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Support Staff in a Transitional Age:

Implications for Continuing Education

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The changes libraries face today are driven by a variety of factors that affect us deeply, even though most of them are external to the library itself. Foremost among these are the rapid infusion of information and communications technologies, the trend towards static or declining budgets, and the transformation that is occurring within higher education itself.

Universities are becoming increasingly distributed and less place-bound and their student bodies and faculties more diverse. We see a move away from the traditional talking-head teaching model towards a student-centered learning model.

Within our schools, this change drives—and in turn is driven by—the infusion of the new technologies and the networking possibilities that promise to enhance teaching, learning, and research. As the unit of the university responsible for providing the information upon which the success of our teaching and scholarship rests, we in the library face unique challenges. Ralph A. Wolff, the executive director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, summed it up this way:

> "Events within and outside higher education are changing our fundamental conceptions of the library, as well as the very nature of the content and methodologies of learning sponsored by the institution. These changes could catapult the library into a central role within the teaching/learning enterprise if appropriate adaptations are made; if not, they could further remove the library from the institutional center."

As a profession, we have accepted the need for change more or less gracefully, although we differ considerably on how rapid and how profound 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, believing that if we are to remain serious players in an increasingly volatile education and information environment, we must create new services, new collections, new organizational structures, new information access tools, and new relationships with our campus allies and competitors alike.

Whether we like it or not, the change that is occurring within our libraries today is having a profound effect upon the deployment and use of all staff. The work of librarians, paraprofessionals, technical staff members, and supporting personnel differs, in many cases significantly, from what it was even a few years ago. Our efforts to manage this change effectively are hampered by librarians' lack of clarity on how we ought to staff our libraries and on who ought to be doing what within them. More than a century after our professional associations were formed, adequate guidelines for staff deployment and use have yet to be formulated. To this day, we have not resolved these issues, and this lack of resolution compounds the staffing dilemmas we all face. As a consequence, we have not been able to demonstrate convincingly what it is that makes us a profession, this despite the fact that earlier generations spent decades constructing separate lists of tasks that were declared suitable for either librarians or clerks.

Because of our traditional inability to articulate clearly who we are, and what we ought to be doing, librarians have created considerable insensitivity, even indifference, to the status and working conditions of support staff. Here is an illustration of our historic insensitivity as a profession: For many years, liberal arts colleges routinely offered support positions to the spouses of new faculty members or administrators as a perquisite of the job. Regardless of the competencies of the individuals involved, non-competitive hiring practices trivialized the importance of these positions.

We have soul-searched a considerable amount about appropriate terminal degrees, our status and image, curricular emphases in graduate library school programs, and what to call ourselves now that the new information technologies have so profoundly changed our lives and our libraries. Unfortunately, we have resolved none of these issues, and this lack of resolution compounds the staffing dilemmas that have for too long characterized the library workplace. These problems of definition go a long way towards explaining why the expression "professional librarian" is still not perceived to be a redundancy and continues to appear in our literature.

Librarians also have a long history of hiring into support staff positions candidates with qualifications higher than our job advertisements require. We often employ individuals with graduate, or even terminal library school degrees, and we do not hesitate to assign these talented individuals tasks in accord with their educational level, whether or not these tasks appear in the position descriptions. As a result, support staff in many libraries are inadequately compensated for their contributions.

During the past 20 or more years, library staffing patterns have been further complicated by the need to adapt to new technologies. Faced with the prospect of extinction, most librarians have chosen to redefine their roles, their mission, and their profession. In so doing, they have all but given up performing the traditional process work of the library, work that characterized the role of librarians a generation ago.

As librarians redefined themselves, they shifted their attention toward automating their libraries, creating new networked services, designing integrated information interfaces, and teaching students and faculty how to be wise consumers in an environment suddenly rich with information resources. These new roles require librarians to spend more time outside the library, working with faculty and researchers in schools, departments, and laboratories; teach more classes; integrate print and networked resources; and collaborate more closely with colleagues at other institutions on cooperative resource sharing projects.

As a result, many tasks once performed by librarians have migrated to support staff, a trend that is likely to continue. My own research demonstrates that in academic libraries across the country, support staff now administer major functional areas of our libraries, work increasingly at the reference desk, and catalog most of the books we add to our collections (Oberg et al, 1992).

The migration to support staff of tasks once performed more-or-less exclusively by librarians is only one of many profound changes that are now occurring. Library support staff are also assuming complex tasks and filling key positions newly created by automation and the consequent reconfiguration of library services. Today, support staff do far more than passively learn and apply new software programs. Rather, they are beginning to work side by side with librarians to rethink and reconfigure many of our basic systems and processes. Over a decade ago, Allen Veaner pointed out that the introduction of new technologies had upgraded the level of work we all perform and that many librarians have virtually ceased to be production workers … When, we might ask ourselves, was the last time any of us filed into a card catalog, typed an order card, or checked out a book with a pencil?

In my own library, for example, the systems librarian position, traditionally devoted to PC support and the care and feeding of our Innovative Interfaces system, has migrated to a member of the support staff. The librarian who formerly held that position is now responsible for systems administration and spends much of his time designing and developing workstations, intuitive interfaces, Web homepages, and representing the library in campus-wide forums.

The assignment to support staff of tasks that were formerly performed by librarians and the creation of complex new positions invested with a high order of decision-making authority has resulted in considerable specialization. Support staff, especially the higher level paraprofessionals, are now authorized to perform tasks and make decisions that cannot be reviewed easily and may not be understood well by librarians.

Carla Stoffle believes that librarians must place a 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 the staffs that perform narrow tasks within the tightly defined job descriptions, toward staffs empowered to make decisions about the work they do and how they do it in a manner that in her words, results in delighted customers (Stoffle, 1996).

Today, librarians are more sanguine about the prospect of redefining themselves and their profession than they were five years ago. It is becoming clear that their libraries will remain key players in the environment of the twenty-first century. But, in order to guarantee this optimistic future, they must not fail to provide support staff with the training, compensation, and status needed to ensure that the library continues to play a central role within the teaching and learning enterprise. **Q**

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