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The Use of Paraprofessionals in Electronic Resources Management: Results of a Survey

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ABSTRACT

The authors surveyed 121 paraprofessionals employed in the management of electronic resources to gather information related to their institutions, education, and position descriptions. The authors sought not only to describe the kinds of work being performed by paraprofessionals in electronic resources, but also to explore correlations between institutional and educational variables and the kinds of duties being performed by electronic resources paraprofessionals. The authors discovered paraprofessionals performing a sizeable number of advanced duties and many holding advanced degrees but could find few predictive variables within our data correlating with the types of duties an electronic resources paraprofessional may be performing. In particular, holding an advanced degree seemed to yield little additional predictive power for ascertaining the level of an electronic resources paraprofessional's possible job duties.

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INTRODUCTION

Defining non-MLS holding library employees in terms of their responsibilities has been a challenge in librarianship since the emergence of the library profession in the early 20th century. Generally referred to as paraprofessionals, they are employed in every functional unit of the modern academic library with prescribed duties that are instrumental to daily operations. Without their contributions, libraries would have difficulty providing services that affect access and resource discovery. The present study seeks to examine the historical roles of paraprofessionals relative to professional librarians and how these roles may be changing and why by examining the profile and duties of a sample of paraprofessionals in electronic resources management. In the course of the present study, the authors will make reference to differences in professional and paraprofessional duties as well as duties that are more or less advanced. The reader is encouraged to note that the authors are making no proscriptive judgments as to what should constitute so-called professional or advanced duties or making value judgments regarding the importance of advanced degrees to their performance in the course of analyzing the literature and our data. The distinctions are based on prior definitions from the literature and author experience with electronic resources management staffing, job descriptions, and duties. The purpose of this study is descriptive and seeks merely to gauge the present state of paraprofessionals in electronic resources management.

The definition of a paraprofessional in the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science (ODLIS) illustrates some problems

with this class of library employee: "A member of the library support staff, usually someone who holds at least a baccalaureate degree, trained to understand specific procedures and apply them according to pre-established rules under normal circumstances without exercising professional judgment. Library paraprofessionals are usually assigned high-level technical support duties, for example, in copy cataloging and serials control. In smaller public library systems in the United States, branch librarians are sometimes paraprofessionals (Reitz, 2004)." The ODLIS definition unites a wide array of possible duties under the rubric of paraprofessional.

Unfortunately, the Occupational Outlook Handbook's (OOH) definition of library technicians and assistants is even less descriptive and entirely outmoded. It is a rare library indeed that would include "answering phones" and "organizing files" in paraprofessional position descriptions. The definition embraces two subcategories within the general paraprofessional designation, distinguishing between library technicians and library assistants, with the former having "more responsibilities than library assistants…" Both types, however, "catalogue and maintain library materials"; "maintain computer databases used to locate library materials"; and "perform other routine clerical tasks (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a)."

While the OOH may indicate a hierarchy within the paraprofessional class by distinguishing between two types of library paraprofessional, one with more responsibility and authority than the other, Zhu's research demonstrates that the library profession lacks a consensus as to what to label this group and offers the following: "paraprofessionals, library assistants, library specialists, library associates, non-master of library and information science (MLIS) staff, para-librarians, sub-professionals, non-professionals, library aids, library technician, library support staff, and so on (Zhu, 2012)." For clarity's sake and consistency

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with modern parlance within the library profession, the authors will refer to staff holding positions that do not require an MLS as paraprofessionals. This definition notes the important fact that many paraprofessionals have earned MLS degrees, yet work in paraprofessional positions—a fact that the present study starkly illustrates.

The aforementioned definitions of paraprofessional work do not encompass the management of electronic resources, so it remains unclear how to determine what type of job duties are appropriate for paraprofessionals working in this area of technical services. One may conclude that these definitions lag behind modern processes in technical services environments but this is only partly the answer. Arguably, electronic resources management is still a nascent subfield of librarianship that emerged in the 1990s. There are several discussions regarding the professional identity of the electronic resources librarian as depicted by the analysis of position descriptions (Hartnett, 2014; Murdock, 2010). While paraprofessionals are not the focus of these studies, both authors found that some electronic resources librarian positions require the supervision of staff who assist with their respective processes. Logically, paraprofessionals have some role in managing electronic resources under the auspices of the electronic resources librarian.

Apart from general assumptions, there is research-based evidence that technical services paraprofessionals can have a strong role in managing electronic resources. Two studies confirm this, albeit using different approaches. One examines the role of the paraprofessional in technical services and the other focuses on the trend towards the obsolescence of paraprofessionals managing print serials and the feasibility of their future role in managing electronic journals (Glasser, 2010; Zhu, 2012). The category of electronic resources paraprofessionals warrants closer examination because there are no studies devoted solely to discussing their role.

In 2014, the authors conducted a survey of paraprofessionals who assist with managing electronic resources in order to reveal the type of work assigned. An analysis of the survey results gives an emerging portrait of the electronic resources paraprofessional through educational requirements for the position held, the increasing/decreasing complexity of duties assigned, and prescribed rote work. This survey of electronic resources paraprofessionals focuses on their duties, professional experience and perspective while seeking to address several issues:

1) To describe the general role of paraprofessionals in managing electronic resources: what training they have, what duties they perform, and what is their role in the organization.
2) To assess correlations between the education and training of paraprofessionals and the types of duties they may be assigned
3) To assess the transfer of duties once conceived of as "professional" to paraprofessionals and what variables may correlate with such a transfer

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE EMERGENCE OF LIBRARY PARAPROFESSIONALS

Library paraprofessional employees have a curious history that coincided with the emergence of the library profession. Bishop's (1973) monograph, "The Use of Professional Staff in Libraries: A Review 1923–1971" is an examination of primary sources tracing the development of the library professional that also offers a historical account of the paraprofessional vis-à-vis the professional librarian. As early as 1923, Williamson's "Training For Librarians" recognized that there are two distinct categories of library employees—clerical and professional—with each type defined by "general and vocational education of a particular character" (Bishop, 1973). According to Bishop, Williams did not offer a distinction between specific professional and clerical duties because his aim was to provide educational recommendations for professional employees (Bishop, 1973). As a result, the level of educational attainment remained

the standard way of classifying library employees. In 1939, for example, the American Library Association (ALA) issued "Classification and Pay Plans for Municipal Public Librarians" and defined three categories—professional (college including one year of training in library school), sub-professional (some college), and clerical (high school education) (Bishop, 1973). Subsequent decades were devoted to defining professional and non-professional duties with some attempts to resolve the issue of work duties in the 1950s. Finally in 1970, the ALA adopted the "Library Education and Personnel Utilization" which provided a framework for library employee status designations. Paraprofessionals were said to have a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree (depending on the responsibilities of the position) with supportive responsibilities, while professionals are defined by either having a master's degree or a professional degree relevant to the specialty, and are essentially managers and exercise independent judgment (Bishop, 1973).

In 1991, the ALA Office for Library Personnel Resources, Standing Committee on Library Education's (1991) "Role Definition" addressed the transfer of responsibilities from professionals to paraprofessionals (and vice versa). The report points out that "the term 'routine' is frequently used to differentiate between the work done by librarians and paraprofessionals", but this does not accurately characterize the positions many paraprofessionals hold; library paraprofessionals supervise staff, oversee operations, and have responsibilities requiring "sophisticated judgment calls (ALA Office for Library Personnel Resources, 1991)." This report represented an early challenge to the binary professional/paraprofessional model of library staffing.

A little over a decade later, in 2002, the ALA (2002) revisited the status of the professional and paraprofessional by revising the 1970 policy "Library and Information Studies and Human Resource Utilization." This proved to be a more nuanced approach to the troublesome binary employee model. The current policy recognizes various types of professionals that contribute to the library organization, but the library profession bears "responsibility for defining the training and education required" of these personnel (Council of the American Library Association, 2002).

In addition to the ALA's classification of library employees, the ALA formally acknowledged the contributions of paraprofessionals to the organization. At the ALA Annual Conference in 2005, the ALA Policy on Inclusiveness and Mutual Respect (2005) was approved. The ALA recognized the contributions of support staff and "welcomes the contributions and participation of all library workers" (Council of the American Library Association, 2005). This policy was a significant step towards the inclusion of paraprofessionals in a more fluid system of library staffing.

THE PARAPROFESSIONAL IN TECHNICAL SERVICES: CATALOGING

Despite official distinctions between professionals and paraprofessionals, their roles remain profoundly blurred in the 21st century technical services environment (Cox & Myers, 2010; Jones & Stivers, 2004; Leibowitz, 2002, 2012; Milczarski & Garofalo, 2011; Montgomery & Sparks, 2000; Obrig, Thompson, & Lingle, 2005; West, Miller, & Wilson, 2011; Zhu, 2012). A familiar instance can be found in staffing for cataloging. This group of paraprofessionals expanded throughout the 20th century as the steady migration of cataloging work from professionals to paraprofessionals was the result of emerging technologies. Specifically, the national acceptance of the MARC format for cataloging materials in 1971 paved the way for increased automation among libraries. This resulted in the creation and storage of MARC records that was facilitated by the development of the microcomputer. Automation enabled non-MLS staff to take on most of the copy cataloging and this is what occurred throughout the latter part of the decade (Johnson, 1996). In the early 1980s Eskoz's survey and subsequent follow up investigation (1990) of 106 academic library catalog departments found a "gradual trend toward involving support staff in higher levels of cataloging" (Eskoz, 1990, p. 388).