

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Oberg, L. R. (2014). The library of the 21st century: Creative approaches to staffing and organization. *OLA Quarterly*, 5(4), 4-6+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1534>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

The Library of the 21st Century: Creative Approaches to Staffing and Organization

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In this brief article I recount a couple of hopefully amusing, perhaps even bittersweet, anecdotes from my past life as a library assistant; trace a brief history of support staff in American libraries; and comment on our changing organizational structures and the roles of both support staff and librarians. My conclusion includes a few suggestions for how we can construct continuing education programs that will contribute to the success of all staff in the library of tomorrow.

The Past as Prelude

My first post-high school job in the early 1960s was a support staff position in the cataloging department of a state library somewhere to the south of Oregon. In those days, the work that a member of the support staff might be allowed to do was limited and repetitive. It would have been quite uncommon, for example, that I or any of my peers would have been given the time or money required to attend a library conference or even a job-related workshop.

To be fair, a few hand-selected members of the support staff were occasionally sent across town for some form of "training." You may or may not remember that in those days we "educated" librarians and "trained" support staff. Librarians attended conferences and, upon their return, passed along to the support staff any information deemed relevant. Plainly put, our organizational and behavioral patterns trivialized support staff and the roles they played.

In college libraries in those days—and I'm sorry to say that this practice still occurs in some schools—there was an implicit understanding that no member of the support staff, no matter how long or how hard he or she worked, would ever make a salary higher than that of the lowest paid librarian. Support staff positions were not considered by administrators or personnel officers to be career positions. They were jobs, and jobs were something you worked at until you got a better one, got a profession, or no longer needed to supplement your spouse's income.

While working at that state library—and it was no better or worse than any other library of the period—I came

to know that something was wrong, but never felt that there was anything I could do about it. Until, that is, I met a young librarian, a newly minted MLS from UC-Berkeley, with whom I found common cause. She and I took to spending our coffee breaks together. Until, that is, someone pointed out that there was an administrative memo posted in the staff lounge that stated that librarians and support staff were not permitted to take their breaks at the same table.

I'm not making this up, these things actually happened!

Of course, she and I protested that memo, but to no avail. How long it remained posted and whether or not it was ever really enforced, I have no idea. Nonetheless, it symbolized the attitudes and prejudices of the period. Even though we did not succeed in getting the memo taken down and the policy rescinded, our protest was a bonding experience and we married a few months later. Thus, all was not lost.

Two other anecdotes illustrate our historic insensitivity as a profession. For many years, in liberal arts colleges at least, library support staff positions were routinely awarded to the spouses of new faculty and administrative hires as a perquisite of the position. Regardless of the competencies of the individuals involved, noncompetitive hiring practices further trivialized the importance of support staff.

Librarians have a long history of filling support staff positions with candidates whose qualifications exceed what we require in our position advertisements. We often employ individuals with graduate or even terminal library school degrees. And we do not shy away from assigning them tasks that are in accord with their educational level, but not necessarily with their written position descriptions.

Now, these stories from yesterday's libraries and my own personal experiences of the period are not, I trust, merely self-indulgence, although they are fun to tell! They serve to emphasize that, indeed, things have changed since that by now rather distant time.

In many libraries today, paraprofessionals work at reference desks, do original cataloging and perform a variety of systems tasks. This is work that they would not necessarily have been allowed to perform in the past. In other libraries however, competent, willing and hard-working folk are still held back from performing these same tasks, often for no reasons other than that to do so would pose a threat to the librarians and the library administration. This results in an uneven pattern of task assignment in libraries around the country and an equally uneven pattern of support staff compensation and continuing education opportunities.

The Emergence of Dichotomized Staffing Models

Personnel problems, of course, are not new to our libraries. How we deploy and utilize staff, how we

distinguish between the roles and status of librarians and support staff, and how librarians and support staff interact with each other have all been difficult and divisive issues within the profession for most of this century. These are nagging concerns that remain largely unresolved today. Our historic inability as a profession to come to grips with such issues as terminal degree and certification requirements, not to mention who it is that we are and what it is that we ought to be doing, remain with us today. And they pose ever greater problems as we attempt to secure our niche in the new information environment.

As early as 1923, Charles C. Williamson challenged the profession to distinguish clearly and unambiguously between what he referred to as professional and non-professional tasks. His ambitious publication, *Training for Library Service*, is commonly referred to as the Williamson Report. Williamson's caveat was heeded and in 1927 the American Library Association (ALA) released another report entitled *A Proposed Classification and Compensation Plan for Library Positions*. This document marked the beginning of a long series of efforts to separate library tasks into two discrete streams: tasks deemed appropriate for "professionals" and tasks deemed appropriate for "nonprofessionals." The aim, of course, was to eliminate overlap and ensure that the two groups were not performing the same tasks.

In 1939, the ALA released a classification and pay plan for public libraries that advocated a three-tiered approach to staffing. The three classification levels the plan proposed were called professional, subprofessional, and clerical. By 1970, the ALA Council had approved something now known as the Library Education and Personnel Utilization document, generally referred to as LEPU. LEPU is still in effect today and was revised only a few years ago. This policy document proposes formal educational requirements for all library staff and three distinct levels of employment for support personnel: library associates, library technical assistants, and clerks.

Meanwhile, it has become clear that the task list approach to work assignments, at best an idealistic effort to create unambiguous staffing categories, has failed to gain any significant degree of acceptance at the grass roots level. The idea that one can draw up one list of tasks appropriate to support staff and another appropriate to librarians no longer works in a world that has changed dramatically from what it was only a short while ago.

Change as a Way of Life

The changes that have occurred over the past few decades have created a dramatic redistribution of the library workload. This redistribution, in turn, has created a distinctly new category of library employee whom we generally refer to as the paraprofessional. It is not uncommon today for paraprofessionals to perform many of the tasks that were once performed exclusively by librarians. And paraprofessionals in-

creasingly are assigned new tasks that have been necessitated by automation and change in the organizational structure of the workplace.

In my 1992 survey of the role, status, and working conditions of support staff, I found that few traditional or newly created tasks were still off limits to paraprofessionals. Today, paraprofessionals commonly administer such major functional areas within our libraries as circulation, interlibrary lending, acquisitions, and cataloging. They work more hours at our reference and information desks and have assumed greater responsibility in our systems departments as well.

Paraprofessionals have had a particularly dramatic impact upon technical services. In the historically brief period since the advent of OCLC some thirty years ago, they have come to dominate this workforce. For example, I found that 92 percent of the large research libraries in the United States assign copy cataloging responsibilities to paraprofessionals. Over 30 percent assign original cataloging responsibilities, including classification and subject analysis, as well. In a 1997 follow-up, Mohr and Schuneman demonstrate that the use of paraprofessionals in cataloging departments nationally has grown considerably since my earlier survey results were reported.

It seems likely that a similar increase in the utilization of support staff is going to occur in public services as well. For example, a growing movement toward tiered, or differentiated, reference and a past record of successful performance at reference and information desks is ensuring paraprofessionals a larger role in the direct provision of information to our patrons.

By now, most of us who work in libraries accept the need for, or at least the inevitability of, change, although we differ considerably on how rapid and how profound we believe that change should be. Some of us have adopted an evolutionary approach that presumes the basic soundness of our current policies, practices, and structures. Others actively encourage a radical rethinking of our basic assumptions and processes. This latter group—to which I belong—believes that if we are to remain viable players in an increasingly volatile information environment, we must create new services, new collections, new organizational structures, new information access tools, and new relationships, not only amongst ourselves, but with our allies and competitors alike.

The Library Staff of the Future

In the library of the next millennium we will retain and expand many of our traditional core activities, even as we create new services and new roles for all staff. It is clear that we will continue to select, purchase, organize, preserve and provide access to information resources in print and electronic formats. The rapid expansion of what someone has called "dematerialized" publications will require close attention as we access, filter, archive and attempt to preserve them.

In the new academic library world, increased emphasis will be placed upon teaching the fundamental structure of information, how to evaluate sources and resources critically, and the retrieval techniques necessary to navigate the considerably enlarged resource base we now make available.

Our libraries will be staffed by creative, flexible, increasingly specialized staff, individuals who are comfortable living with ambiguity and committed to experimentation, collaboration, and the accelerated development of new services. Less emphasis will be placed upon specific skills—what the old task lists emphasized—and more emphasis will be placed upon personal traits. Roy Tennant suggests that we would be well advised “to choose staff who can evolve as the needs of the organization change.” Here is Tennant’s list of traits that he feels are better indicators of success than, for example, the number of application skills an individual might list on a vita:

- The capacity to learn constantly and quickly
- Flexibility
- An innate skepticism
- A propensity to take risks
- An abiding public service perspective
- The capacity and desire to work independently

Increasingly, librarians will be preoccupied with the creation of new services and the design and development of the tools needed to access electronic and networked information effectively. These tools include web pages, workstations, and intuitive, even didactic, interfaces that highlight the structure of information and aid patrons in developing a clear conceptual model of the types of resources available.

We will need to learn to deal effectively with polarized public perceptions. In the short run, at least, we will see an “either-or” world composed of traditionalists who view web surfing as an adolescent waste of time, and radicals who view the traditional library as a marginalized warehouse filled with obsolete and increasingly irrelevant information.

Academic librarians, I believe, will abandon their traditionally passive public service stance and spend more time outside the library, working with faculty, researchers, and their computing center colleagues on web-based services and the integration of technology into the classroom. They also will design new instructional programs and teach more classes, often in collaboration with the faculty and the academic computing center staff. A major challenge will be the successful integration of computer technology and electronic resources with the traditional print formats.

As we have seen, tasks traditionally associated with librarians are being performed increasingly by support staff. This trend will only accelerate. As librarians turn their attention to the design, the evaluation, and the teaching of new resources and services, support staff will become increasingly accountable for service delivery, or in other words, for the day-to-day operation of the library. They will also assume complex tasks and fill key positions newly demanded by automation and the reconfiguration of library services.

New Roles for Support Staff

Although the position descriptions of support staff have changed radically in years past, it is only relatively recently that, as a profession, we have begun to take an interest in ensuring that their status, compensation, and preparation are in accord with the level of work they perform. Carla Stoffle, of the University of Arizona, believes that librarians must place an even higher value on the contribution of support staff, examining their ideas and suggestions on an equal basis with those of librarians. She feels that libraries should move away from staffs that perform narrow tasks within tightly defined job descriptions, and toward staffs empowered to make decisions about the work they do and how they do it in ways that, in her words, “result in delighted customers.”

Of course, we all know from experience that the existing library culture can be quite resistant to change. The norms and values that form the culture of a given library vary widely and create differing, often contradictory, perspectives. Change is resisted by some and welcomed by others. Given the new roles and responsibilities being assumed by paraprofessionals and support staff generally, staff training and continuing education take on an ever-greater importance. All staff have a right to expect to receive the preparation that will ensure their success in the new roles that they are being assigned.

It is critical, I think, that continuing education efforts for support staff receive explicit administrative support if they are to be successful. Continuing education must be expected and supported, and positive incentives—linking continuing education to merit and promotion, for example—must be offered. The key to developing effective continuing education programs is, in fact, top-down support, but it is also critical that support staff make their own needs known. They must take the initiative to seek out appropriate continuing education opportunities and justify their participation.

All support staff need to develop solid technological, management and communication skills. Appropriate involvement in consortia and professional associations at the local, regional and even the national level should be encouraged and funded. Developing excellent continuing education programs is an essential first step toward greater support staff involvement and contribution.

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LINCC Conference

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The rooms are too large and the screens are too difficult to see from the back of the room. We now plan our programs to be introductions to topics or overviews, and there have been fewer complaints from disappointed staff.

Minimize the administrative work by simplification.

At LINCC we have tried to simplify one or two things each year to reduce the amount of time spent on details. For example, we used to spend at least one Conference Committee meeting every year trying to think of a theme and catchy name for the conference, and then we had to buy or beg a graphic design to represent the new theme. Last year we came up with the theme *LINCC to Learning* and we liked it so much that from now on we will stick to with it and call each conference *LINCC to Learning [YEAR]*. We have found that the "theme" really didn't have much impact on program development and a consistent name/design will build name recognition over time.

A number of other details have been streamlined over time: we have eliminated printed name-tags (folks who want them can make up their own on site) and we give a default (vegetarian) meal to those who don't select a lunch choice to cut down on follow-up phone calls. We don't track or enforce attendance at individual sessions. We set up each room for 90 chairs and let people decide on the spot which session to attend. If a room is full, they can bring in another chair, stand or attend a different session. We do ask people to mark their workshop choices when they fill out the registration card so we can plan for numbers of handouts to copy—and we find that some speakers really want to know how many folks they will be addressing—but we stress that these numbers are only approximations.

Set up a template for the program brochure and then reuse it each year.

One of the significant overhead costs of the LINCC conference has been the design, preparation and printing of the program and registration card. This year we created a standard template which we hope to be able to reuse easily next year with minimal editing (facilitated by the decision to keep the same name/graphic identity as mentioned above). We also decided to photocopy the registration card in-house and saved those printing costs. Once we decided that black ink would work for this card, the decision was easy.

Investigate new technologies for advertising and registration.

This year for the first time we set up a link from the LINCC web site to the conference program and registration card, and then advertised the link on *LIBS-OR*. We are not yet able to take online registrations, but a significant number of folks have printed out the form from the web site and registered this way. It is our hope that eventually this will allow us to print and mail fewer registration forms.

Set up a sample budget using a spreadsheet program.

Last year we set up a sample budget for the conference with several variables allowing us to adjust each variable and see how the outcome affected the price of registration. We modeled attendance at 250 and 300 and then used several different registration fees to see how much revenue would be raised at each attendance level. We could then subtract different costs for food (also set up as a variable) and other expenses and thus determine the amount we could afford to spend on speakers. We have learned to plan for the smallest likely number of attendees in terms of revenue, adjust the attendance fee to cover basic expenses, and then manage speaker costs accordingly. ☐

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Finally, librarians and support staff alike will need to demonstrate greater flexibility if we are to compete successfully in today's volatile information environment. To achieve flexibility, we must maximize creative potential. And this we do by jettisoning the rigid hierarchical structures that defined our libraries in the past and replacing them with structures that create new opportunities for librarians and support staff to work together collaboratively and responsibly.

By working together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust librarians and support staff alike will

forge exciting new careers, build new models of information delivery, and ensure that the library continues to play a central role in the information environment of the next century. ☐

An earlier version of this article appeared as Support Staff in an Age of Change: The Challenges of Tomorrow in the January/February 1999 issue of Library Mosaics.