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The Future of the Profession of Librarianship: Constructed or Ordained?

L'avenir de la profession en bibliothéconomie : déterminée ou prédestinée ?

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Abstract: This paper continues a series exploring the perceptions of students entering university about the roles of librarians as well as other occupations by examining the role of professionalism in perceptions of occupations. A model of professionalism developed by Elizabeth Graddy that focuses on the informational relationship between the professional service provider and those who receive the service, rather than on internal characteristics of the field of the service provider, is tested. While Graddy's focus on the relationships between occupations and the public, rather than on conditions within various professions, is reinforced as predicting an occupation's ability to meet the challenges of a changing society, the data from this study demonstrate more predictive variables than those identified by Graddy. A more complex view of the future of librarianship is emerging.

Résumé : Cet article constitue la suite d'une série d'articles explorant les perceptions qu'ont les étudiants qui entrent à l'université face aux rôles des bibliothécaires ainsi que face à d'autres professions par l'examen du rôle du professionnalisme dans les perceptions des métiers. Un modèle sur le professionnalisme, développé par Elizabeth Graddy, centré sur les relations informationnelles entre le fournisseur du service professionnel et ceux qui reçoivent le service, plutôt que sur les caractéristiques internes du domaine du fournisseur du service, est mis à l'épreuve. L'étude confirme l'importance de s'arrêter sur les relations entre les professions et le public plutôt que sur les conditions internes dans diverses professions, tel que le postule Graddy, en particulier pour prédire la capacité d'une profession à relever les défis posés par une société en changement. Par contre, les données de cette étude permettent d'identifier des variables plus prédictives que celles identifiées par Graddy. Il en ressort une vue plus complexe du futur de la bibliothéconomie.

Introduction

One would expect librarians and their institutions to thrive in the emerging information society where, it has been said, the value of knowledge workers is increasingly being recognized (Lavoie and Roy 1998). The quintessence of librarianship is its character as a classic information sector occupation, and its practitioners have long been identified as knowledge workers. The value of such professions would only be expected to rise because "no other commodity [as information] is so intimately tied to ideas of freedom and democracy" and has been granted as privileged a status (in national constitutions and international human rights documents) within society as information (Winseck 2002).

However, when important works from other fields that discuss the new information environment make no reference to either library science literature or librarians (as examples: Tapscott et al. 2000; Thorp et al. 1998), the role of libraries and librarians as key players in these developments is cast in doubt.

Empirical evidence appears to allay concern over the future of libraries to some extent. A 1998 survey of 1271 respondents conducted by the Canadian Library Association² found that usage of public libraries in Canada had gone up from 1991.³ However, despite the clear evidence that librarianship and library science have much to contribute to the emerging practices and theoretical enquiries involving concepts like knowledge management (Davenport and Cronin 2000), there is evidence emerging that the public may increasingly view *librarians* as isolated from, rather than integrated into, the emerging dominant information culture (Estabrook 1997; Harris and Wilkinson 2001; Harris and Wilkinson 2002a).

Literature review and conceptual framework

Martin (1998) noted that, even though the information workforce continues to grow, and while opportunities are better in occupations involving non-routine information work, "growth is strongest among occupations that produce information" (p. 1064). He pointed out that information workers categorized as "distributors," including "public information disseminators" such as librarians and archivists, are expected to experience a slowdown in opportunities as technological change results in increasing routinization of their work. On the other hand, "producers," including

“private information service providers,” such as lawyers,⁴ and “science and technical workers,” such as scientists, mathematicians, systems analysts, and engineers, are expected to find increasing opportunities as technology permits them to apply non-routinized skills.

In previous work, these researchers have presented evidence corroborating some of Martin’s speculations. In 1998, Harris and Marshall reported that professional librarians are becoming “a more compressed group” in Canadian libraries as certain tasks become increasingly routinized and are transferred from the higher-paid professionals to the lower-paid para-professionals. In Harris and Wilkinson (2002a), the authors demonstrate, as part of this same study, that of 13 occupations under study, students just beginning university harbour the greatest misconceptions about librarianship. In Harris and Wilkinson (2001) and Harris and Wilkinson (2002b), the authors have explored the students’ pessimism over the future of librarianship in the context of gender and identity politics. However, the students studied were enthusiastic about the future of physiotherapy, which is at least as female-dominated as librarianship, if not more so. In further work, Wilkinson and Harris (2002) are exploring the effect of the location of work predominantly in the public or private sector as an element of the explanation of the students’ unflattering views on the future of librarianship. In this paper, the researchers explore the relationship between professionalism and the students’ perceptions of the future of librarianship.

Given that the value of knowledge workers is increasingly recognized in society (Lavoie and Roy 1998) and given that all professionals are, by definition, knowledge workers (since those laying claim to professional status have always depended upon their identification with a unique body of knowledge) (Johnson 1972), it would seem to follow that those occupations showing greater degrees of professionalism will be increasingly valued in society. Thus the debate about professionalism in librarianship, which is certainly not new (Harris 1992, 1), continues to be highly relevant. As Kelly points out,

[t]he words [profession, professional, professionalism—the professional family of words] have an almost incantatory function, combined with the special utility of so many meanings that listeners or readers can take what they want from them, ranging roughly from concepts of business acumen to high moral principle to proficiency and lofty standards of quality. And they have one other quality that is invaluable: favourable res-

onance. In whatever mode of meaning, they generate agreeable vibrations or responses from the reader or listener. (Kelly 1994, 9)

In keeping with the emphasis on the identification of a profession with a unique body of knowledge, traditional statements of the nature of professionalism have focused on the information base held by the "professional," rather than the communication of that information to those whom the profession serves. For example, among four sources of claims to professional status identified by Tancred is the following:

... one could suggest a professional definition which would include *all those with the relevant level of tertiary education*, even if they have never been members of a professional association. (Tancred 1999, 37, emphasis in original)⁵

It has been established, however, that focusing purely on the body of specialized knowledge held by the occupation is not reliably useful in discriminating between those groups traditionally accorded professional status and those less commonly recognized as professionals (Harris 1992, 5 ff.).

In 1991, Elizabeth Graddy posited a theory of professionalism that connects the likelihood of occupational regulation through law with the information relationship between the professional service provider and the user of that service. She developed her argument in the context of an empirical examination of the increasing American state regulation, between 1968 and 1980, of geologists, landscape architects, physician assistants, psychologists, and librarians. All five groups of professionals had been regulated in some places, at least, in the United States during the period of her study. She argued that

[i]nformation asymmetry exists between most service providers and consumers. Whether it is of sufficient importance to generate market failure depends on the information search costs for consumers and the consequences of error in the selection of providers. In occupations with high search costs, that is those with large variation in service quality, most skill required to evaluate the service, and little contact between consumers and practitioners, consumers may be unable to determine the level or quality of services needed, resulting in an oversupply of high- or low-quality services ... for occupations in which information asymmetry is severe and has important consequences, intervention [through legal regulation] is justified. The appropriate regulation depends on the ability of consumers to evaluate the service with information and the conse-

quences of error in that evaluation. (Graddy 1991, 678)

Graddy found that librarians had the least increase in state regulation during the period of her study. She developed an argument that led her to hypothesize that the degree of information asymmetry between the public and those in a given occupation can predict the social value placed on that occupation. In Graddy's terms, occupations perceived to have high search costs, and therefore, the most claim to high social value, will be those perceived by the public to require the most skill to evaluate the service being given and also perceived by the public to have largest variation in service quality.

In this article, the authors discuss the findings from their recent empirical study looking at student perceptions of a dozen professions, including librarianship, in terms of the approach to questions of professionalism postulated by Graddy.

Method

The empirical data presented herein is based upon the responses of 2047 students attending the 1999 summer academic orientation program at a large Canadian university whose answers were gathered in the authors' study of "Career opportunities: 2000 and beyond." Each of the students completed one of eight, randomly assigned, distinct questionnaires, with no fewer than 250 students completing each questionnaire.⁶ First year university students were chosen as the focus of this study because they are particularly motivated and interested in career futures. Such students, as opposed to those further along in the university education, also share a relatively common educational preparation from high school when considering questions of future careers. On the other hand, since it was not longitudinal in nature, this study does not investigate what occupations the students being studied ultimately pursued, although it did ask what occupations the students were currently planning to pursue.⁷

Each instrument explored different aspects of comparisons between 12 different occupations: lawyer, reporter/news correspondent, Internet researcher, paralegal, animator, systems analyst, librarian, database administrator, announcer/newscaster, physical therapist, computer engineer, and medical records technician. Each of these fields, with the single exception of the Internet researcher, is one included in Martin (1998) as

an information sector occupation. The eleven were chosen to represent occupations traditionally thought of as information fields: librarian and reporter or news correspondent, for example. Others were included particularly because they have been traditionally associated predominantly with male workers, such as computer engineers or lawyers whereas others have been more familiarly associated with female workers, such as medical records technicians, or physical therapists. Both lawyers and paralegals were included, in part to provide a contrast between professional and non-professional occupations in the study. Occupations not commonly associated with the notion of information professions were included, such as animators, lawyers, and computer engineers. These eleven occupations also represent all categories of the range of information sector workers (see Martin 1998).

The twelfth occupation studied, "Internet researcher," was first encountered by the authors on the web site of Syracuse University's School of Information Studies in 1999. It has no counterpart in Martin (1998), in American or Canadian federal job classifications, or Ontario government data. Throughout this study, where elaboration was given of "Internet researcher" in the survey instruments administered to the students, exactly the same characteristics and descriptions were given for Internet researcher as for librarian.

The first four questionnaires included items concerning the work roles, future employment prospects, educational requirements, status, and starting salaries of the 12 "information" occupations. Data about 11 of these (not Internet researcher, as mentioned) were available from either Ontario government sources, American, or Canadian federal government sources, or some combination of the three.⁸

In addition, in two of these four questionnaires, certain questions asked for the students' perceptions of the occupation of mechanical engineer, which deliberately chosen for contrast because it is not included by Martin (1998) as an information sector occupation—but information about it is available from Ontario and Canadian and American federal government sources, as well as from the professional association in Ontario which is responsible for its self-regulation, the Professional Engineers of Ontario.

The last four questionnaires, (5 through 8), focused more closely on the

respondents' perceptions of the characteristics of a subset of these occupations: lawyers, journalists, Internet researchers, librarians, physical therapists, and mechanical engineers. The smaller subset of occupations being surveyed permitted the researchers to obtain deeper insights into the students' perceptions of this group of professions while still keeping the instruments comprehensible and clear to the subjects.

The data obtained through all eight of the questionnaires was analysed using the statistical package SPSS.

Because of the complexity of the administration of the eight questionnaires, administration was limited to one university site. However, questionnaires were distributed during campus orientation visits scheduled over several weeks that included students registered in every program and the responses include the perspectives of the full range of university-bound high school graduates. During the orientation day, an option was given to students to participate in this research study: for those who chose not to participate, reading material was supplied to occupy them for the maximum of 20 minutes while their fellow students completed one of the questionnaires.⁹ Questionnaires were randomly assigned to orientation groups on a given day. The results confirm that the student respondents were a homogenous group, exhibiting no significant differences between groups completing each questionnaire in terms of age ($M=18.69$ years, $SD+1.43$), distribution by sex (60% women, 40% men), or intended program of study.

Initial results

As mentioned in the introduction, the students' perceptions of librarianship were often less than flattering: of the 12 occupations surveyed, the students thought librarianship was the only one shrinking¹⁰ (see Figure 1); they anticipated the lowest starting salaries for librarians amongst the 12 information occupations surveyed;¹¹ librarianship was the one occupational instance in which the students vastly underestimated the actual educational requirements for entry;¹² and, finally, the students assigned their lowest prestige rating to librarian. The students' highest prestige rankings went to lawyer and computer engineer, followed by physical therapist.¹³

Figure 1: Projections of the Growth Potential of Occupations

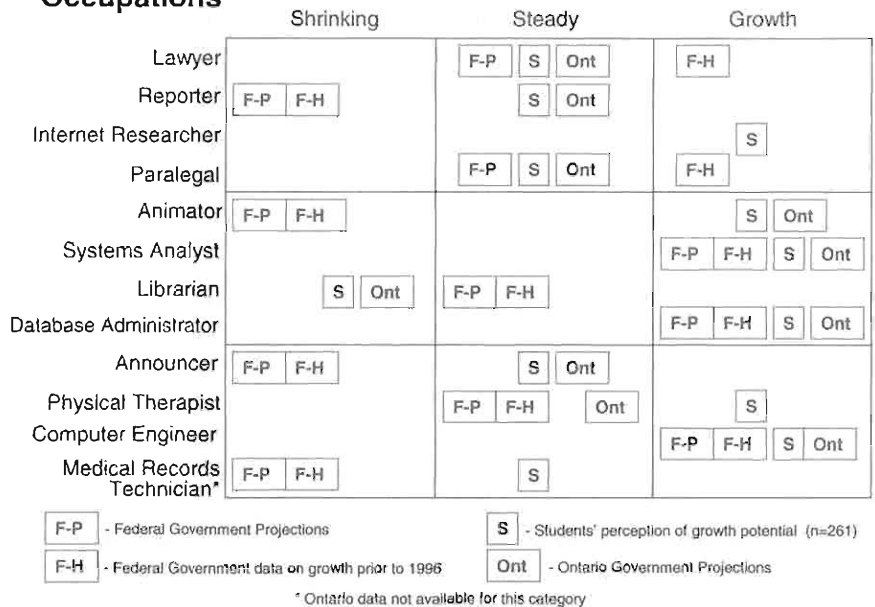
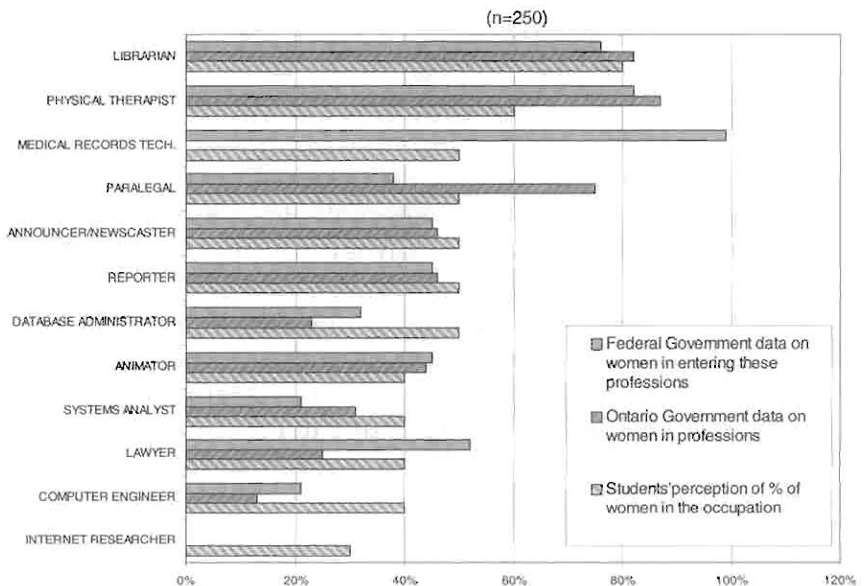


Figure 2: The Presence of Women in Various Occupations



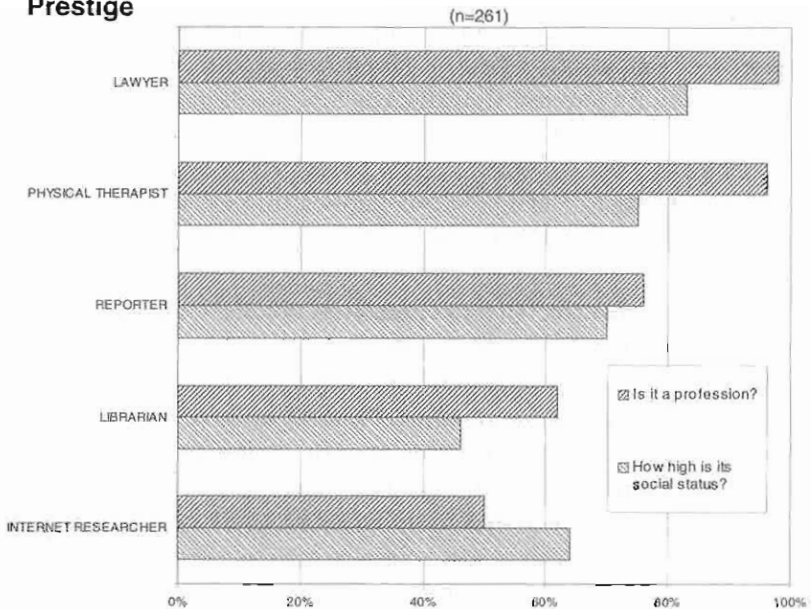
It might be tempting to attribute the generally low rankings accorded to librarians in this study to the female-dominated nature of the field. In fact, medical records technician actually tops the federal list of women-dominated entrance into these occupations—at 99% women Canada-wide—followed by physical therapists at 82% but librarians are third, at 76% (see Figure 2). These two fields received better recognition than librarianship, but the students actually perceived librarianship to be the most female-dominated of all the occupations studied, including medical records technicians and physical therapists.¹⁴

The explanation that the students perceived librarianship to be the most female-dominated field¹⁵ may not, alone, be enough to fully explain the perceptions of librarianship held by the students. Although the students' perceptions of an occupation's status did tend to be inversely related to their perceptions of the number of women in the field, the students were not consistent in this thinking. They also indicated that they thought overwhelmingly that female-dominated physical therapy was a profession with high status (very closely trailing law and computer engineering, which they accurately perceived to be male-dominated). Both law and physical therapy were both seen by virtually all the students (98%) to be professions, although the students thought that physical therapy was the second most female-dominated of the 12 occupations they examined. In fact, the proportion of women practitioners of physical therapy in Ontario is higher than the proportion of women practicing in any other field studied (87%) whereas, in law, it is 25%.

Thus, an explanation of the students' perceptions of professions which focuses on gender composition must also explain the fact that the students' perceptions of physical therapy, for example, were more positive than those of librarianship even though both are, in fact, heavily female-dominated.

A further explanation for the unfavourable perception that the students had of librarianship must therefore be sought. One of the classic claims to professional status is obviously "the profession's *own definition of its membership* which acknowledges that a profession, if fully developed, has the legal right to control those who enter and are acknowledged as professionals" (Tancred 1999, 36, emphasis in original).

Figure 3: Students' Perceptions of Professionalism and Prestige



Of the 12 occupations in this study discussed so far, those of lawyer and physical therapist are the only ones that are legally self-regulating in Ontario (respectively by the *Law Society Act* and the *Regulated Health Professions Act*). As discussed earlier, for some parts of this study, data was gathered from the students about their attitudes toward a thirteenth occupation, that of mechanical engineer. This profession is also legally self-regulating in Ontario (under the *Professional Engineers Act*). On the other hand, journalists or reporters and librarians in Ontario, as in the rest of Canada, are subject only to laws of general application and are not specifically occupationally regulated.

In the five occupations of physical therapy, law, librarianship, journalism (reporting), and Internet researching, physical therapy and law maintained a first- and second-place dominance in terms of the students' perceptions of professionalism and social status (see Figure 3). This order also parallels the division between these two occupations (law and physical therapy) as self-governing in Ontario, and the other three as not. The percentage of students viewing the occupation of reporter/news correspondent as a profession was about mid-range among the 12 occupations in this part of the study (76%), with librarianship at 62%, and Internet researcher well at the bottom (at 50%).

Thus it would seem that whether or not an occupation has self-regulatory status in law may provide at least a partial explanation for the public's perception of it. However, an interesting apparent anomaly in the findings of this study with respect to the students' perceptions of librarianship and the "new" calling of Internet researcher prompts further exploration for an explanation of the students' perceptions of the occupations in this study: although the students accorded librarianship their lowest prestige rating, almost two-thirds of the students (62%) thought it was a profession—more students than considered Internet researcher to be a profession (see Figure 3).

Initial discussion

These problems in explaining the data led the researchers to consider the propositions put forward by Graddy as possibly providing an explanation for their findings, in the same way that Graddy was able to use her propositions to explain her own data. Graddy made three findings that appeared to demonstrate to her satisfaction why librarians had the least increase in state regulation during the period of her study:

1. Librarians (as well as geologists and physician assistants) "are hired almost exclusively by institutional clients," which, she claimed, "provides an indicator of the likelihood of consumer participation in this political process" of regulating occupations (Graddy 1991, 688);
2. Librarians (again like geologists) have no professional competitors—that is, they do not resist a "license" being given to others for services that they already perform, or would like to perform (Graddy 1991, 679);
and
3. There is no significant information asymmetry (between librarians and their clients) and thus no consumer or public interest rationale for regulation (Graddy 1991, 685).

Graddy does not appear to specifically present evidence in support of her conclusion that there is no significant information asymmetry between librarians and their clients. However, she developed an elaborate five-point index for the seriousness of the impact on the public of the five professions she studied. On this scale, which included such elements as the degree of possible harm through personal or property injury, the remediability of any harm caused, and the degree of discretion exercised,

Graddy assigned librarians her lowest score: 0 (Graddy 1991, 689)! This finding then bolstered her conclusion that, of the five groups in her study (geologists, landscape architects, physician assistants, psychologists, and librarians) “[a]rguments for regulating librarians are the least compelling” (Graddy 1991, 685).

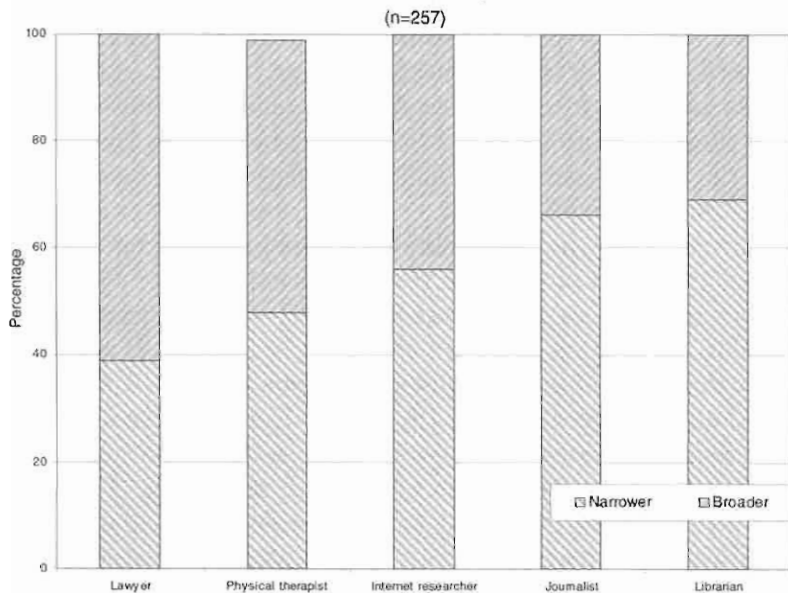
Graddy's concept that those perceived to require the most skill in evaluation will claim a greater share of the public's regard seems to be borne out in this study in terms of the students' views of the judgement required to practice each calling, at least to the extent that the students clearly awarded both status and professional recognition to those occupations which they most viewed as requiring judgement. One of the questions in this study asked the students to compare two descriptions of five different occupations, in each case one narrower and one broader. These definitions are attached as Appendix A. The students' views of the various occupational definitions are shown in Figure 4. In the case of the lawyer, over 50% of the students chose the broader description of the occupation as the best, endorsing a view of the lawyer as counsellor rather than simply “hired gun” (see also Wilkinson et al., 1996). Similarly, over half the students chose the broader view of the physical therapist, as an independent health professional rather than as one member of a health team under the direction of a doctor.

While more students chose the broader description of both Internet researcher and journalist than chose the broader description for librarians, in each of these three cases, over half the students selected the narrower description of the occupation, the one without any element of judgement.

The fact that by far the largest proportion of students chose the broader description of the lawyer's role and then nearly the same proportion chose the broader description of the physical therapist's role mirrors the first- and second-place dominance of these two occupations in terms of the students' perceptions of professionalism and social status (see again Figure 3). As mentioned above, this finding with respect of law and physical therapy also parallels the separation between these two occupations as self-governing in Ontario, and the other three traditional occupations.

Of these three whose role the students perceived narrowly, however, the reporter's role was more often perceived broadly than was the librarian's—and, reporters also did better than librarians in terms of students'

Figure 4: Students' Views of the Definition of Various Occupations



perceptions of professionalism and social status. On the other hand, the Internet researcher occupation was given a broader ambit of activity by more students than either journalism or librarianship, though still under half preferred the broad definition to the narrow, while the occupation of Internet researcher was still perceived least often as a profession and had a lower social status than reporting. This latter finding is particularly interesting because the occupational descriptions given for the Internet researcher and the librarian were exactly functionally equivalent (see Appendix A). Figure 4 graphically illustrates the differences in the students' perceptions of the roles of librarians and Internet researchers, given these two identical choices.

In seeking to explain these differences, the researchers again turned to Graddy's work for further explanation. Graddy appears to identify the level of contact between consumers and practitioners as a variable which can potentially be used to discriminate between occupations with high social value and those with lower value.

Further results

In the present study, one of the instruments asked the students a series of questions about the types of skills they thought were required in each of the six occupations of lawyer, physical therapist, mechanical engineer, reporter, librarian, and Internet researcher. The following skills were canvassed for all six: nurturing and reassuring communication, compassion and empathy, rapport and trust building, persuading, mediating, and finally, advising and counselling. In each case, the students were given the choice of selecting the skill as absolutely essential, preferred, helpful if present, unnecessary or "detracts from practice if present." Figures 5–10 show the percentages of students identifying each of these skills as either essential or preferred for each of the six occupations. It is striking that although almost all the students found compassion and empathy to be prime skills for physical therapy (Figure 6), that skill is not identified uniformly with all those occupations which the students saw most strongly as professions or worthy of high social status or prestige (Figure 3). Conversely, the skills of persuading and mediating, while highly valued in lawyers by the students, were not thought particularly necessary to the highly regarded practice of physical therapy (Figures 3, 8, and 9). Figure 10 indicates that the skill of advising and counselling was viewed by the students as a prime requirement, not only for the highly respected occupations of physical therapy and law, but also for librarianship (less so for internet researchers and only by a few for journalism) (see also Figure 3). The students' perceptions of the necessity of nurturing and reassuring communication in each of the occupations mirrors their views of the level of professionalism involved in the occupation, except that considerably more skill in nurturing is perceived to be required more for physical therapists than for lawyers (Figures 3 and 5). On the other hand, Figure 7, showing the level of skill in rapport and trust building required in each occupation, more or less exactly mirrors the students' perceptions of the social status to be accorded to each occupation: physical therapy and law quite exceed the other occupations in the level of trust-building required, as they do in occupational prestige (although physical therapy is highest in the former and law in the latter). Reporters, meanwhile, lie in the middle; Internet researchers and librarians bring up the rear, although in both cases, Internet researcher edges ahead of librarian (Figure 3). It therefore seems that the public's perception of the need for rapport and trust with the public in an occupation may be most closely linked to the public's perception of the occupation's professionalism and public status (Figures 7 and 3), which seems consis-

rent with Graddy's thesis (although perhaps an even better indicator than those which she proposed).

Figure 5: Students' Views of the Need for Nurturing and Reassuring Communication

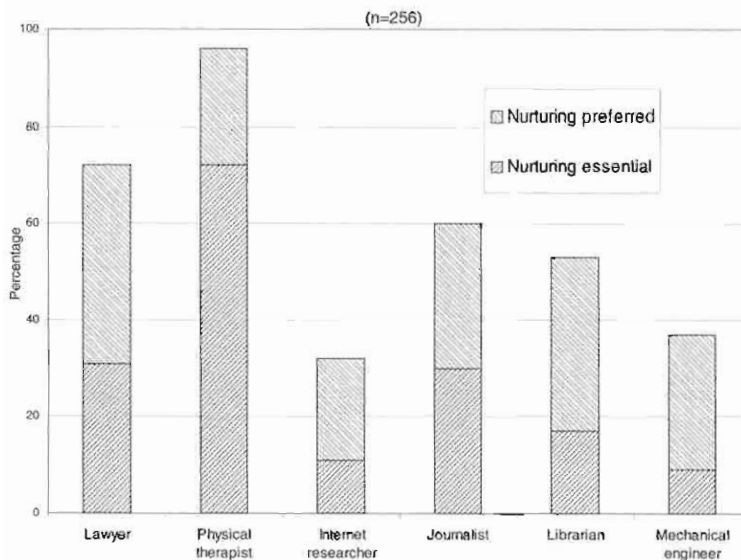


Figure 6: Students' Views of the Need for Compassion and Empathy

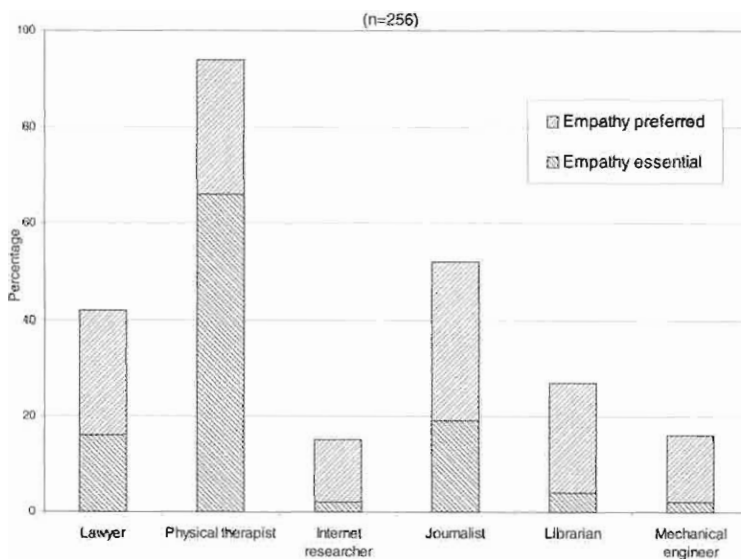


Figure 7: Students' Views of the Need for Rapport and Trust Building

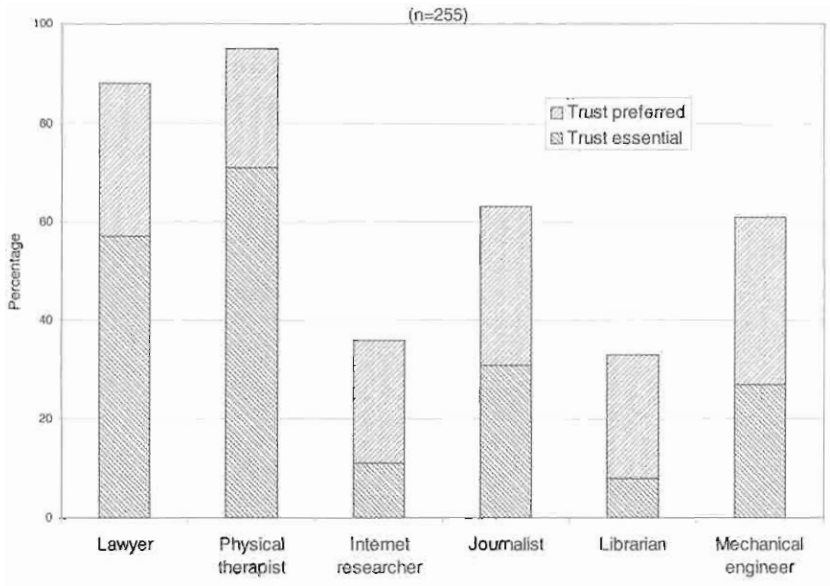


Figure 8: Students' Views of the Need for Persuading

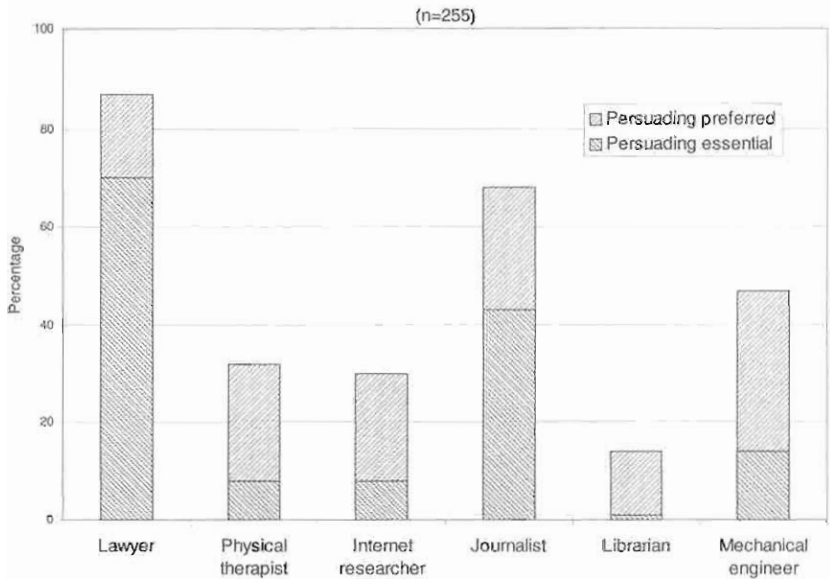
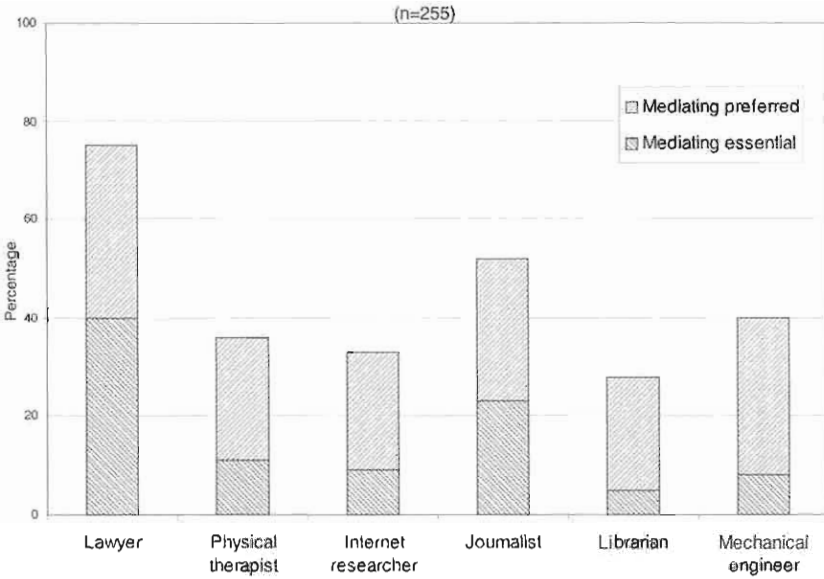
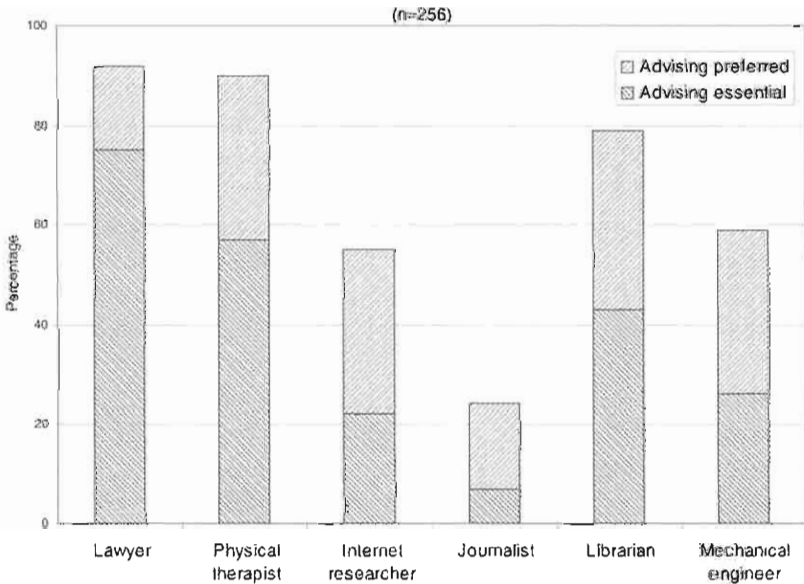
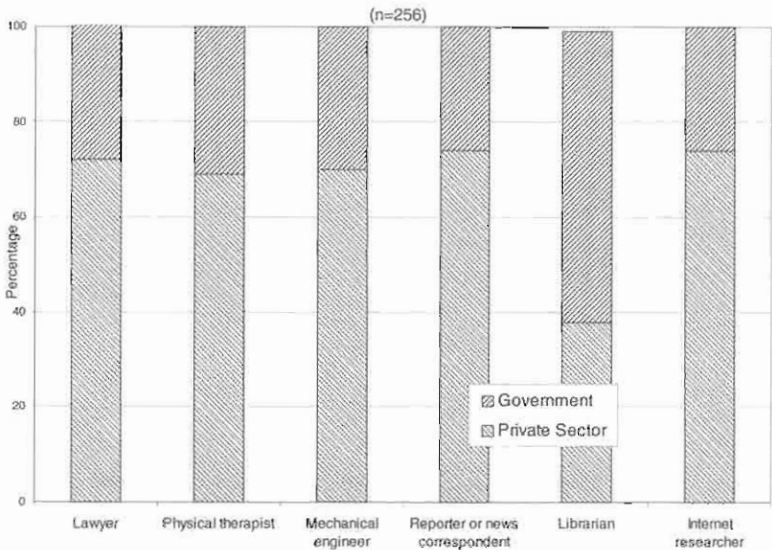


Figure 9: Students' Views of the Need for Mediating**Figure 10: Students' Views of the Need for Advising and Counseling**

Graddy, as discussed, also argues that the fact that librarians (and geologists and physicians' assistants) are hired by institutional clients rather than by individuals makes them less likely to be highly valued in a democratic society.

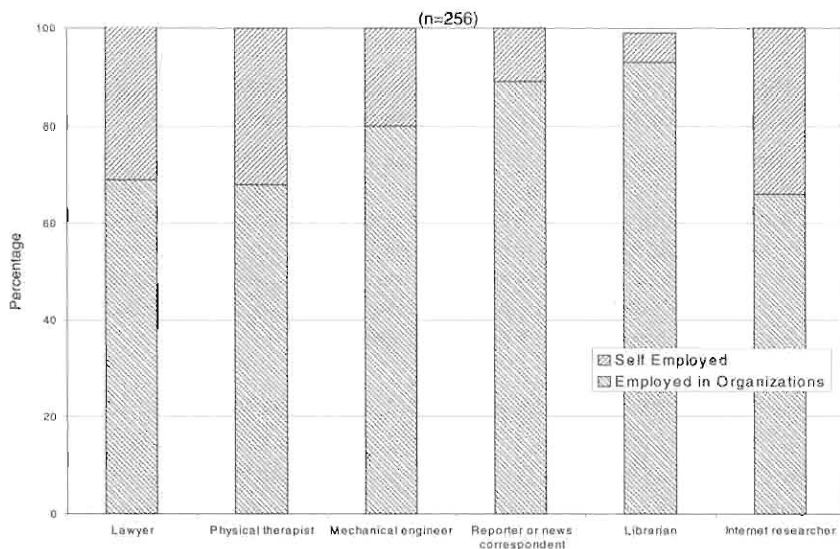
Figure 11: Students' Perceptions of the Proportions of Private and Public Sector Employment in Various Careers



In the present study the students were asked to estimate, for all people who work in each occupation, the percentage: self-employed, employed in private sector organizations, and employed in government. The students perceived librarians to be far more often employed in the government sector (61%) than they did any of those working in the other eleven occupations (the next nearest was the mean percentage of medical records technicians, thought to be 51.58% employed in the public sector). The authors have argued elsewhere that this perception of librarianship as being primarily located in the public sector (see Figure 11), more than any of the other five fields examined in this regard, may be responsible, at least in part, for the low estimation in which librarianship seems to have been held by the students participating in the study (Harris and Wilkinson 2001). The data would equally be consistent with Graddy's notion that those hired by institutional clients rather than by individuals are less likely to be highly valued in a democratic society (see Figure 12 which shows that the students perceived librarians as to be the least likely of the six professionals to be self-employed). Neither analy-

sis, however, can explain adequately why Internet researchers, although perceived by the students to be less government-centred and more institutionally employed, are nonetheless perceived as less professional than librarians (see again Figure 3).

Figure 12: Students' Perceptions of Self-employment and Organizational Employment in Various Careers



Moreover, while it may be the case that landscape architects and psychologists are hired by individuals (as Graddy claimed), this factor as a distinguishing one predicting government regulation of occupations and, related to this, their social importance, would seem to be challenged by the cases of both professional engineers and lawyers, where self-employed status is becoming less and less frequent, without any apparent diminution in professional regard. As David Williams recounts:

[t]he decade of the 1940's was as much a watershed for the legal profession as it was for every other aspect of Canadian society. Before 1939, the Depression had laid a heavy hand on commercial activity, such as it was, and Canada was still undergoing the transition from an essentially agrarian economy to an industrial one ... Government regulation ... has [since] steadily become more entrenched. For lawyers, the change was profound.... law firms grouped themselves into specialized pens – the real estate section, the trust section, the securities group.... (Williams 1995, 5)

Recent data available from the self-governing association of Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO) indicates that probably fewer than 10% of Ontario's professional engineers are self-employed (Professional Engineers Ontario 11).

Further discussion

It has been suggested that

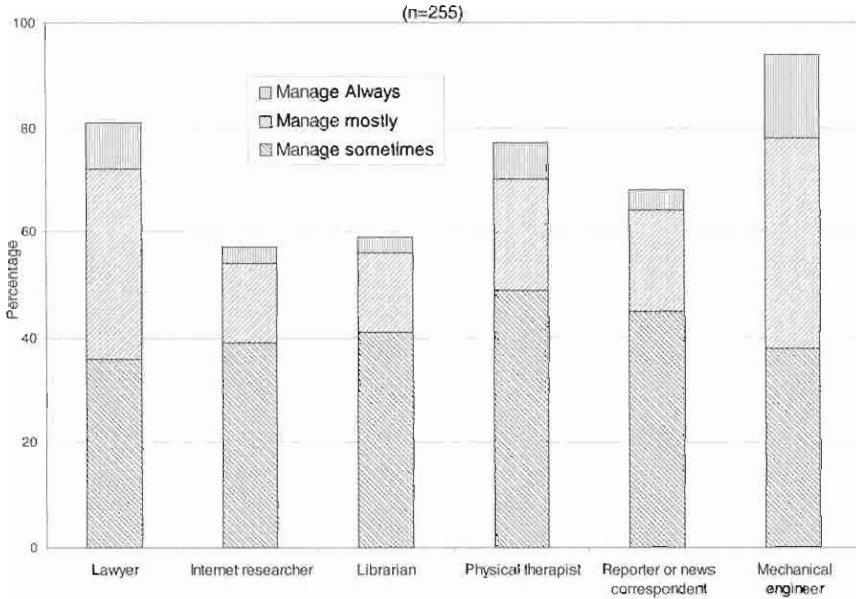
[l]ibrarians have traditionally cast the public sector/ private sector debate as one concerning where the cost of service delivery will fall.

Librarians who have seen the information paradigm as the best guide to the future ... have been aggressively suggesting that in the new age "information brokers" or "free lance librarians" will earn their livelihood by selling information to the highest bidder ... many, perhaps most, members of the library profession have seen it in quite different terms ... that librarians must resist (or at least cautiously approach) the commodification of information. (Harris et al 1998, 44)

If, however, at least in so far as the prestige to be according information occupations is concerned, there is the beginning of an explanation in Graddy's notion that it is the difference between self-employment and institutional employment which matters—rather than the difference between public and private sector employment—then perhaps the question of the commodification of information may be an irrelevant debate in librarianship.

Perhaps Graddy's notion that the public's perception of the dominant organizational structure for the performance of a particular occupation as being related to its perceived level of professionalism is better expressed in terms of the level of managerial activity people in various occupations are perceived to have, rather than, as Graddy herself hypothesized, in terms of the nature of their employment. One of the questions in this study asked the students the extent to which they believed people in various occupations managed other staff. As can be seen in Figure 13, the pattern of the students' responses to this question (rather than the pattern of their responses to the questions involving locus of employment discussed above in relation to Figures 11 and 12) exactly mirrors the extent to which they perceived the various occupations as professions in Figure 3.

Figure 13: The Extent to Which Those in Various Occupations are Perceived to Manage Other Staff

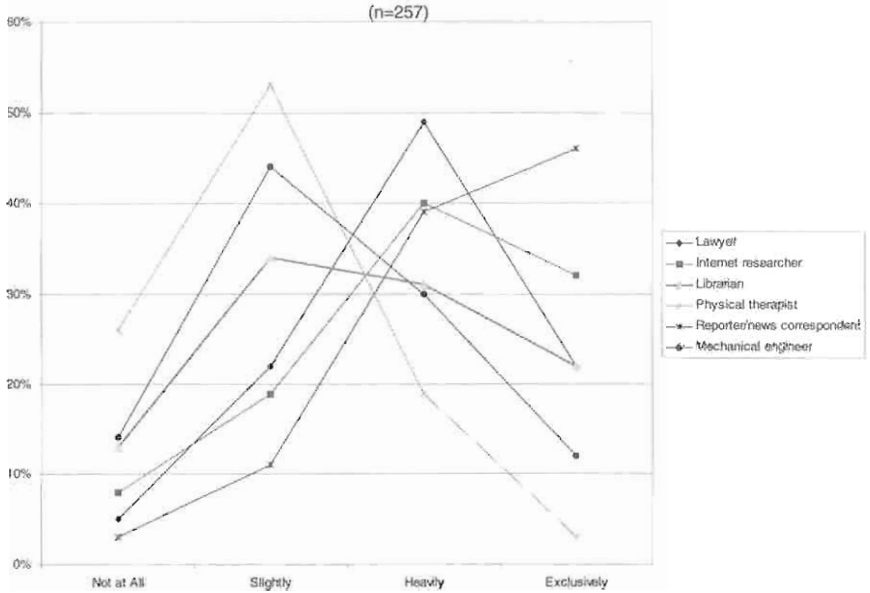


Conclusion

One possible reason for students' perception of the issue of professionalism as separate from the question of social status brings this paper back full circle to the contradiction between librarianship's view of its own potential and the apparent lack of recognition of this outside the occupation itself. It is true that there are internal challenges to be faced within librarianship. Harris, Hannah, and Harris identify the public/private sector debate as key:¹⁶ "the most intensely contested aspect of the post-industrial metaphor as understood by librarians" (Harris et al. 1998, 44). However, other occupations, such as law, face equally daunting internal issues:

Two different reactions or stories, one accepting, one critical, have emerged as explanations of these changes in the contemporary legal profession ... [One] story is of a profession being renovated and improved ... A different, more critical account of changes in the legal profession is a story told with some emotion about a decline in values ...

Figure 14: The Degree to which Students Perceive those in Various Careers Produce, Distribute, or Manage Information



These two stories or reactions are deeply contradictory accounts of the legal profession. They share common ground in two respects. First they agree that the legal profession *is* undergoing rapid transformation ... Second both stories claim to be about professional values. (Kelly 1994, 2-3)

Figure 14 illustrates, for the six occupations discussed in this paper, the students' responses when asked, using a Likert scale, whether each of the 13 occupations in the study were involved in the "production, distribution, or manipulation of information." Perhaps the most important observation in this figure is that the students were most divided over the role of the librarian—about equal numbers saying librarians were slightly and heavily involved in the "production, distribution, or manipulation of information"—and only slightly fewer saying exclusively so involved. By contrast, over three-quarters of the students were sure physical therapists had either no role or only a slight one in this area, while almost the same proportions were sure lawyers had an exclusive or heavy role in the "production, distribution, or manipulation of information." A greater number of students were more sure that both reporters and Internet researchers had a heavy or exclusive involvement in these information processes than were sure that librarians had those roles. Thus, it appears

clear that while many students were willing to accord librarians professional status, they are unclear what the role of the librarian is—and therefore accorded librarians less social prestige.¹⁷

From the responses of the students in this study, the occupation of lawyer, which even at present is less male-dominated than computer engineering or systems analysis, appeared at the pinnacle of the students' estimation. In terms of gender distribution, law is the most rapidly changing occupation studied.¹⁸ As may be seen by referring back to Figure 2, the federal government data on the number of women entering law is rapidly outstripping the percentage of women currently in the Ontario legal profession—25%. While Bryna Bogoch has already documented the fact that the reactions in Israeli courtrooms to female judges and lawyers are markedly different and inferior to the courtrooms' reactions to male judges and lawyers (Bogoch 1999), such findings may not spell a rapid decline in the prestige or professionalism of law in the eyes of the public. Certainly, there is no clear evidence in this study of such a decline.

Moreover, the data from this study may be taken as demonstrating that the gender composition of the field is not necessarily determinative of its future. While the female-dominated nature of librarianship is clearly perceived by the public, as evidenced by the students in this study, it may not be the sole determinant of its future.

Elizabeth Graddy's propositions focus on the informational relationship between the professional service provider and those who receive the service, rather than on internal characteristics of the field of the service provider. This data reinforces her focus on the relationships between occupations and the public, rather than on conditions within various professions, as the best predictors of an occupation's ability to meet the challenges of a changing society. For example, in this study, the more broadly defined the service provider's role is thought to be, the more prestigious and professional that service provider is thought to be—which reinforces Graddy's notion that perceived information asymmetry enhances the value of the professional in the eyes of the public. Indeed, perhaps not altogether surprisingly, this study demonstrates that a perceived advising and counselling role seems to be the public's hallmark of professionalism.

However, these data also challenge the specific elements of the relationship between occupations and their publics, like the imprimatur of legal self-governance, or self-employment versus organizational employment, that Graddy has put forward as being evidence of an occupation's social value. Instead, the data from this study indicate that more predictive variables for occupational prestige than those identified by Graddy include those directly related to a clear communication of roles between service provider and the public. For example, perceived trust and rapport-building skills appear to be key to the prestige of a professional in the eyes of the public, not just the perception of the information transmission of advice and counselling. On the other hand, compassion, empathy, nurturing, and reassuring, by themselves, are not necessary to the development of a perception of professionalism or to occupational prestige.

It may be the most important finding of this study that, while many students were willing to accord librarians professional status, they are unclear what the role of the librarian is. They are roughly evenly divided between opining that librarians are involved in the production, distribution, or management of information, and that they are not involved. This lack of clarity is singular among the occupations studied. This may be the reason that the respondents accorded librarians so little social prestige.¹⁹

These results indicate that in the future an outward focus, clear communication of roles, and a deliberate effort to overcome isolation may be more important to occupational survival for librarianship (let alone for survival of a professional identity), than clarifying internal competing ideologies and attitudes. Building on a historical reputation for professionalism, ongoing efforts to demonstrate to the public the wide involvement of librarians in the distribution and management of information—and thus create a clear image of the role of the librarian in the information economy—appear to be key.

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the information-seeking behaviour of abused women, and the restructuring of libraries as a result of technological change.

Notes

- 1 The authors are grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous support (grant no. 410-95-0185). They are grateful for the research assistance on this paper provided by Marcella Smit and Jonathan Mesiano-Crookston, as well as for editorial suggestions made by the reviewers. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Association for Information Science conference in Quebec City in May 2001 as "Beyond Librarianship: Are Librarians Becoming Isolated in the New Information Age?"
- 2 On behalf of a consortium of libraries across Canada, the National Library of Canada, Industry Canada, the Association pour l'avancement des sciences et techniques de la documentation (ASTED) and the Canadian Library Association itself.
- 3 Respondents had visited libraries an average of 7.7 times in last year surveyed, up from an earlier 1991 *Reading in Canada* study (6.4 times) (Canadian Library Association 1998).
- 4 As pointed out by Harris and Wilkinson (2002a), the Canadian federal government projections for law into the twenty-first century are not as rosy as the future predicted by Martin.
- 5 Tancred's empirical work explores the roles of architects, engineers, and bankers. She ultimately prefers yet another definition as the most inclusive of women: "The State, through its official statistics, formulates a definition of all professions" (36).
- 6 Usable responses varied between 247 on Questionnaire 6, and 262 on Questionnaire 2.
- 7 Not one student indicated that she or he intended to pursue librarianship as a career.
- 8 For more information about how the different professions were reported by the different levels of government, please see Harris and Wilkinson 2002a, 80.
- 9 The same article was distributed to those who participated in the research, after they had completed the questionnaire. In addition, the researchers made available to any of the students an optional workshop later in the orientation day that presented the projections of the various levels of government about each of these occupations.
- 10 In fact, although this perception of future shrinkage was consistent with the Ontario government projections for librarianship, the federal projections were more optimistic (predicting a steady state). On the other hand, the federal government has forecasted a shrinking market for reporters, animators, announcers, and medical records technicians, and, in each case, the student predictions mirrored the more optimistic Ontario forecasts (Ontario Job

Futures 1999; Canada 1999).

- 11 70% of the students thought that librarians earned starting salaries of less than \$35,000 while, in fact, the Government of Canada data indicate that librarians' starting salaries average \$36,200. Librarianship was the only instance in which a majority of the students underestimated the starting salary in the fields surveyed. In fact, librarians' starting salaries in Canada are only topped by those of lawyers (with a starting salary of \$39,100 according to the Government of Canada).
- 12 The largest proportion (60%) of the students believed that librarians required no university preparation. A majority of students also thought announcers/newscasters, Internet researchers, and animators only required a community college diploma. However, in the cases of the 10 other known occupations, the students were either accurate in their perceptions of the educational preparation required or, in the cases of reporters and systems analysts, tended to overestimate (39% thought reporters required a university degree, and 49% thought systems analysts did as well). Of course, the minimum educational requirement for professional librarianship in Canada is the graduate degree in library and information science from an accredited university.
- 13 The students were asked to rate the social status of the occupations on a scale of 1 to 100, with 100 representing the highest possible status in comparison with all other types of work. The mean prestige rating for librarians was 46, with that for lawyer and computer engineer tied at 82. Physical therapists had a mean rating of 75.
- 14 The students thought women, to a level of 80%, dominated librarianship; the next most female-dominated occupation was physical therapist, at 60%. The students thought only 50% of medical records technicians were female.
- 15 The lowest perceived presence of women occurred in computer engineering (30%) and in the occupation of Internet researcher (also at 30%).
- 16 Birdsall on the other hand argues that librarians draw their strength and professional status from their association with public sector institutions. He suggests that librarians, rather than try to disassociate themselves with their bureaucracies in a misguided attempt to increase their status, should shift their focus on becoming more client-oriented (1995, 105).
- 17 One author contends that (school) librarians are invisible because they have done little to shape perceptions of librarians and that indeed, the librarian culture does not encourage self-promotion. He says that "the culture of librarianship encourages the exchange of information among librarians, but it has never encouraged them to look outside their own group." (Hartzell 1997). Carbo identifies 10 roles for the future of librarians including managers, resource procurers, and creators/disseminators of information, but suggests that what is needed foremost is "a reasonable understanding of the likely future of our field ... identifying where we want to go ..." (1998, 74).
- 18 Mechanical engineering, which is discussed later in this paper (and was not discussed in the earlier papers from this research [Harris and Wilkinson 2002a or

Harris and Wilkinson 2001)), currently attracts women to fill only 14.7 % of student openings (Hamilton 2001). Women comprised only 8.3% of the annual salary survey respondents of engineers in Ontario (2000 PEO Membership Salary Survey).

- 19 Certainly, this would be an important point of departure for another study that could include follow-up with the students to determine why they have the perceptions described in this study. The large number of subjects and range of areas of investigation, given the short period of time possible for administration of the instruments, precluded such qualitative data-gathering in this study.

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Appendix A

The paired choices given students for best description of certain occupations

The [librarian/Internet researcher] answers questions by directing people to sources of information; the [Internet researcher/librarian] does not manipulate, analyse or criticize sources of information or evaluate, interpret or apply the information to particular problems.

OR

The [Internet researcher/librarian] searches, selects only the best information retrieved, and delivers the results to the person who asked the question.

The lawyer should examine the client's situation and go beyond the question asked by the client, weigh other people's interests as well as the client's, examine both the short and long term implications for the client, and then only act in the best interests of the client, whatever the client's actual instructions are.

OR

After accepting a person as a client, the lawyer should only give the advice requested and then act to the best of her or his ability exactly as the client directs. The client has the right to expect the lawyer to do everything possible in the client's interest.

The journalist seeks to report on as many events as possible as they happen, striving for objectivity, accuracy and completeness as the news unfolds—without commentary or judgement.

OR

The journalist seeks to select the most important items for a given audience and interpret them to that audience—attempting to influence and enhance the development of social justice and culture.

The physical therapist (physiotherapist) is a health professional who contributes directly to the welfare of her or his own patients and the overall health of a given society.

OR

The physical therapist (physiotherapist) is a member of a health team under the direction of medical doctors and provides particular support to the doctor's patients within the context of an overall course of treatment.

