

Not Too Academic

Nonprofessional staff who have been properly selected, trained, and supervised are capable of a wide range of tasks often considered professional, including cataloging and classifying, bibliographic verification, reference and interlibrary loan work, and of course, circulation. The role of the librarian lies in planning; in the selection of materials and courses of action; and in the training, supervision, revision, and inspiration of nonprofessional and student assistants. There must be careful discrimination between professional and nonprofessional tasks on the basis of the actual work done, not on old prejudices, and trust must be placed in the abilities of the nonprofessional working under the tutelage and supervision of the professional.

THESE ARE several aspects of Academia which make the life of the college and university librarian somewhat different from that of the librarian elsewhere, and this holds true with respect to staffing the library as it does in other matters. For one thing, the librarian is working in an intellectual milieu with professional colleagues who are not altogether willing to accord the entire professional staff of the library the sought-for professional or—as it is called in these circles—academic status. The normal faculty member (assuming, for the moment, that such a creature can be found) has completed a long and rigorous training in his discipline, having earned his doctorate through years of study and research culminating in what is, hopefully albeit infrequently, a major research project that represents a significant contribution to knowledge. He teaches—less and less each year, I might add—and is engaged in research which results sometimes in advancing the frontiers of knowledge and, inevitably, in the vast flood of books and articles which threatens to inundate us all. He is heir to the

longest tradition of professionalism (or is it really the second longest?), for as my crusty old French professor loved to remark, the professor was a doctor when the surgeon still barbered and any one at all could pull teeth. This old pro, then, is reluctant to consider professional those whom he sees filing cards, stamping date due slips, or arguing over ten-cent fines—the image is his, not mine; he questions the intellectual currency of those who classify psychology as a subdivision of philosophy, who continue to make arbitrary and illogical divisions of the continuum of mathematics in accord with medieval concepts, and who never does any research and rarely publishes articles, even on what Ralph Shaw refers to as “how we done it good at Podunk.” Consequently, the academic librarian is usually in an uneasy limbo between the teaching and the clerical staffs.

Thus, it seems to me, the necessity of distinguishing between professional and nonprofessional activities is even more critical in academic libraries than in “the real world.” It is not a simple thing. Many academic libraries are small with small staffs, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to effect the discrete separation of all tasks into professional and nonpro-

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fessional until a library, like an atomic pile, reaches a critical size. Even then it is not easy. Then, too, because of budgetary restrictions, modern and efficient equipment is often not available for the mechanization of routine chores.

But, basically, the problem is that we have not clearly defined the professional work of librarians and have tended to assume the expedient policy of employing trained librarians to perform a mixture of professional and clerical tasks because it is easier than studying our operations and setting up proper staffing tables. I say this as one who is guilty. *Mea culpa*. Furthermore, even when we do discriminate between the levels of operations, we are prone to follow tradition rather than to analyze the tasks to be done. For example, we usually consider cataloging a professional activity; yet much of cataloging (and I do not mean the menial chores of typing and filing) can be done and done well by nonprofessional staff members, and I would include actual classifying and descriptive and subject cataloging.

A recent survey of cataloging in forty-two libraries, members of the Association of Research Libraries, asked about the use of clerical staff for cataloging new monographs with Library of Congress cards.¹ Of the forty-two, all but eight employed clerical staff to do some cataloging with LC cards, but only a few used them extensively. Yet all responded that their performance was satisfactory. One library, however, noted that "We believe that LC cards cannot be accepted absolutely in regard to call number and subject headings. New titles involve new numbers and new headings, and older titles need to be verified for present LC practice. Professionals needed also to verify main entry when various rule changes are involved." I should like to comment briefly on these

remarks: In the first place, they seem to me to assume that the clerical worker has little or no training and that he is incapable of absorbing enough cataloging lore and is of insufficient intelligence to exercise any degree of judgment. I do not concur. Many libraries, my own included, not only use clerical staff for cataloging with LC cards but for original cataloging as well—often for quite difficult material. There must, of course (or should I say "I believe"?) be professional librarians to supervise and to whom the nonprofessional can turn when questions arise, and to revise when there may be errors in the more complex work. That some errors will escape is beyond question; but if you believe in the infallibility of the professional cataloger, permit me to suggest a careful scrutiny of any public catalog. I do not believe that intelligent, well trained nonprofessionals working under intelligent and alert professional supervision will make appreciably more errors than professionals.

Another area in which nonprofessionals can be utilized is the verification of entry and the checking to eliminate duplication. In some libraries this is considered professional work; in others it is not. I know of two large neighboring libraries which illustrate these contrasting practices. The one which uses professionals admits to sizeable duplication discovered only after the arrival of the book. The other, using graduate students with a minimum of professional supervision, has a minuscule rate of duplication; and the catalogers there have indicated that the verification of entry was excellent. Why? I believe that in the first library the professional librarians had but little interest in what they soon came to regard as a low-level task and they could not sustain that interest through a full day's work. In the second library, the students were challenged by the work and, since they worked only a few

¹ Rexford S. Beckham. Unpublished study, 1965.

hours a day, stopped before boredom set in. The first library, it seems to me, was wasting the talents of a goodly number of trained professional librarians.

In reference work, too, there is much that can be done by nonprofessionals under supervision. They can answer many directional and informational questions, freeing the professional for the more difficult and extensive "research" question. Under supervision, they can handle the bulk of the work of interlibrary loans. Everyone, of course, uses nonprofessionals in circulation, so I shall not pursue this—except to say how very difficult it is to find really good professional people interested in supervising a circulation department.

Students were mentioned a moment ago. This is the second unique situation of an academic library's personnel: the pool of highly intelligent students available, even in these days of academic affluence. The situation is even brighter, of course, when the institution has extensive graduate work, and brighter still when it has a good library school. In one library I had the honor to be associated with we had student assistants, largely graduates, of exceptional intelligence. Many of them are now professors themselves, and some even saw the light and have achieved a state of grace by entering our profession. By using these students we had access to all kinds of special competencies, and it was not unusual to see a senior cataloger consulting a beardless boy—or even a bearded boy—who happened to have some expertise in a subject or a language. All too often we do not make adequate use of the talents and capabilities of our student assistants; and as a former student assistant, I have only the greatest respect for them.

I have frequently been shocked by the attitude of some of my colleagues towards students and nonprofessionals. Apparently my experience differs radically

from theirs, for I have encountered a good many with as much knowledge and ability—and sometimes more—than many library school graduates. We have all too often accepted the assumption that a degree from an accredited library school is a guarantee of successful librarianship. And yet all of us know some who have managed to pass through library school without its teachings having made any impression on them.

What then, you may ask, do I consider the role of the professional librarian? By no means do I advocate that we dispense with them! Their role, as I see it, should be in planning; in the selection of materials and of courses of action; in the training, supervision, revision, and inspiration of the nonprofessional and the student assistant. Librarians, in short, should be librarian-managers or bibliothecal specialists. There is room for those whose bent is towards administration and for those with special competencies who wish no part of administration. Nor should anything I have said be construed to preclude the magic combination of inspired librarian, good book, and receptive reader.

A recent column in the *Library Journal*² scoffed at the separation of professional from nonprofessional tasks, drawing an analogy between librarians and the dentist who fills cavities or the doctor who takes temperatures and blood pressure. These are false analogies. I do not deny that the librarian should be familiar with all tasks performed in a library—indeed, I heartily agree—but why must he *perform* them all? Need the architect lay brick or weld steel to design a building? I am reminded of the very portly chief engineer of a ship I once knew. I wondered how on earth he could ever get down into the engine

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² Walter Brahm, "On the Grindstone," *Library Journal*, XC (March 1, 1965), 1080.

from her announced topic of "The Novelist Today" to discuss authors' thoughts concerning the proposed revision of the copyright law (HR4347). They like the proposition to extend the period of protection, and would prefer it to be the lifetime of the author plus fifty years. She felt that the major problem facing revisors of the law, however, is to effect some kind of author protection from technological advances in library photocopying. In effect, she pointed out, libraries are already acting as short-run supplemental publishers, and this is all to the good if authors benefit from this extension into new markets. She invited the library profession to lend its support to a licensing provision in the new law which would guarantee a financial return to authors for library copying of their works.

Peter Jennison, executive director of the National Book Committee, then spoke on "What's Wrong with Book Publishing Today." He called for constant scrutiny of the social function of the publishing industry to assure its continuing value to society. Although society has not chosen, for example, to make adult trade book publishing a profitable venture, no one would seriously question its right to continue. Many problems are arising from the rapidly increasing number of titles being published in this country annually. In part at least this in-

crease may be attributed to the likelihood that there are today more ways of subsidizing a writing career than there have been in times past. At any rate, today's major problem seems more to be a shortage of serious readers than of good writers. Problems continue in the areas of censorship, in book advertising, and in book distribution.

The closing speaker was M. M. Oberlander, president of The Faraday Press, Inc., who described "Trends in Soviet Scientific Publishing." The ignorance of Soviet scientific literature among American scientists, thinks Dr. Oberlander, is widespread and inexcusable. The reverse of this proposition, however, is not true, due to major and successful Soviet efforts to develop a network system around VINITI to get the world's scientific literature into the hands of Soviet scientists in some usable form. Not only are important breakthroughs taking place in Soviet science, but also Soviet abstracting techniques and practices are being constantly refined and improved more rapidly than American techniques are advancing.

Again a healthy question-answer period ensued, following which the delegates were adjourned to reconvene shortly thereafter in the school of library service for a reception sponsored by the school and the Columbia University libraries.—D. K. ■■

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room by way of the several very long steel ladders that were the only way there, and asked the captain. "He hasn't been down there in fifteen years!" Then what good is he? "He gets good officers to serve under him and there is nothing he doesn't know about the engines and how to keep them going. He's invaluable." I don't recommend that librarians sit in their offices sipping Scotch (at least not all the time), but I think there is something to be said for the chief's methods.

The separation of duties is not, as I said earlier, an easy job. But it must be done. We must exercise the same care in recruiting good nonprofessionals (paying them decent salaries and according them the dignity due their work) and students as we do in recruiting professionals. We must institute adequate inservice training for them. And, finally, we must persuade the profession to abandon the comfortable prejudices of the past and, most of all, persuade our colleagues to learn to trust in the abilities of others to work under their professional tutelage and supervision. ■■