

Guest Editorial

Paraprofessionals: Shaping the New Reality

Until quite recently, the role, status, and working conditions of paraprofessionals have not been topics of intense or generalized interest within the profession. That librarians have remained aloof from the day-to-day needs and concerns of their uncredentialed coworkers is a truism reflected in our experience, our literature, and the activities of our professional associations. Although an intense process of "off-loading"¹ tasks, once characteristically performed by librarians, onto support staff has occurred over the past twenty or so years, the effects of this process have been largely ignored and stand in need of analysis.

Increasingly preoccupied with their newfound faculty status obligations of governance, teaching, and research, academic librarians began assigning to support staff tasks they could no longer accommodate or considered repetitive. These assignments included stints at that once sacrosanct preserve of the true professional, the reference desk. Today, newly anointed paraprofessionals search remote databases, perform original as well as copy cataloging, select books, and assume administrative responsibility for a variety of functional areas. Although we largely ignored the effects of these changes, the process created a class of authentic paraprofessionals.

Several forces have driven downward many of the duties formerly considered fully professional; for example, the intense application of technology to library processes, severe budget constraints, and the relative success achieved by librarians in their quest for a higher status. These factors have resulted in significant task overlap between librarians and support staff and in an acute identity crisis for the profession.

Task overlap causes the role blurring that characterizes the academic library workplace today. It also inhibits our ability to describe satisfactorily either group. Role blurring profoundly angers paraprofessionals who perceive themselves as doing the work of librarians for less money and an inferior status. They also resent being labeled non-professional. Even an act as apparently simple as assigning generic or position titles to paraprofessionals risks creating shock waves. Nomenclature, Kathleen Heim suggests, is "symptomatic of deeper and more complex problems."²

Role blurring confuses our clientele. It is hardly surprising that teaching faculty, students, administrators, and others fail to distinguish between librarians and support staff. A recent study of faculty attitudes towards librarians concludes that such misperceptions diminish the quality of patron-library contacts, isolate the library within the organization, and depress the salaries and status of librarians and paraprofessionals alike.³

In general, paraprofessionals have good reason to be concerned about their condition. My as yet unpublished research demonstrates that we often fail to provide them with systematic continuing education opportunities, for example, funding for attendance at national workshops and conferences; limiting their involvement in our associations and in library policy formulation, planning, and decision-making processes; excluding them from the collegial process and; at least in the smaller libraries, failing to provide them

with ranked classification systems to compensate for the rigid hierarchical structures within which they are required to function.

In her final recommendations as Executive Director of the Association of College and Research Libraries, JoAn Segal suggests that now "is the time to open membership [in the ACRL] to paraprofessionals," a move she expects "would strengthen relations in the workplace, serve as a recruitment tool for entry into the professional ranks, and indicate our willingness to provide educational and other opportunities."⁴ Other recent signs of interest in the condition of paraprofessionals include a new journal devoted to support staff issues,⁵ an increase in the number of research-based articles on paraprofessionals, and the growth of paraprofessional sections within state and regional library associations.

Much more needs to be done. We must incorporate paraprofessional concerns into our strategic planning and national research agenda. A few of the topics that cry out for attention include:

- occupational segregation, pay equity, and comparable worth,
- role blurring and role definition,
- job satisfaction,
- education, utilization, and entry requirements,
- deliberate task and salary overlap,
- similar issues in other professions, and
- the effects of deprofessionalization.

Of course, individual librarians neither can nor should expect to resolve all of these issues immediately. We must begin, however, by abandoning our traditionally patronizing attitudes towards paraprofessionals and accept them as colleagues. As for paraprofessionals, they must take charge of their own destinies through renewed dedication to the profession and intensified organization, participation, and education.

That the problems besetting paraprofessionals mirror those confronting librarians is an irony that is not lost. Both librarians and paraprofessionals recognize and accept the symbiotic nature of their relationship. In the final analysis, however, we librarians may fail to resolve our own long-standing identity problems if we are unwilling or unable to help paraprofessionals resolve theirs. Meanwhile, it is encouraging to note that we are no longer ignoring the legitimate concerns of the majority of all library workers.

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