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The Wide World of Support Staff: Introduction

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Introduction



My favorite session at the annual Support Staff Division (SSD) conference is “A Day in the Life of a Library Assistant.” Making a connection with peers from other libraries that experience the same joys and struggles as I do is one reason. Another is that over the years it has made me aware of the variety of tasks that support staff performs.

Whatever the appellation used—tech, technical assistant, technician, paraprofessional, clerk, library assistant, or library aide—these days support staff may be called on to do more and more tasks, and even to perform at a higher level than in the past. Part of this trend may be dictated by reduced budgets or by geographical constraints; whatever the reason, I have seen support staff over and over rise to the expectations they are faced with.

This is nothing new though, as the movement for recognition and empowerment of library support staff has been around in various forms for decades. More recently, The Library Support Staff Interest Round Table (LSSIRT) of the ALA was instituted in 1992, and here in Oregon in 1998, it became an official OLA Division with voting rights on the OLA board. In 2005 The ALA Council established the Policy on Inclusion and Mutual Respect referring to library support staff/paraprofessionals, officially recognizing the value of support staff and encouraging them to actively participate in the association. We now have the ALA-APA Library Support Staff Certification (LSSC) program with required competency sets to provide paraprofessionals with the chance to attend a specific educational program tailored to their own position in the library world, and earn certification that demonstrates not just their competency and knowledge but their commitment to their chosen profession.

For me, working as a library paraprofessional is my profession. Having already earned a professional degree and worked in education, I have no interest in earning another degree. Being a library worker in a support role does not indicate lack of skill or ambition—I am consistently amazed at the talent I see represented among support staff, both my coworkers and the many I have met throughout the state in 17 years as a member of OLA. The support staff I know who are enrolled in or planning to enroll in the LSSC program will not supplant librarians; they will instead bring depth and advanced skills to their roles which can only enrich the libraries in which they work.

The best library I can imagine is one that treasures all its employees, regardless of the level at which they work; that empowers all the staff, librarian and support roles alike, to use all of themselves to best serve the public. Read on to see support staff at work doing amazing things and telling amazing stories.

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