Other duties as assigned: a reexamination of roles in resource acquisition and management

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Abstract:

Libraries are a disrupted industry. Since the advent of ready, unmediated information through the widespread adoption of the internet, the place of the library in society and on our campuses has been irrevocably altered. Now as we are no longer the authoritative and singular pipeline of knowledge, learning, and information, we have to reinvent ourselves over and over for relevance in our communities. To add to the layers of change and chaos, libraries and the people that work in them have not had the comfort of uniform definitions or even strong recognition as a profession since the advent of libraries and librarians.

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Article:

Libraries are a disrupted industry. Since the advent of ready, unmediated information through the widespread adoption of the internet, the place of the library in society and on our campuses has been irrevocably altered. Now as we are no longer the authoritative and singular pipeline of knowledge, learning, and information, we have to reinvent ourselves over and over for relevance in our communities. To add to the layers of change and chaos, libraries and the people that work in them have not had the comfort of uniform definitions or even strong recognition as a profession since the advent of libraries and librarians.

Despite the lack of clarity about what it means to work in a library, people still pursue employment in libraries. In the specialized sphere of academic technical services departments, additional barriers and challenges exist for job seekers. The work is complex enough that experience is typically expected for most positions, yet the work is specialized enough that there are barriers to gaining the experience. Even with a strong educational background, the lack of experience can limit hiring opportunities. A candidate's ability to pursue unpaid work as a volunteer, intern, or practicum student may also make them more competitive, making equity in hiring even more challenging. What does that mean for the employee, and what does that mean for the library? Library support staff who have held positions in public service and who may be seeking work that supports the library's mission while reducing the face-to-face time with

patrons will have a better hiring opportunity than someone seeking entrance to employment from beyond libraries. Perhaps a student employee is selected for a support staff position after graduation because they have technical experience with the library management system. And as the basis for this study, another avenue may be hiring candidate who has earned a master's degree in librarianship, even though it not required for the job as a member of the support staff. From the position hiring authorities, we pursued clarity to these questions.

A prerequisite to any investigation into industry-wide trends requires uniform definitions and classifications for clarity of the discussion. The first challenge was how to even describe the work of "technical services." A now mostly legacy umbrella term, we defined it to mean any labor involving acquisitions, cataloging, metadata, electronic resources, serials, collection development, materials processing, and gift/donation receipt. This open definition was in recognition of the diversity within the field and to invite participation of all within this area of collections work.

The far more fraught definition was that of what constituted a professional librarian within technical services. The master of library and information science/studies (MLIS) from an American Library Association (ALA)-accredited program is a base requirement for professional librarian positions. The professional master's-level library degree is identified in various ways, but this chapter will refer to it as the MLIS. Library support staff positions will vary from expecting educational levels of a high school diploma to an associate's or bachelor's degree to higher degrees or certification, based upon specialization of the position. It is not unusual, though, for applicants to have an MLIS, even though it is not required. Repurposing or reclassification of positions and changes in responsibilities have resulted in loss of professional positions in technical services units, which can also be a factor in holders of an MLIS taking a support staff position. According to Lihong Zhu, "Technological advances, budget cuts, reorganizations, downsizing, outsourcing, expanded roles of professionals, and changes in the information world are redistributing workload between professionals and paraprofessionals in academic library technical services units."[1] Rory Litwin comments that "the more complex duties that the new paraprofessional career ladder accommodates are duties formerly performed by MLS-holding librarians." Further, he states that "it is in management's interest to shift the job function of librarians to a paraprofessional group for the purpose of gaining greater control (as well as saving money)."[2] Individuals holding positions that do not require the MLIS may be referred to as library support staff or paralibrarians. The term paraprofessional is widely used but is not welcomed by some library support staff who consider it as being negative and suggesting being excluded from the profession.

We have observed and discussed with colleagues the situation where library support staff members are hired with an MLIS or earn their MLIS while working in a library and remain working in a support staff position after graduating with the degree. This research and survey were conducted as a result of interest in knowing what attitudes are held by librarians and library support staff members toward individuals with an MLIS degree working in support staff positions.

To gain the perspective of library and information science (LIS) faculty, Christine Fischer met with Dr. Nora Bird of the Department of Library and Information Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and affiliated faculty member Mike Crumpton, who is assistant dean for administrative services of the UNCG University Libraries. Both have seen MLIS graduates taking positions as library support staff. They discuss the library field with their students, foster resilience and flexibility in a profession that is constantly

changing, develop assignments with real world application, and encourage professional development opportunities to gain new skills. But both acknowledged that electing to take a position that does not require the degree while holding an MLIS is essentially a personal choice. Being hired and finding full-time employment with benefits may be die main consideration in accepting a position, and so many factors are part of that reality. From the library's perspective, it cannot be prohibited from hiring someone with the credential. It is not surprising that a library would choose a candidate with higher educational attainment when they meet the job requirements as posted.

Research Method

From September 24, 2018, to October 10, 2018, the authors conducted a survey to assess attitudes of librarians and library support staff toward individuals with an MLIS degree (or equivalent) working in support staff positions in academic technical services departments.

The survey was aimed at individuals employed or with other investment in the work of academic technical services departments. It was distributed for a two-week period to multiple professional regional and national LISTSERVs for technical services work (see textbox 13.1 for list). All participation was voluntary and anonymous. No questions were required, and participants could cease participating at any time. Given this open nature of the survey, some findings will be the total percentage of responses and not respondents. There were ten questions with the option to add any additional comments. Three of the questions requested demographic information, five were multiple-choice questions about observations of the workplace, and two were open-ended questions about personal attitudes.

LISTSERVs Where the Survey Was Distributed

ERIL
AutoCAT
Alma-L
Orbis Cascade Technical Services Group
colldv (ALCTS)
acqnet (ALCTS)
NCLA: North Carolina Library Association
OCLC-CAT

We chose our method in order to verify in a timely manner that our perceptions were even a trend outside of our institutions and communities. While an open blind survey lacks rigor and reproducibility, it did allow us to quickly determine we were not alone in our concerns. There were eleven questions as shown in textbox 13.2.

Library Support Staff Attitudes Questionnaire

This survey is aimed at exploring beliefs and trends around library support staff positions in technical services departments in academic libraries. Library support staff positions, also known as paraprofessional positions, refer to positions in libraries that do not require MLIS degrees. The job titles often contain words such as "technician," "specialist," or "assistant." For the purposes of this survey, technical services may include such areas as metadata, acquisitions, e-resources, and/or collections. Survey will close October 10, 2018.

1. Which best describes your experience in academic technical services departments? (Select all that apply.)

   - Currently employed as a professional librarian in academic technical services
   - Previously employed as a professional librarian in academic technical services
   - Currently employed as library support staff in academic technical services
   - Previously employed as library support staff in academic technical services
   - Currently hold a volunteer/intern/unpaid position in academic technical services
   - Library administrator
   - No direct personal experience in academic technical services

2. Do you currently have an MLIS?

   - Yes
   - No
   - Other

3. If yes, what year did you graduate?

   - In the last 5 years
   - 6-10 years ago
   - 11-15 years ago
   - 16-20 years ago
   - More than 20 years ago
   - N/A

4. In your experience, has the number of library support staff positions in the last 10 years in academic technical services

   - Increased
   - Remained the same
   - Decreased
   - Not sure

5. Given the tremendous changes in technical services in the last 10 years, are library support staff job descriptions/duties, in your estimation, requiring work that is more complex?

   - No, the work is not more complex.
   - Yes, the work is more complex.
   - Sometimes the work is more complex, depending on the position.

- Not sure

6. Given the tremendous changes in technical services in the last 10 years, are current library support staff job descriptions/duties, in your estimation, requiring professional level work?

   - No, the work is not professional level.
   - Yes, the work is professional level.
   - Sometimes the work is professional level, depending on the position.
   - Not sure

7. In the next 10 years do you believe the number of library support staff positions in academic technical services will

   - Increase
   - Remain the same
   - Decrease
   - Have no guess

8. From your position, do you believe library support staff positions in academic technical services are increasingly being held by individuals with MLIS degrees?

   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

9. How do you feel about individuals with MLIS degrees being hired for library support staff positions?

   - [Long answer]

10. What responsibilities does a library have to individuals with MLIS degrees in library support staff positions?

    - [Long answer]

11. Any other comments?

    - [Long answer]

Within the two weeks of our survey, we received 607 responses, far more than expected. Our first demographic question was what experience people had in academic technical services departments. The goal here was to understand the positions that perceptions were originating from. Fifty-two percent of respondents self-identified as current technical services librarians. Thirty-three percent identified as current library support staff. The other 15 percent identified as previous experience as technical services librarian, previous library support staff, administrator,

no technical services experience, and other. An initial bias of this survey is the distribution through library LISTSERVs. A possible reason we did not receive more responses from library support staff is that they may not be on various LISTSERVs, especially if they were new to their position or the field.

The next question was to probe into the possible phenomenon of MLIS degree holders working in support staff positions. We asked if people held an MLIS degree or equivalent. Seventy-six percent of respondents said yes. This was one of the most answered of the demographic questions. The next demographic question was the least popular. It asked when people received their MLIS degrees. No one will contest that field has greatly changed in the past thirty years. No one will contest that the nature of the degree has changed, from the advent of authoritative online education to the reduction of traditional MLIS courses such as cataloging in favor of digital collections management. Yet, even this innocently posed question provoked discomfort, and accusations of ageism by the authors. Our intent was to find an easily obtainable metric to assess if people with MLIS degrees in staff support positions as a trend was a more recent one. While people could have received an MLIS degree later in their career and generational frameworks are riddled with biased generalizations, we did find that this metric provided the unforeseen benefit of showing possible trends of attitudes among various library professional groups by length of experience.

One question asked whether the respondents believed that support staff duties had become more complex in the past ten years. The majority, 54 percent, indicated that yes, the work had become more complex, while 41 percent replied that sometimes the work is more complex. Five percent were not sure or stated that, no, the work was not more complex. The perception is that support staff is handling more complex work activities. Zhu's study confirmed that and noted, "Finding routine tasks where complex problem solving skills were not needed was becoming more difficult."[3] Respondents to Zhu's survey indicated that "their libraries had pushed paraprofessionals to do more complex duties because of budget cuts, hiring freezes, layoffs, reorganization, technological changes, or library priority changes (or a combination of these). "[4] The nature of the work has changed so that "the amount of routine work that can be taught once and then performed repetitively by paraprofessionals has decreased."[5] Zhu further explains that "paraprofessionals have taken on high-level complex duties that cannot be labeled routine because those duties require special training, knowledge, and experience; high-level creativity and originality; and good problem solving, communication, and analytical skills."[6]

Responses

While the intention of the survey was to identify if there was a larger trend of MLIS holders occupying library support positions, the responses received were far more varied and told of a much more complex environment. While the majority of our respondents did report that there are MLIS holders filling support staff positions, the attitudes about this practice varied- from outright support and approval to a resigned acknowledgment to strong condemnation.

Individuals working in paraprofessional positions who did not hold an MLIS had varying responses when asked how they felt about someone with an MLIS degree working in a paraprofessional position. One participant who is a library technician with a two-year diploma described as common in Canada said, "I am dismayed that the job market for librarians is so flooded that they are applying for paraprofessional jobs just to get work in a library but they are "glad that it allows librarians to see and experience the work done by paraprofessionals ... so a

support staff role can broaden the perspective and skills of the librarian." Another support staff member without an MLIS expressed the following:

> I have mixed feelings. 1 don't believe that work requires a MLlS degree, but then in all honesty most library jobs don't. Most of what we do can be learned on the job. Degree inflation, however, makes that less and less like!). What I have personally seen is that the technical services work has become much varied, complex, and less routine. Sometimes portions of that work are to MLIS librarians as the library staff as a whole decreases in size. Support staff roles as I remember them from fifteen to twenty years ago don't really exist.

An individual with an MLIS working as support staff noted,

> It's a complex issue. In many cases, faculty positions/salary lines may have been given away years earlier, often during times in which MLIS graduation rates were lower, budgets were exceptionally tight, or there was a prevailing belief that automation would eliminate technical services jobs or render them less in need of a professional. However, the work did not go away, and in many cases [has] become much more complex, and support staff often "grew up" with the work.

A positive view came from an individual who stated, "I am one of those individuals. I have my MLIS, and I have worked in a tech services support staff position for the past five years. I love my job, and it is directly relevant to my interests. I don't have to publish or teach, and I get to work closely with materials all day. It's what I really wanted to do."

Concerns about MLIS holders serving in a support staff position included ensuring that compensation met the level of expertise and job requirements; the likelihood that the employee would leave as soon as a professional-level position became available, thus leaving a vacancy; providing professional development support; and a dilution of the degree and profession in general. Some participants observed that it may be difficult to gain technical services experience unless a support staff position is accepted first to learn on the job when other opportunities were not available to the employee during graduate school or prior. Tension in the workplace was described in the survey results by such comments as "I think sometimes they feel superior to support staff who do not hold MLIS degrees, and it can cause problems."

Participants in the survey were also asked about the responsibility of the library to individuals holding an MLIS while working in a support staff position. Some responses were matter-of-fact such as "the same responsibility that it has to individuals without MLIS degrees in library support staff positions: to pay a fair wage based on their experience and level of work they are doing." Another respondent agreed and listed "a professional work environment, staff development opportunities if funds allow, and performance reviews/goal setting that enable them to move into different positions if they desire to." Further examples of responsive support included "open communication, professional development opportunities, sharing of professional job notices, and good references." The expectation for the level of activity that the support staff member with an MLIS performs factored into several responses, with one concluding that the library should "not take advantage of the fact that they have someone with additional training in the position; that is, if they want to add professional-level responsibilities to the position, they should upgrade it to a professional-level position (including professional-level salary)." Some

responses considered why an individual with an MLIS would have taken a support staff job, with one stating, "It's the individual's choice to be in that position-one takes a position, one isn't forced into it."

Additional comments included, "We see this same situation in archives work with increasing numbers of professionally educated archivists having to settle for part-time grant-based or paraprofessional positions." One person commented that "work in technical services is becoming more complex. More professional librarian positions are needed. Unfortunately, library administrators don't have a background in technical services and/or understand the nature and complexity of the work."

Numerous respondents discussed the practical reasons someone with an MLIS would accept a support staff position: lack of geographic mobility, maintaining a position in the library where they were working as they had earned their degree, little interest in taking on activities expected of a librarian related to scholarship and service, access to health insurance and other benefits, and the need to work full time.

One interesting circumstance mentioned by a couple of participants was the expectation of staffing required as library members of a consortium worked together on shared catalogs. Some institutions reduced the number of positions in technical services in anticipation of the work being handled more broadly in that multi-institutional setting. The reality is unexpected if other institutions are also cutting positions or reducing the level of expertise required. "We no longer have local staff with cataloging expertise, because previous administrators believed our consortium would centrally manage all of our records and the role of our TS department would be to merely stick some barcodes on books."

Conclusion

Individuals with an MLIS degree have many reasons for accepting library support staff positions in technical services units. These include such circumstances as competition for positions as librarians; remaining in the support staff roles that they held as they earned their degrees; being bound geographically; enjoying their work and perhaps preferring not to take on additional activities such as publishing, presenting, and service; and facing the need to hold a full-time job with benefits, even if it is not their ideal position. The sentiment shared repeatedly in the survey results was how crucial it was that libraries hiring MLIS graduates make expectations clear. As one participant shared, "As long as expectations regarding the position are clear and lines of communication are open, as with all positions and levels of education, things are generally good for all involved." If there is not an easy path to move from support staff to a librarian position, the supervisor must state that. Job responsibilities must align with the category of the position and fair pay offered for the level of work expected. This can be challenging if an individual is willing to take on higher levels of work and would welcome the opportunity to contribute beyond their designated tasks. There is a balance to allowing for more creativity and responsibility without taking advantage of a person as well as maintaining an environment within the department that does not suggest partiality.

All members in a department should have access to mentorship, coaching, and professional and staff development opportunities with organizational support for registration fees, travel, and release time away from regular responsibilities. Library employees want to be included in discussions and consulted on decision-making, so the library can benefit from their

expertise, experience, and insight. They want to have time to complete their goal and to contribute to the vision of their library and the institution.

In the end, employees want to be treated with honesty and respect regardless of the degree they have earned, the position they hold, or the tasks they are assigned. The responses from the survey indicated that many library employees do not feel respected. There are differences in professional and support staff positions that will always present a challenge. As Francine Fialkoff stated, "The barriers between professional and paraprofessional in the library field remain. It's not about a degree, however, it's about basic human respect."[7] Libraries can open up communication and show their commitment to employees at all levels. Even small things can make the library place where people want to work and where they feel valued.

Areas of further study could include assessments that consider a participant's race or gender, geographical location, or membership in unions.

Notes

1. Lihong Zhu, "The Role of Paraprofessionals in Technical Services in Academic Libraries." *Library Resources and Technical Services* 56, no. 33 (2012): 127.
2. Rory Litwin, "The Library Paraprofessional Movement and the Deprofessionalization of Librarianship," Progressive Librarian, no. 33 (Summer 2009): 43---60, 48.
3. Zhu, "Role of Paraprofessionals," 139.
4. Zhu, "Role of Paraprofessionals," 138.
5. Zhu, "Role of Paraprofessionals," I 39.
6. Zhu, "Role of Paraprofessionals," 141.
7. Francine Fialkoff, "Not Yet Equal," Library Journal 135, no. 4 (March 1, 2010): 8.