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The MLS in perspective

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PARAPROFESSIONAL VS. PROFESSIONAL

If you are a member of the library staff and don't have a master's degree, you are a support staff member, or a paraprofessional. Webster's *College Dictionary* says a paraprofessional is someone trained to assist a professional, and a professional is a person who is expert at his or her work. Wow! What a nice black and white picture!

The most efficient, organized, enthusiastic, intelligent person in the world without a master's degree may run your library. The most stubborn, dull, narrow-minded, non-people person with the MLS may run another library. Who is the professional? Who is a credit to the profession?

If we focus on a specific person and make a judgment of professionalism based solely on education level, the judgment may be neither accurate nor fair.

But when trying to establish a professional status for a specific job field such as librarian, we must look for an overall evaluative method. A higher degree seems acceptable.

ANYONE CAN SHELVING BOOKS

In the opinion article in the March 1996 issue of *American Libraries*, Mark Plaiss maintains that there is no argument for a higher degree in librarianship. (Plaiss works in a medical library in an education foundation. Because of his environment, I excuse a lot of what he writes about librarians.) It is true that much of what we do is task-oriented, especially in small and mid sized public libraries. The tasks are not life-saving in most cases and probably not life-fulfilling either. You might agree with Plaiss; most of academia does. Academics often regard the MLS with so little value that they require a second master's in another field just to get a library job. Plaiss says that "we give the commodity we handle—information—to anyone free of charge. If librarians do not place a value on their services, why should anyone else?"

Good grief! Plaiss has obviously worked within the medical profession too long, and he's lost his awareness of what librarians are made of. Of course librarians place a value on themselves and their services, and they know that their commodity, information, is invaluable. However, the commodity is not ours; We merely provide access to it. It belongs to the world. Librarians above all know the importance of providing free access to information to prevent discrimination based on a patron's ability to pay.

SETTING THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARD

There is much more to being a librarian than checking books in and out and running a summer reading program. To talk about this I must sink to what Plaiss

calls "the prattle." We are the guardians of intellectual freedom and the freedom of information. Librarians are the keepers of civilization's ideas, history, accomplishments, thoughts and feelings.

Technology may aid us in some of our tasks. There will always be someone who wants to take away knowledge from those without power or education, and it is up to us librarians to ensure that that doesn't happen. (Computers will never take our place.) We must be educated to provide the philosophical defenses of the freedoms to read, to think, to speak, to learn and to listen. We can't learn it all during a one-day workshop on book repairs. We can't learn it all at graduate school either, but there is more time in grad school for thought and discussion and the formulation of beliefs.

For the world outside the library, standardized criteria must assure our employers that we represent a certain quality in the profession of librarianship, that we have moved above the task-accomplishment level and are prepared to act as guardians of intellectual freedom. Earning a master's degree from a school accredited by the American Library Association is one criterion. I believe the MLS can be a condition of our being recognized as professionals.

YOU CAN SHINE RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE

It is enough to be a paraprofessional. Anyone who approaches work with honesty and enthusiasm deserves respect, regardless of job or position. But the MLS can help if you want to boost your self-esteem, get a ticket out of where you now are, or if you want to stay and seek promotion.

Do you want to be considered a professional? Is it worth it to leave your job and physically move to a campus and get the MLS? Is it worth it to overextend your bank account and the hours in a week to take night and weekend courses while you still maintain a family and work life? It's not easy, but it's not all bad if you're looking to gain professional status, get on a career track, or make more money. After all, if you don't do it, you must ask whether you will be happy with where you are five years from now.

WHY I DID THE MLS

A library-related career came late in my work history. Circumstances moved me from an entry level position to library director in 18 months. There I was, a library director who had never purchased a book, worked on a budget, developed a policy, or used a computer, and I didn't know the meaning of bibliographic instruction.

I started work in the library in 1982 and I earned an MLS in 1990. For five years I was a paraprofessional as I budgeted, hired and fired, automated the library and ran a successful new building campaign. I also shelved books, wrote media releases, and set the lawn sprinklers—everything expected of an entry-level library director at a small public library.

The MLS in Perspective

by MLou Williams

Director, Hermiston Public Library

I didn't know what I was doing. Determined not to cheat the people of Hermiston, I learned on the job and on my own time, through reading, workshops, and conferences. I sought mentors and asked questions of other librarians, who were wonderful about sharing their knowledge. The State Library staff was very patient and supportive.

As my experience grew, so did my awareness of the gaping holes in my knowledge. Through participation in OLA, I began to think of more education. I was on the Continuing Education Committee back when the committee actually generated workshops. Everyone else on the committee had a master's degree; some had two. I kept my mouth shut (those of you who know me now, know how difficult that must have been!) and I listened, becoming more and more impressed with the quality of those people.

My enthusiasm for more education blossomed after Mary Ginnane organized the first Basic Librarianship Institute. During a period of days, a group of us paraprofessionals stayed at Marylhurst campus and shared a sampling of graduate school. We attended half-day classes led by genuine professors flown in from library schools. The classes were challenging, the environment stimulating, the camaraderie encouraging. It was a relief to find that my brain still functioned in a formal education setting. After all, it had been more than 15 years since college.

As we completed construction of the new library in Hermiston, the city acquired a new city manager. He was intelligent, efficient, and career oriented. He had definite goals and objectives, one of which was to establish pay equity among city personnel. He offered me a leave of absence to earn a master's degree. He felt it would justify increasing the librarian's salary to a level on par with the other department heads.

What a chore it was to empty my home of 12 years, to rent it out, store everything and drive across country to northern Pennsylvania in steamy August to scrounge on a limited budget and live without my teenage cat for a year. I wiped out my accumulated sick leave, vacation leave, and life savings. But I know going back to school was the right decision.

THE REWARD

That year was a sabbatical from my life. It was my first time east of the Mississippi River. I got to know Chinese students and share their heartbreak at the Tiananmen Square massacre. I heard the campus rejoice when the Berlin Wall fell. I spent a glorious autumn in Leaf Festival country, taking hundreds of photos on sunny, class-free afternoons. Because of a Greyhound strike, I was able to travel expense-paid all over the east, while taking graduating students to job interviews. I visited Punxsutawney on Groundhog Day, ate a real Philly Cheese Steak, spent a free week in Washington, D.C. as the cherries blossomed and heard Niagara Falls roar. Despite hardships, it was a lovely year.

Besides all that, I acquired new knowledge about children's and young adult literature, collection development policies, statistical research, original cataloging and more. Now I understand how in the world Hermiston's books on the Donner Party came to be classified under Description and Travel.

The demeanor of graduate school encourages growth. Professors of any substance enjoy the challenge older students provide and appreciate the true-life experiences of a practitioner who can balance theory with realism. They smile, learn your name, write comments on your papers, and even take time to discuss those papers with you.

APRÈS-MLS: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

Do I view my job differently? I feel more confident, having the formal education to guide me in formulating my opinions. The knowledge I acquired has helped me establish and follow a collection development policy, handle censorship issues, extoll the library's place in the community, and earn respect in the community. When high school students asked, I could show them where to find the price of gold and how to read the stock page—such simple things, if you simply have the knowledge.


Getting the MLS gave me the option to move onto a career track, and that allowed me to accept staying where I was without feeling trapped. Personal conditions require that I stay, but it was encouraging to know I could leave if I wanted to. The most measurable payoff was just that — the payoff. I'm now making more than twice what I made when I left for graduate school in 1989.

Do I view the staff differently? I have always valued people over machinery. I learned early in working that no matter how glorious your working environment, if you don't have people who get along with each other, bring out the best in each other and give the best they have to the public, everyone gets

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LIBSUP-L

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Responses and answers flood the list within hours, and if enough subscribers are reading their mail, sometimes minutes. LIBSUP-L has also become a popular venue for surveys.

Several weeks ago, one fairly new subscriber asked for information concerning the use of PCs for cataloging instead of the terminals her institution used. It seems that her library was considering the change and asked her to gather information. Between the answers from LIBUP-S and another list, she was able to have the information within a day or two. It is common to read the results of surveys taken on the list or to hear from someone who asked for specific information and is pleased to report that the supervisor was impressed with the depth of knowledge "LIBSUPPERS" have. It is also common to see a request for someone from a specific library or area to respond to the member off list. That person usually needs specific information from only that library or area. One such request was to someone from either McGill or Laval Universities in Montreal, because the subscriber needed information on a specific bill submitted to the Quebec Legislature. Contact made and information received.

It would be foolish to claim that there are no problems with the list. It is unmoderated. There is, of

course, a filter that keeps most of the spam mail off the list, and particularly troublesome addresses can be ignored. However, should a member decide to use the list to chat, the posting will reach it and generate conversation, recrimination, and if it continues long enough, a message from the list owner about legitimate topics of discussion. Does this happen often? Not often, but once started it is self-generating. Unfortunately, we have had members resign because of it. Once, new subscribers hit a large chat session and were disgusted. Someone's supervisor picked a particular time to visit the list and hit that same chat problem. However, chat and its siblings are no worse on LIBSUP-L than on other lists to which the author belongs.

Is It Worth It?

Here I must plead some bias. I am the owner of the LIBSUP-L list and do believe that it is. That said, however, LIBSUP-L provides a service not only to paraprofessionals but to everyone in libraries. As the examples above show, the list provides information, a forum for discussion, and a mechanism for locating specific information. As long as it provided these services, attracts new members, fills a need for communication and organization among paraprofessionals, LIBSUP-L will be worth the financial resources, personnel and time it takes to run it. ☐

The MLS

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cheated. Work life can be truly miserable if you have to spend it with the wrong people.

I do view staff differently since getting the MLS, not because of the degree, but because of the lengths I went to in getting it. I expect staff members to want to take advantage of the training made available to improve themselves and improve their abilities to provide better services. And I expect them to set goals to expand services we don't provide at present. I want them to challenge me and to support me in promoting the concept of public library throughout the community. While it was a profitable experience, I know that I didn't learn enough at

graduate school to see me through the next decade—nothing on the Internet back then, or dealing with the homeless sleeping in the library, or emergency policies or ADA regulations.

THE MLS AND YOU!

If you are interested in earning an MLS, use your library reference skills to look into it. The ALA can provide a list of options. Their number is 1-800-545-2433. Whether you believe in the MLS or not, reality is that the career-track librarian must have it. "ALA-MLS required" is usually the cutoff in the job interview line. The MLS does have its place – right after your name. ☐