced in recommendations for future research in both VAL and

ALI, these types of measurements are becoming more closely entrenched with learning analytics, for example, which evaluates the rise and fall of individual GPAs correlated with library information literacy instruction.[10] These measurements have seen an increase in the literature in recent years[11] and help begin to advocate for the role of librarians in such areas as collaboration and instruction.[12]

While these existing techniques for communicating the value of libraries and librarianship have been useful, they are not without issues. For example, although learning analytics is supported by external administration, Jones demonstrates how it is mired in ethical quandaries in library practice, especially over the conflict between patron privacy and sensitive data practices.[13] Kingma and McClure make clear that ROI calculations are only economic and do not include environmental or social values, which could substantially elevate the value of the academic library.[14] Doucette calls for examining how assessment is uncritical and non–self-reflective in practice, without concern for the personal relationships librarians develop as practitioners within the community.[15] In interviews, Cheng and Hoffman found some librarians are skeptical of library assessment research in general, calling it “businessification” and deeming it “mostly superficial.”[16] Magnus et al., in examining the power structures inherent in assessment, suggest that we ask how our research identities shape the way that we assess and who decides what to assess: what are these systems of measurement and how do they reflect our value as practitioners?[17] It is with this very call to action in mind that we draw attention to a missing aspect of library valuation: library labor.

Valuing Labor

Labor, in economic terms, is defined as the physical, mental, and social effort used to produce goods and services in an economy. Visible work is that which is readily available and recognized by patrons, management, and library workers; is paid and profit-generating; and occurs in the public sphere.[18] This visible work is easily measured and analyzed, as discussed above: How many books does the library own? How many people have visited the library this year? How many reference questions has our service point answered? However, financial and impact measurements, such as GPA increases or number of reference questions answered, assess the change in patron outcomes without including the library labor involved in achieving those outcomes. If we want to value library workers as active members in the academic community and diminish passive stereotyping, why aren’t the library workers and their labor included in valuation? Instead, these studies reduce or eliminate the visibility of the labor that maintains library services and information access.

The idea of invisible labor refers to work that frequently receives little or no recognition or monetary reward.[19] The concept emerged from feminist scholarship in the 1980s to bring attention to underpaid, unrecognized, and undervalued work, often performed by women, such as household work.[20] Here we draw attention to the distinction between unpaid domestic work and invisible work. Invisible work is labor that is tied to formal, paid employment and performed in order to fulfill requirements; it is crucial to “generate income,

to obtain or retain [one's] job, and to further [one's] career, yet [is] often overlooked, ignored, and/or devalued."[21] Some of this labor can be fully unpaid, such as that done in preparation for work or outside of paid hours; some is underpaid due to workers, employers, and consumers taking it for granted or not seeing/perceiving all tasks performed.[22] Further explorations revealed that invisible work was not limited by gender or setting.[23] Rather, it is more clearly related to power dynamics: the greater the compensation for labor, the greater the visibility of that labor.[24]

Invisible work has been differentiated in various ways in the social sciences. In a discussion about visible and invisible labor, Star and Strauss assert that no work can be deemed solely visible or invisible.[25] For example, physical work may be inherently more materially present, whereas networking may appear to be effortless but disguises intellectual labor. They use this perspective to tease apart the layers that exist in any given organization. Work and labor are often treated as synonymous terms. However, for Star and Strauss, work does not exist a priori but is defined by the situation: what is required of one to perform the job, be it exerting extreme physical labor or working on retainer. Invisible work may include intellectual work, affective or emotional work, and articulation work. Intellectual work—which constitutes much of professional library work—often remains unseen and therefore unrecognized, placing it under the umbrella of invisible labor.[26] For example, Galvan explains how technical services is responsible for "the largest pieces of the budget; our jobs translate into the first and sometimes only experience our patrons have with the library," yet technical services is "underresourced with high turnover."[27]

Additionally, invisible labor may include work that is unrecognized because it involves emotional work.[28] Emotional labor, or the effort required to manage one's emotions to meet organizational expectations,[29] is especially prevalent in professional library work such as reference services.[30] Articulation work is a "supra-type" of work carried out both simultaneously and sequentially with standard work tasks that includes the meshing and coordination of tasks, efforts of unit workers (such as individuals and departments), and meshing of actors with their various types of work and implicated tasks.[31] That is to say, it is the complexity and intricacy involved in coordinating cooperative work, and is "work that gets things back 'on track' in the face of the unexpected, and modifies action to accommodate unanticipated contingencies."[32] Think of the student supervisor at a circulation desk: they are responsible for the coordination and management of staffing the service point at all times, then the subsequent handling of disruptions from sick or absent employees. Articulation work is rendered less visible if the desk is staffed seamlessly. In fact, the higher the quality of the work, the less visible it becomes to those who benefit from it.[33] To that end, many professional library services that are labor intensive and done well remain invisible.

Research Questions

Current measurements of the financial value of academic libraries, such as ROI and contingency valuation, contain library labor only as a passive part of the library budget. Without this fundamental consideration, librarianship will always lack successful

communication of true calculation of value—one that may lead to increased understanding of the full range of what libraries offer. Given this significant gap in the considerations of library value, we investigated the following research questions:

- What is the range and scope of labor performed in US academic libraries?
- What is the financial value of that labor?
- What, if any, aspects of that labor are invisible?

Methods

To surface the value of labor and invisible labor in academic library work, we created a questionnaire intended to solicit information regarding job tasks both on and off the clock and the time spent on these tasks in an average week. To estimate value, we also asked about salary information. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic potentially affected many academic librarians' job tasks and time allotments, we asked participants to share information about their average work week in 2019. It should be noted that the work reported here is part of a larger research project about invisible labor in librarianship overall; however, we report here only on the data relevant to the above research questions. The questionnaire (see appendix) was approved by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB), implemented using Qualtrics, and was open for responses for approximately six weeks from August 1 through September 15, 2020.

Our goal was to survey as broad an audience of library workers as possible. Therefore, we did not ask for job titles, formal job descriptions, or whether a participant was titled "librarian" or not. Such delineations do not accurately correspond to work tasks or exempt status for the purpose of salaries; furthermore, we believe these delineations further contribute to class segregation in library work. Participants were people 18 years or older who self-identified as employed in a library in the United States in 2019 and were able to complete a questionnaire in the English language. Invitations to participate were posted to various social media sites and library listservs and distributed to any known library associates. Our data is self-reported, voluntary, and anonymous. Additionally, the findings are limited by convenience sampling and participation bias; thus, our findings are presented as averages and percentages and are exploratory in nature.

We received 2,095 responses to the questionnaire; however, 1,067 of those responses were incomplete. To compare consistent data, we performed a complete-case analysis (also known as listwise deletion) that excluded all incomplete surveys from analysis.[34] Although this approach can induce bias in statistical analysis, since this is a descriptive survey rather than an explanatory survey it does not lend itself to more sophisticated statistical analysis, nor is that its purpose.[35] Of the completed responses, we filtered to focus on respondents who identified as working in an academic library in 2019. The findings presented below are based on these 355 responses. We performed descriptive quantitative analysis to ascertain the average financial value of academic library work overall, by task division and visibility, and what, if any, patterns or differences emerged. We also reviewed and taxonomized the open-ended responses for additional context.

Findings

Of 355 participants who identified as working in an academic library in 2019, 81 percent (287) identified as a woman, 14 percent (51) as a man, 2 percent (8) as nonbinary, with 4 respondents who preferred not to disclose and 2 self-identifying. This spread overall reflects a similar distribution to the 2017 ALA Demographic Study, with 81 percent female and 19 percent male.[36] While we collected data on ethnic/racial identity, due to the sensitive nature of these topics, these results were voluntary and not enough data was collected to be significant.

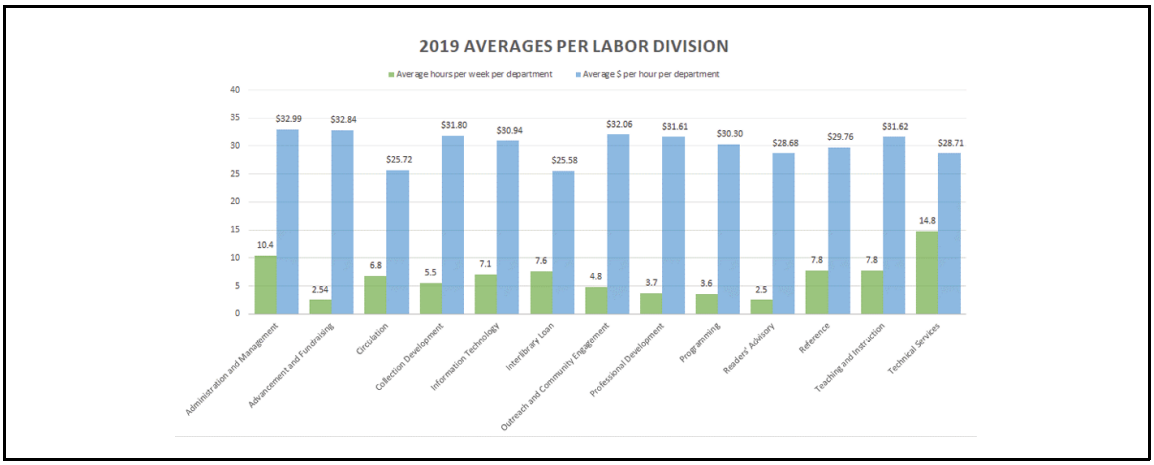
Paid Labor

In 2019, the average respondent worked 38.02 hours per week, with 92 percent reporting full-time work, defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as 35 or more hours per week. While income was reported in hourly, biweekly, and salary increments, all was converted to hourly payments using self-reported hours worked. Taking this into account, the average library worker pay of respondents in 2019 was $30.27 per hour.

Our labor divisions take into consideration a wide range of services and tasks that any individual worker could perform during a given week. We determined 13 total categories of labor divisions based on several rounds of pilot testing with library workers (see the appendix for the list of categories of labor divisions as they appeared to survey respondents). These divisions are meant to cover as much of library services as possible; they may correspond to official departments, but the categories here represent types of labor. Thus, very few respondents worked solely in one division of labor. Respondents divided hours worked among the categories, with the total equaling self-reported hours worked. Technical services tasks amassed the largest number of hours worked at 14.8; readers' advisory the smallest, at 2.5. Administration and management is the highest paid on average at $32.99 per hour, and interlibrary loan and circulation are the lowest, at $25.58 and $25.72, respectively.

FIGURE 1

Average Income per Hour and Average Hours per Week, for Each Labor Division



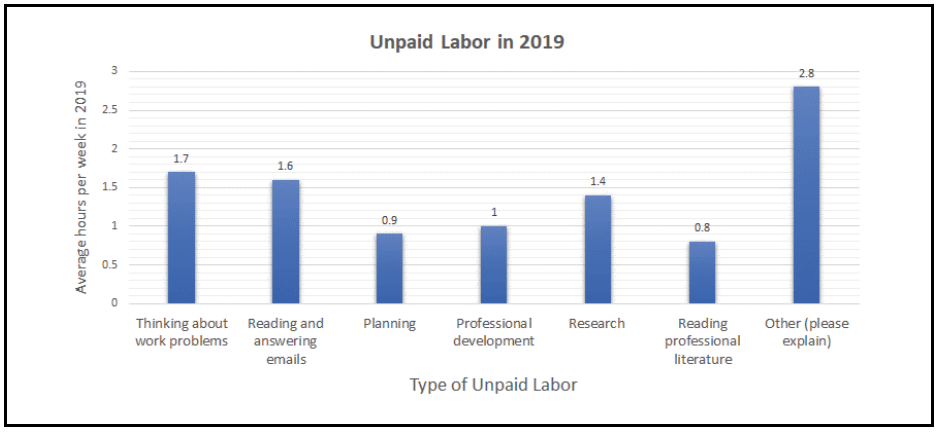
Additionally, technical services reported the lowest number of different tasks weekly, with an average of 5.75 out of 13 task groups we provided. On the other hand, respondents who reported readers' advisory as a part of their weekly tasks reported an average of 8.78 different tasks per week. Technical services also presented with the highest number of respondents spending more than 30 hours per week on technical tasks alone, at 16 percent, whereas advancement, outreach, programming, and readers' advisory had zero respondents reporting more than 30 hours per week on the respective task. This suggests that technical services labor is highly siloed, separated more from other task divisions. For example, 70 percent (170 out 242) of respondents who selected reference work also input teaching and instruction, whereas only one third of those in technical services also provided instruction.

Unpaid Labor

Sixty-four percent (226 out of 355) of respondents reported working outside of paid hours in 2019. Of those 226 who reported unpaid labor, the average was 5.79 hours per week. There was no discernable pattern between salary levels and unpaid labor. Similar to paid labor, we broke down unpaid labor tasks into six categories, reflecting typical behavior such as "thinking about work," "reading and answering emails," and including a free-text option for "other: please explain." Thinking about work problems took an average of 1.77 hours per week, while reading professional literature was only 0.8 hours per week.

FIGURE 2

Average Time Spent per Week on Various Types of Unpaid Labor



Ninety-seven of 226 respondents selected "Other" and provided a vast array of descriptions of unpaid labor. We reviewed these open-text responses to develop inductive categories reflecting the types of work tasks described. Many respondents replied that work outside of paid hours constituted the same types of tasks as their typical work duties. For example, one respondent stated, "Work beyond my required 40 hours was not qualitatively different from work performed within my required 40 hours." In addition to standard work duties, respondents also reported a wide variety of tasks undertaken outside of paid hours, including IT issues and troubleshooting; planning and attending events that occur in off-hours; and preparing and teaching classes and instruction sessions. A variety of

administrative tasks were also mentioned, ranging from basic clerical tasks like answering phones and unlocking doors, to high-level situations like resolving HR/personnel problems and preparing impact reports for university stakeholders such as presidents and deans. A number of respondents also mentioned supporting other library workers during this unpaid time, such as covering shifts for colleagues or assisting student workers. Despite options for professional development and reading professional literature appearing in the multiple-choice selections, several respondents specifically cited these tasks when asked to explain additional work. A handful of people mentioned continuing education, such as working on an MLIS or other graduate degree. One person listed business travel, and one person mentioned the emotional labor of "stressing about work situations that seem beyond my control but bother me immensely." A collaborative qualitative coding process was used to identify themes across the types of work tasks described in the open-ended responses. We then organized the themes into a taxonomy of work tasks based on type. See table 1 for the full taxonomy.

TABLE 1

Taxonomy of Types of Responses Received Describing Additional Types of Unpaid Labor

Top-level Categories	Subcategories	Tertiary Categories
Standard work duties *"Work beyond my required 40 hours was not qualitatively different from work performed within my required 40 hours."*	**Collection development and management** *"Collection development and acquisitions"*	
	Cataloging and related technical services *"Primary job tasks such as cataloging, processing, etc."*	
	Archival services and processing *"Rehousing and reorganizing the Archives and Records Management department"*	
	Administration and management *"Administrative tasks"*	**Human resources** *"Resolving emerging employee problems"*
		Reports and documentation *"Working on reports and analysis at the request of university administrators or the Senate Library Committee"*

TABLE 1

Taxonomy of Types of Responses Received Describing Additional Types of Unpaid Labor

Top-level Categories	Subcategories	Tertiary Categories
	General/clerical work *"Opening the library before scheduled hours (unlocking doors, turning on computers, etc.)"*	
	Patron queries *"Catching up with patron queries"*	**Reference interactions** *"Answering reference questions from faculty, administrators, students, and peers"*
	Instruction *"Information literacy instruction"*	**Planning and instructional design** *"Preparing teaching materials"*
		Preparing research guides and tutorials "Developing libguides [sic]"
	Outreach *"Outreach"*	
Finishing standard work not completed during time at work *"Finishing larger projects that required focus, because it was the only quiet time in the library when I wasn't on call for other services."*		
After-hours duties [no general responses regarding after-hours duties]	**IT troubleshooting** *"Troubleshooting technical issues on weekends and nights as necessary"*	
	Events and programming *"Attending university events to promote the libraries"*	
Supporting the work of other library workers *"Covering shifts for others"*	**Supporting colleagues** *"Helping other librarians with their work"*	**Supporting subordinates** *"Being a Student Worker Supervisor, I would stay late to talk to students that did not have time during the day/ work hours to meet with me"*
Continuing education *"Second Masters [sic] Degree, required for my position to reach tenure"*		

TABLE 1

Taxonomy of Types of Responses Received Describing Additional Types of Unpaid Labor

Top-level Categories	Subcategories	Tertiary Categories
Professional service *"Volunteer committee work for professional associations"*		
Travel *"Business travel"*		
Emotional labor *"Stressing about work situations that seem beyond my control but bother[s] me immensely"*		

Discussion

Not All Labor Manifests Equally

Our findings reveal that library labor includes a wide variety of tasks requiring various levels and aspects of physical, mental, and/or social effort. Of official work duties, we found that technical services work, such as cataloging, classification, acquisitions, physical processing, and other duties, averaged the highest number of hours per week at 14.8. This is almost 4.5 hours higher than the next highest average (administration/management tasks such as budgeting and finance, human resources, committees, staff scheduling, facilities, and other such tasks) and nearly twice as high as many other tasks including circulation, IT, ILL, reference, and instruction.

This potentially factors into Galvan's findings that technical services comprise a bulk of library budgets, especially considering that the average salary for technical services work is within a $1–$2 range of most other task categories.[37] As more library collections become digital, such as electronic journal subscriptions, the volume of technical services labor has risen. Additionally, technical services departments are infinitely expandable (aside from budgetary constraints), whereas service points are limited by physicality and the volume of patrons. It is also possible that technical services work such as original cataloging requires more time to ensure quality and accuracy of description and data entry—a long-documented tension in cataloging work.[38] Reference, instruction, and other front-facing academic library work tasks are bounded by time in ways that technical services are not. For example, shifts at a reference desk may be bounded by specific start and end times and instruction sessions are usually of consistent lengths (for example, 90-minute "one shot" sessions), whereas technical services work does not include any inherent time boundaries, only prescribed deadlines that can be shifted. Additionally, tasks within technical services are often less multifaceted than in other areas of the library. A worker may be both reference and circulation at any given time while working at one service point, whereas a worker in

technical services may be doing a number of different tasks that all lie under “technical services.” This is consistent with our findings that technical services reported the lowest number of different tasks weekly.

While there were some categories of work tasks with lower reported hours, such as outreach and community engagement, professional development, programming, readers’ advisory, and advancement and fundraising, most of these findings make sense in the context of academic libraries. Work such as outreach and community engagement, programming, and readers’ advisory seem like tasks more likely to occur in other types of libraries, such as public libraries. In US university settings, advancement and fundraising may be its own department, either internal (within a library) or external (serving the university at large), or some combination thereof. It is somewhat surprising to see a low reporting of professional development tasks considering that many academic librarians are required to engage in professional development as part of their work and to achieve tenure status. However, not all academic librarian positions are considered faculty or tenure-track, and not all respondents to the survey worked in professional librarian positions. Those working in positions that do not require professional development components would likely spend less time on those types of tasks. However, it may also be possible that workers in positions requiring professional development for tenure and promotion face barriers such as time or competing priorities that lead them to spend their time on other tasks, which could ultimately impact their ability to succeed long-term.

Not All Labor Is Paid

In addition to the range of tasks reported as part of a library worker’s paid work, an even wider range of tasks is performed outside of paid work hours. Almost two-thirds of respondents reported working an average of almost six hours of unpaid work per week. With the average hourly wage reported by respondents in 2019 averaging $30.27, this amounts to just over $9,000 worth of unpaid labor for the year per person. This does not include costs of direct or indirect benefits, such as sick leave, vacation time, retirement contributions, and/or medical benefits that are paid by the employer. There are 26,606 academic librarians and 59,145 academic library staff in the United States.[39] This effort totals $781,508,031.19 worth of academic library labor unpaid in 2019 and would add up to much more if benefits were included.

Some work will always need to be completed outside of regularly scheduled work time due to the nature of the work, without necessarily qualifying as unpaid labor. For example, people working in IT must be on call and available to respond to technology breakdowns. People working on events and programming may need to attend those events whenever they happen, be they during regular working hours or not. However, people working in these types of positions (often classified as exempt) generally understand the expectations, responsibilities, and scheduling associated with these roles, and typically payment is structured accordingly, through salary structures or task-based contract work. It seems instead that some respondents may not fully understand how time, compensation, and pay function based on role or contract. A few responses, such as the person who said “when

working part-time, late night and weekend staff are at work" or the person who mentioned receiving comp time for after-hours work, give the impression that people may not fully understand compensation and pay, and what constitutes unpaid labor. A few responses also indicate increasingly blurred lines about what actually constitutes work. For example, one respondent reported taking MLIS courses as part of their unpaid work. There was not enough information from this respondent to know whether or not completing the degree was a condition of the job and therefore could be considered part of one's work duties. However, given that most professional librarian positions require the MLIS or equivalent graduate degree, and some organizations offer financial support or tuition remuneration, it is possible that such activities could fall under the purview of employment, especially professional development work.

In our questionnaire, we specifically asked people about unpaid work (as opposed to scheduled hours). Of significant note is the high frequency of respondents reporting performing the same tasks during unpaid hours as performed during paid work hours. Many respondents mentioned that they undertook this typical work due to a need to finish specific tasks or to "catch up performing regular duties that did not get done in [an] ordinary work week." Others mentioned becoming so involved with work that they worked through their lunch breaks or beyond their scheduled hours. Ironically, multiple respondents mentioned completing impact reports during unpaid after-hours time. Respondents specifically mentioned not recording these overages on timecards and other examples of not reporting the time.

Although such focus and dedication may be considered admirable in some respects, it raises questions about work pressures and expectations. At a basic level, work completed should be compensated fairly, or stricter boundaries need to be enacted by both staff and management to ensure that unpaid work overages do not occur. Working beyond paid hours may not meet the US legal standards of wage theft, since the employer is not explicitly requesting the employee to work off the clock, but we must question whether there is implicit pressure shaping these employees' decisions to work without pay. For example, for the many respondents who reported needing to finish a task or catch up with regular duties, what is so critical about these library tasks that they cannot be finished the next day, or the next week? Some tasks certainly have deadlines, such as planning for a scheduled instruction session, answering a reference question via email, or other time-constrained commitments. But others do not necessarily have such time-based constraints, so we must question the source of the pressure to finish these tasks. One of the respondents mentioned that they worked beyond paid hours "because it was the only quiet time in the library when I wasn't on call for other services." Yet if an employee is on call for services, those services are clearly the work priority of the organization and other projects must be deprioritized, leaving them to take longer to complete rather than completing them on unpaid time. Another respondent mentioned spending unpaid time "finishing tasks [formerly] done by vacant positions." Again, if these tasks are so critical to complete, then those vacant positions need to be filled rather than employers or staff themselves expecting them to be completed. Lack of prioritization—be it from the employer or the employee—leads to the

understanding that all tasks are at the same level of critical importance and all must be completed. We recognize that federal and state wage regulations as well as some union contracts require appropriate compensation for overtime work from non-salaried employees, but this necessitates adequate reporting of overtime work, rigid boundaries for the end of a workday, and job security when faced with tasks unfinished within established work times. Our data is self-reported, voluntary, and anonymous and, as such, may indicate that some legal regulations are not always accurately followed. Even if it does not officially constitute wage theft, library staff working beyond paid hours certainly contributes to overwork and an erosion of boundaries that shifts expectations over time.

This erosion of boundaries is a major contributing factor to the perpetuation of vocational awe—the idea that libraries are so important to society that library workers martyr themselves to support this social good.[40] Ettarh specifically calls out undercompensation as one of the ways vocational awe negatively impacts library workers, showing how the “heroic narrative” of librarianship leads to reduced or even free labor.[41] Job creep, another negative impact of vocational awe, can also be seen in this unpaid labor. While Ettarh discusses job creep in terms of scope (mentioning the ever-expanding range of tasks falling under the purview of library workers), our example here shows how job tasks—even the regular ones—creep into unpaid time simply because people want to show diligence and quality work through task completion.[42]

Rendering Labor Invisible as Part of Library Value

Based on previous definitions of invisible work that include unpaid labor performed to fulfill requirements, retain employment, and further one’s career, our data clearly shows a great deal of invisible work occurring in academic librarianship. Star and Strauss discuss a continuum of additional indicators beyond un- and underpaid work that function to render labor invisible.[43] The continuum involves: creating a nonperson; disembedding background work; and the abstracting and manipulation of indicators. In creating a nonperson, the employee is rendered invisible by the power dynamic between the employer and employee. For example, the domestic worker is quite literally present, but consciously ignored by the employer, and the legitimacy of their work is determined solely by the employer. The outcome is assessed without reference to the labor involved: how clean is the house? On the other hand, by disembedding background work, the opposite is true: we acknowledge the librarians staffing the reference desk but cannot see or recognize the labor the reference worker is performing. This carries into the third category, the abstracting and manipulating of indicators, which renders invisible both the work and the person. In this situation, the parameters by which work is measured are both rendered abstract from the workplace and used to make decisions about the workplace. Alternatively, the products are created in one place and purchased far away, abstracting the work and worker involved in the production.

Library workers are susceptible to both disembedded background work and the abstraction of indicators. The language of assessment and value, especially the economic language of ROI, typically focuses on the outputs of the library. Even when labor measures are included in the overall total valuation of library services, they do not account for the time and pay of

library workers on various tasks. For instance, Kingma and McClure's value calculation of an electronic resources collection is based only on the cost of subscription from the vendor —it does not include the costs of establishing and maintaining the information technology and infrastructure required to access the resources, nor the labor of the workers who negotiate and acquire the electronic resources and/or manage the IT infrastructure.[44] In contrast, our data demonstrates that library workers engage in a diverse range of tasks: everything from physical work such as unlocking doors and shelving materials, to intellectua work such as metadata and research, to emotional labor and stress management. Collapsing these various tasks into an overarching category of general labor is a prime example of disembedding background work since it essentially hides the diverse variety of tasks performed as well as the training, knowledge, and expertise needed to perform those tasks.

ROI also functions as an abstracted indicator of value. ROI is intended to present a rough valuation of the overall investment versus income gained; it is not a robust overarching measure of all of the services provided by libraries to the patrons. Yet it is regularly used to make decisions about funding and resource allotment by administrators and stakeholders. Disembedding background work through the homogenization of diverse library work not only makes the financial differences among various tasks invisible, but essentially eliminates the ability to communicate the diversity of library work to stakeholders. Presenting an overall line item for salaries without describing the variety of work being performed can unintentionally lead stakeholders to believe that library work is homogenous and that all library work and workers are equal and interchangeable. It neglects the variety of expertise required for some aspects of library work (such as instruction experience or specialized cataloging knowledge). It potentially contributes to confusion among administrators and other stakeholders who may not understand why a graduate degree is required for some library positions, since the functions and expertise performed by people in those positions is not presented, just folded into a larger category of labor. Rendering this labor invisible also leads to stakeholders associating libraries with materials and collections, potentially contributing to the long-lamented stereotype of libraries as warehouses for books and librarians as people whose work consists solely of shelving and reading them. In examining the ROI strategy of library valuation, the language used refers to the library as a passive object to be used. Regardless of the economic demands of library valuation, librarians themselves are rendering their own profession invisible by adopting the framework of an economic system that homogenizes various types of labor.

Conclusion

Academic libraries are under constant pressure to demonstrate value to their stakeholders. Outcomes-based approaches, such as financial value and impact value, are typical means of articulating and asserting that value proposition. Despite substantial critiques, many library assessment schemes are foundationally quantitative and economics-based since demonstrating economic value is directly tied to funding and financial considerations that are at the forefront of decision-making. Yet common approaches to financial value, such as

contingency valuation and ROI measures, do not capture specifics about the value of academic library labor. The research reported in this article specifically sought to explore this missing aspect of value in academic libraries. We found that the range and scope of labor performed in US academic libraries is diverse. Librarians and library workers perform a wide variety of tasks that may require specialized training, knowledge, and expertise, with financial compensation ranging accordingly. Yet financial representations of this diverse labor are usually collapsed into one homogenous category when reporting value to library stakeholders. Homogenizing library labor has arguably rendered many aspects of the library profession—and thus the value of library labor—invisible.

In addition to a diverse skill set, we found that a significant proportion of academic library workers complete work tasks during nonwork time and without pay, representing another form of invisible labor unaccounted for in calculations of library value. Such occurrences at the very least reflect issues with boundary management, workplace pressure, and unrealistic expectations. Many libraries and organizations may feel compelled to "do more with less," especially due to the framing of value in economic and financial paradigms. However, relying on unpaid work to accomplish tasks and goals is unsustainable at best, if not outright abusive, and will ultimately undermine the library's ability to actually provide the value that it claims.

Although our work focused specifically on labor, it is possible that other aspects of librarianship have also been made invisible in value assessments and calculations. Our responses were dominated by the population majority in LIS, white female respondents. However, Black professionals are often required to conform to normatively white, middle-class workplaces, uphold structural discrimination, spearhead diversity endeavors, and deny or minimize racial inequalities. These activities are known as racial tasks, which are "additional, invisible labor that workers of color are charged with performing."[45] Future work should explore these forms of invisible labor and prevalence in the LIS profession. Another manifestation of invisible labor was voiced by a respondent: "I thought this survey might be about how much librarians give to researchers—we often do a lot of work for them but must be satisfied with a nice acknowledgment that no one really reads. The researcher/writer gets the credit, but we know they couldn't do it without us!" Additionally, emotional labor is a form of invisible labor surfaced by respondents that needs further investigation. Future work collecting more detailed data addressing these aspects, as well as other factors, such as geographic location or library status (for example, ARL membership), and more specific inquiry on time spent on specific tasks could add valuable nuance and insight. Exploring these additional aspects may ultimately help academic libraries communicate value in more effective ways.

Communicating more nuanced articulations of labor as part of library assessment, via financial data or otherwise, has the potential to uncover and even promote aspects of libraries and librarianship that were previously invisible to stakeholders. Showing stakeholders and funders the range of work librarians do can help combat the outdated and incorrect stereotype of libraries as mere collections of resources and help shift the view to

libraries as providers of services and experiences, which can in turn garner increased support for academic libraries and the variety of services they offer. Making hidden labor visible, especially unpaid labor, may also spur conversations and concrete actions toward redistribution of work tasks and resources in an effort to reduce workload, stress, and pressure.

APPENDIX

Below are the questions reported on in this article. These questions appeared in a longer questionnaire about invisible labor in librarianship overall. Additional questions not included here cover postpandemic work tasks, emotional labor, and other data that will be reported on in future work.

- Did you work in a library in the United States in 2019?
  - □ Yes
  - □ No [if no, exit survey]
- We understand that some people may work multiple library jobs. For this set of questions, please tell us about the position you considered to be your **primary** library job in 2019. According to your job description, how many hours per week are you expected to work at your **primary** library job in an average week in 2019 (that is, before any disruptions created by COVID-19)?
  - □ [fill in the blank—numeric—max out at 168] hours per week
- You told us you worked X hours in **an average week in 2019**. Of those hours, please tell us how many hours you spent on each of the following types of tasks:

administration and management This includes work such as budgeting and finance, human resources committees, staff scheduling, facilities, etc.	[default set at zero]
advancement This includes work such as fundraising, donor relations, marketing, community outreach, etc.	[default set at zero]
circulation This includes work such as resource check in/out, maintaining patron accounts, working with holds and reserves, shelving materials, etc.	[default set at zero]
collection development and management This includes work such as materials selection, inventory, weeding, etc.	[default set at zero]
information technology (IT) This includes work such as hardware/software support and repair, system administration, ILS management, etc.	[default set at zero]
interlibrary loan This includes work such as resource sharing, cooperative agreements, materials searching, etc.	[default set at zero]
outreach and community engagement	[default set at zero]

This includes work such as tabling and external event attendance, representing the library in the local community, liaising with departments, etc.	
professional development This includes work such as research, publication, conference attendance, creating materials for promotion or review, attending PD workshops, etc.	[default set at zero]
programming This includes work such as program or event planning, materials preparation, delivering programs such as story times, setup and cleanup, etc.	[default set at zero]
readers' advisory This includes work such as recommending books and other resources, creating book lists and displays, etc.	[default set at zero]
reference This includes work such as staffing shifts at a reference desk, chat reference, answering reference questions either in person or by other means, etc.	[default set at zero]
teaching and instruction This includes work such as leading workshops, teaching one-off courses, lesson planning, teaching full semester courses, etc.	[default set at zero]
technical services This includes work such as cataloging, classification, acquisitions, physical processing, etc.	[default set at zero]
TOTAL	[must add up to the number of hours they said they worked]

- In an average week in 2019, approximately how many hours per week did you work beyond paid hours for your primary library position?
  - □ [open text—numeric]
- What kind of work do you do during this time (for example: planning, answering emails, thinking about work problems, etc.)?
  - □ [open text answer]
- What tasks did you perform during these hours?
  - □ Thinking about work problems
  - □ Reading and answering emails
  - □ Planning (scheduling, events, programs)
  - □ Professional development (seminars, webinars, training sessions like **lynda.com (http://lynda.com)** , etc.)
  - □ Research (designing studies, writing articles for publication, conducting research programs, etc.)
  - □ Reading professional literature (trade magazines, academic journals, etc.)
  - □ Other (please explain)
- Are there any additional aspects of your work in 2019 that you felt were unrecognized? Please share. [open text answer]
- What type of library is most representative of the library in which you work(ed)?[46]
  - □ Academic library

    - □ Boards, friends groups, foundations
    - □ Consortia/cooperative systems/networks
    - □ Consulting
    - □ Corporations/corporate libraries
    - □ Federal or military libraries
    - □ Public libraries
    - □ School libraries
    - □ Special libraries
    - □ State library agencies
    - □ Other: [fill in the blank]
- Please tell us your gross income for the library position you just described:
    - □ [dropdown with choices for hourly, weekly, yearly, etc.]
    - □ [fill in the blank (numerals) options]
- What is your gender?[47]
    - □ Woman
    - □ Man
    - □ Nonbinary
    - □ Prefer not to disclose
    - □ Prefer to self-describe: [open text]
- Is there anything else you would like to add? Please share.
    - □ [open text field]

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Please contact Rachel Ivy Clarke at **rclark01@syr.edu (mailto:rclark01@syr.edu)** if you have any questions.

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