Non-Degreed Librarians

A Pathway for Progress for Academic Libraries

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**Abstract**

The mistreatment of support staff occurs in all fields of employment, and the field of academic librarianship is no different. Paraprofessionals—of a library’s workforce—suffer from a general lack of recognition and respect for the experience and expertise (often expressed through a differential in financial compensation), are vulnerable to widespread—if not universal—mistreatment at the hands of MLIS-holding librarian coworkers, and lack meaningful opportunities for career advancement. Allowing for select, highly qualified non-MLIS library paraprofessionals to be promoted into librarian positions addresses all of these issues.

Opening librarian vacancies for qualified workers without an MLIS degree will create a career pathway for the paraprofessional staff that has been lacking in academic libraries. With hope for material advancement, retention of paraprofessionals should increase. The higher pay also more fairly compensates staff for their expertise and skills. Institutional recognition of paraprofessionals through the creation of such a pathway can support a cultural change where mistreatment of paraprofessionals at academic libraries becomes a rarity.

*Keywords:* Paraprofessionals, Library assistants Master of library science degree, Library administration, Personnel management, Career development, Academic librarians, Academic libraries

**Introduction**

The issue of whether experienced, highly-skilled paraprofessionals qualify to hold the title of librarian recognizes longstanding issues of universal inequity and widespread—if not universal—mistreatment of paraprofessionals who now make up the backbone of academic libraries everywhere. This inequity is expressed in many ways such as when library assistants are not consulted in decisions that affect their work. Resistance to granting the title of “librarian” to staffers who have not gone through the work of earning the Master of Library and Information Science is understandable, but other solutions implemented by MLIS-holders to curb the belittlement of paraprofessional library staff and shrink the inequities that they face have failed to generate acceptable results. As such, librarian administrators need to be open minded to the benefits and pitfalls of allowing for non-degreed librarians in the organizational structures that they oversee. Librarians who oppose granting personnel a librarian position without first obtaining an MLIS justify their position by citing the two key benefits that the MLIS provides—a broad survey of library specializations and the socialization (instillment of values and ethics of information science)—as benefits not easily obtained outside of earning said degree.

**Literature Review**

Martin (1997) advocates that the title of librarian be reserved for individuals who have earned an MLS but recognizes that librarians are no longer the only staffers performing professional level work. Martin discusses how instances of librarians treating paraprofessionals poorly are one of the effects of this shift in duties. This breeds resentment from which a multitude of negative consequences spring from—each of which undermines a library’s ability to fulfill their mission. This article suggestions on how to solve this issue boils down to imploring librarians to “be nice.”

Woodsworth highlights a lack of a career path as the biggest problem for library assistants (1998, p. 60). Farrell discusses how the lack of career advancement, have paraprofessionals in academic libraries seeking alternative employment with better compensation resulting in a loss of institutional knowledge. Paraprofessionals that stay without the reward of material advancement, risk becoming disillusioned and detached from their day-to-day tasks, which as a whole will lead to a lower quality of work being performed in such libraries (2005, p. 68).

When discussing *Staffing trends in college and university libraries*, Gremmels does not consider awarding the title of librarian to highly-qualified paraprofessionals and instead emphasizes the need of librarians to socialize their library’s paraprofessionals with the values of librarianship (2013, 245). Unfortunately, more concrete measures will need to be taken to solve this inequity. There are paraprofessionals who have acquired the competencies and passion of librarians. Recognizing these individuals by granting then the title of librarian is a step in that direction. Santamaria discusses her previous experience as a graduate student with a non-degreed librarian and recognizes the contribution of a non-degreed librarian currently working under her (2004, p. 22).

**Proposed Solution**

Paraprofessional library assistants suffer inequities in pay, the mistreatment by MLIS-credentialled librarians, and a lack of significant career advancement that taken as a whole can only lead a reasonable person to conclude that academic libraries should be doing much more to take care of their paraprofessional workforce. Much of the literature boils down to “be courteous.” If everyone could be counted on to treat others in a courteous or at least professional manner, the world would be a better place; but until such a vision is realized, more decisive action on the better treatment of the paraprofessional staff of academic libraries is needed. No solution will be perfect at resolving these three issues, but respect, compensation, and the positions of career advancement are all tied to the title of librarian. Granting deserving paraprofessionals the title of librarian would be the first necessary step—a cornerstone—in an effort to tackling these longstanding problems.

There are two methods are available for which academic libraries may consider to opening up access to librarian position for their library assistants and other paraprofessional staffers. The first is to support their workforce in obtaining an MLIS degree through an accredited institution and the second is to recognize non-degreed librarians. Many libraries have already taken steps toward this such as instituting a librarian trainee program as is referred to by Farrell (2005 p. 68). As the author of this paper is working towards the completion of his own MLS degree outside of his institution’s library trainee program, he sees this path as feasible for some, but unattainable to many of his colleagues who are already relied on to the extent of librarians but have family—often children to take care of—and would have great difficulty in finishing the MLS.

This paper advocates that academic libraries open up a path to promote paraprofessionals into librarian positions as non-degreed librarians. As someone who is near finishing his MLS, the author can sympathize with the line of thinking that “work experience and independent study do not routinely replace a master’s degree” (Santamaria 2004, p. 22). The author, though, believes that it occurs more often than such sentiment would suggest. At its core, the MLIS provides a survey of the practices and specialties of the profession and socialization of the profession’s ethics and ideals. Those individuals who take pride in their work and take pride in the service that their library provides to their community will naturally assimilate the ideals of information science. Work experience often equips the paraprofessionals of academic libraries with knowledge and skills that are greater than newly hired librarians fresh out of graduate school.

To open up this opportunity to their paraprofessional staff while still insuring that standards of professionalism and proficiency are met, academic libraries should design criteria including the demonstration of the assimilation of the principles of librarianship, course requirements, and professional requirements such as active participation in professional organizations as qualifications for a non-MLIS holding paraprofessional’s promotion into a librarian position. Ideally, an institution would have list of core topics that personnel must satisfy through coursework or can establish to the satisfaction of their library administration that they already possess sufficient proficiency on the topic to skip specific coursework. In addition, it may be advisable to require that a paraprofessional candidate for a librarian position to also have completed (or a promise to complete) an advanced class on a topic relevant to the position the paraprofessional would be promoted into. It is understood that such implementation would not be easy, but no other solution holds as much promise to resolving the inequities that library paraprofessionals face as the non-degreed librarian. With the prospect of achieving a librarian position, retention among non-MLIS holding paraprofessionals who would previously have to seek employment elsewhere to achieve higher compensation will increase. Career opportunities should also boost job satisfaction of paraprofessional staffers. With paraprofessionals being allowed to hold librarian positions, the inequity between expertise and compensation of that expertise of an academic library’s staff will also be reduced.

**Conclusion**

Librarians by their very nature are advocates of language. They understand the power of the word “librarian.” When the librarian profession has failed to address the issue of fair treatment of paraprofessionals—often with their own graduate degrees—they should allow select high-valued coworkers the opportunity to hold the title of librarian to select to help reduce the historic inequity of library paraprofessionals and the librarian staff. While obtaining the MLIS will always be an option, practicalities demand a more aggressive approach. Academic libraries should provide a pathway for paraprofessionals to become non-degreed librarians.

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