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## With All Due Respect

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# With All Due Respect

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In the library world, we've been committed to diversity since before it became popular. We take pride in maintaining diverse collections, treating all patrons with respect, and providing users with equal access to information

When we think about diversity within the workplace, we probably think about relatively recognizable categories such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, or disability. We've all had training and know that we must not discriminate on the basis of these characteristics.

Most libraries have built-in divisions: management and non-management; librarian and support staff; public services and technical services; salaried staff and volunteers. Within these groups, there may be further divisions, such as reference and circulation, acquisitions and cataloging, etc. Beyond these are less formal divisions based on personal style, interests, and educational background.

Because we are members of the Oregon Library Association's Support Staff Division (SSD), we became curious about the educational attainment of library support staff. A 1997 survey by the Support Staff Interest Round Table of the American Library Association found that paraprofessionals hold a wide variety of degrees. (See [http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our\\_Association/Round\\_Tables/LSSIRT/Strategic\\_Plan3/Issues\\_Survey/Results.pdf](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Round_Tables/LSSIRT/Strategic_Plan3/Issues_Survey/Results.pdf).) Of the 2,089 respondents, 64 had a master's in library science (MLS), 116 had another master's degree, and 10 had a Ph.D. An informal survey of the authors' paraprofessional co-workers and SSD colleagues found educational attainment ranging from high school to multiple bachelor's degrees. Two respondents had three bachelor's degrees each and there were also various vocational certifications and associate's degrees. Some individuals are working towards their bachelor's degree or towards their master's degree. Several had earned master's degrees, and one person had both an MLS and a Ph.D.

With these informal data in mind, we wondered whether we are guilty of being less respectful of coworkers based on their educational level. Are we guilty of being

education snobs? Of not paying closer attention to suggestions from colleagues without a college degree? Or are we reverse-education snobs who discount the suggestions of coworkers with undergraduate or graduate degrees?

Those of us who work in libraries value diversity. We also value literacy and knowledge. Consequently, we value formal education. Positions that include the word "librarian" in the title are generally not open to those without an MLS. Some non-librarian positions may require a bachelor's degree. Other times, job applicants may substitute college education for work experience. Respect for education is built into our workplaces. Although it makes sense to pay attention to educational background, we need to be careful about giving it more value than it deserves.

One thing that unites us is on-the-job learning. The longer we've been in the workforce, the more likely that we have learned skills on the job. Many skills we use every day—from book repair to designing Web pages to applying for grants—we learned on the job. We probably learned these skills informally from co-workers, in-house, at workshops sponsored by library associations, or in classes that are not part of a formal degree program.

If we look at all of our co-workers, from volunteers and student assistants to library directors, we are amazed at what they know and can do. This knowledge and these skills make library staff everywhere dynamic. They allow us to keep up with the demands of our field.

To continue meeting challenges, and to foster the diversity that libraries affirm, we must treat all of our colleagues with respect, regardless of the level of formal education they have attained. We are not suggesting that libraries alter position requirements; nor are we assigning value to anyone's level of education. We are saying that the most important thing is what we do, not how we learned to do it. 

