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Are Library Support Staff Up to the Challenge?

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I've been pondering lately: Do we as support staff really want what we say we want? Do we really want recognition and respect for our contributions to the profession? In May 2003, the Congress on Professional Education: Focus on Library Support (COPE 3) opened communication and many new doors for support staff inclusion into the American Library Association (ALA), and into the profession. These new opportunities bring responsibility, and I've been wondering, are we up to the challenge? And more personally, are you up to the challenge?

One outcome of COPE 3 was a set of recommendations. The ALA is taking these recommendations seriously and making amazing efforts to incorporate them into its planning, both immediate and future. Since COPE 3, the ALA has been working to incorporate inclusive language into everything they produce, the ALA Council has passed a policy statement on "Inclusiveness and Mutual Respect of Library Workers," membership dues have been lowered for support staff, and a "Conference Within A Conference" was held in conjunction with the 2005 Annual Conference which provided programming specifically of interest to support staff. Support staff have been appointed to committees, and committees are actively working on

plans to accredit Library Technical Assistant Programs, and looking at options for certifying individuals. These are just a few of the efforts that the Association has accomplished or is actively pursuing. Library support staff and library workers are also integral pieces of the language in the ALA Draft 2010 Strategic Plan. Without question these are major efforts that will change the future of library support staff involvement in the profession. What you might be surprised to know is that very few support staff are actively involved in the work of accomplishing these goals.

Here are some numbers to help put it into perspective: According to ALA statistics, there are currently somewhere around 400,000 employees in U.S. libraries. It is estimated that approximately two-thirds work as support staff. That means that in the U.S. there are about 264,000 library support staff. Current membership in the ALA is somewhere around 64,000, and of those, membership in the Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT) is around 700. Of these 700, I would guess there are only about twenty who are actively involved in the Association. So, are we going to sit back and expect librarians and ALA staff to do the work that it will take to make these changes happen? The door of opportunity is open. The time is now. We need support staff to step forward and take on the challenge that is being presented to us.

So, what can you do? A start would be to familiarize yourself with the *COPE 3 Implementation Recommendations* (<http://www.ala.org/ala/hrdr/educprofdev/congressprofessional.htm>—click on "Recommendations Update" and scroll down to "Congress III"). If you are an LSSIRT member, and you see something that you are interested in working on, contact the LSSIRT President, Ali Poffinberger (ali.poff@duke.edu), and let her know you are interested. Some of the committee assignments do require ALA conference attendance, but not all. Often e-mail and/or



conference calls are all that are needed to brainstorm and gather ideas on the next steps to take.

Besides efforts on the national level, and whether or not you are an LSSIRT member, you can also look for ways to initiate and actively work on similar recommendations that will still make a difference on a local, state, or regional level. Many of the national recommendations will need acceptance at these levels to be successful. Some suggestions for ways to get involved follow.

Is inclusive language used in professional literature and e-lists you read? If not, anyone can send a considerate e-mail to whomever is responsible for the non-inclusive language and ask that inclusive language be used in the future. (A note of appreciation for inclusive language can also make an impression.)


As the only independent international association for support staff, the Council on Media/Library Technicians (COLT) is always looking for volunteers to work on projects that they are undertaking. Go to their Web site at <http://colt.ucr.edu/> to find contacts and information on their activities.

Does your state have a support staff association? In Oregon, it is the Support Staff Division (SSD) of the Oregon Library Association (OLA). More information and contact information is on their Web site at <http://library.willamette.edu/ssd/>.

Beyond the Support Staff Division, consider opportunities in other parts of OLA—the Board, other divisions, round tables, or committees. There usually are a variety of opportunities available. You just need to ask. Contact the editor of a journal such as this one and volunteer to write an article. Offer your database, graphic design, or photography skills to association officers or conference planners. Plan a workshop or informal networking gathering. Give a presentation or participate in a panel discussion at a conference.

Most importantly, you probably won't know what needs to be done unless you

ask. Be prepared to have a conversation to figure out what you would like to do and what you would be good at. Any good leader would be delighted to get an e-mail or a phone call from someone saying, "how can I help?"

As one who has been active in library support staff issues for over a decade, I've listened to and observed hundreds of support staff discuss their work situations, and I've served in positions where I've needed to recruit volunteers to serve in various roles. My experience has been that there seems to be a lack of interest in getting involved among library support staff. Why is it so easy to sit back and complain that we aren't treated fairly, or are snubbed, but then do nothing about it? Especially now! The door is open and a movement is underway to implement fixes to many of the things we've been complaining about. Support staff have incredible skills to contribute to the profession. Why keep yours hidden? Learn first-hand the value and rewards of contributing to the library profession. The personal and professional returns on your investment of time and talent will be priceless. 

About the Author

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