

# Raised By Wolves: The New Generation of Feral Professionals In the Academic Library

*James G. Neal*

Academic libraries are expanding the employment of individuals in professional assignments who do not have the basic traditional qualifying credential, the master's degree in library science. This includes the hiring of staff with advanced degrees in subject disciplines, with specialized foreign language skills, with teaching experience, or with technology expertise, for example, into librarian positions. This includes a wide range of new professional assignments in such areas as systems, human resources, fundraising, publishing, instructional technology, and facilities management, for example, that demand diverse educational backgrounds. This includes the continuing transfer of responsibilities formerly carried out by librarians to support staff and student employees. In addition, there is a new cohort of MLS librarians who have received their degrees through distance rather than residential programs.

What are the implications of these trends for the academic library workforce and for the condition of the academic library workplace? Historically, the shared graduate educational experience has provided a standard preparation and socialization into the li-

brary profession. The new professional groups have been "raised" in other environments and bring to the academic library a "feral" set of values, outlooks, styles, and expectations. What is the impact of these staffing strategies in such areas as employee relations, training, management, and leadership?

There is a rich literature in sociology on the diversity of professions, contrasting the distinctions between the "classic" professions, like medicine and law, and other kinds of professional occupations. There are numerous studies focused on attitude changes as a result of socialization toward a profession. A profession embraces a unique body of knowledge that is the basis of expertise in a particular type of service. A professional person is autonomous from client and employer in determining how best to provide service. The literature of librarianship is replete with reflections and arguments about the professional characteristics of the field and the level of public understanding, recognition, and respect. The library profession has consistently struggled to defend its special base of knowledge and has always been viewed as heavily dependent on the

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*James G. Neal is Vice President, Information Services and University Librarian at Columbia University, email: [jneal@columbia.edu](mailto:jneal@columbia.edu).*

employing organization and not professionally independent. Does this ambiguity about the professional characteristics of librarianship suggest that educational preparation for the field does not have a socialization impact comparable to other professions?

Graduate professional education is focused on enabling students to undergo a transformation of identity so that they are prepared to carry out the role and status of a professional. The program seeks to inculcate professional values and beliefs, and through role taking and identification with others, contributes to the adoption and internalization of a professional self-image. This concept of professional self is achieved through social contacts and shared experiences with other students and faculty members. Graduates are expected to see themselves as competent, worthwhile, accepted by peers and clients, and successful. In relation to those served or treated, a professional strives for legitimacy and dependence, or what some sociologists refer to as cultural authority. Does the professional education experience for librarians produce these experiences and outcomes? If affirmative, then the expanding diversification of the professional pool in the academic library would produce cultural challenges that must be managed. If negative, then the various strains of professional might integrate more consistently and effectively.

It is widely documented that librarianship draws students from a wide range of academic and occupational backgrounds. The frequent second career status of librarians, either moves from jobs in other professional fields or after a stint in academic assignments, is often discussed. The challenge is evaluating whether such patterns reflect limited opportunities in the chosen field, a recognition of a problematic fit between previous job and personal aspirations, or a profound interest in and commitment to the service goals of librarianship. Is the decision to become a librarian and to proceed through an extended educational program a reflection of personal disappointment and compromise or a positive orientation to a new professional adventure?

The role and relevance of the master's degree in library science has been routinely contested in the rhetoric and forums of the profession. One might recall a program at the 1985 ALA annual conference focused on "The MLS—For the Public Good or For Our Good," and the wide-ranging debate on the topic of qualifications for the profession, and the role of the degree as credential preference or requirement. Does

the applied or practical emphasis of library education and its heavy emphasis on fundamentals undermine professional focus on critical concepts, creative strategies, and methodological rigor?

The launch of several programs in 2003 among a group of research libraries to bring Ph.D. holders into librarian assignments focused our collective attention on the persistent trend to populate our professional ranks in academic libraries with alternative or non-traditional academic backgrounds and raised once again fears about the integrity of the MLS and the professional character of librarianship. As John Berry noted in a November 1, 2003 *Library Journal* editorial, some might view the MLS degree as "just a union card to get into a closed shop" or "little more than an indoctrination and orientation to library values, customs and jargon." These programs highlight the growing demands in academic libraries for individuals to fill specialized positions, especially when these skills and viable candidates cannot be identified in standard library professional pools. There have been calls for "fast track" education programs or even "executive MLS" experiences to prepare individuals for librarian assignments when they bring to the profession different but relevant credentials and backgrounds. As the number of such individuals in librarian assignments increase in our academic libraries, we need to assess not only the impact on library collection and service quality and reputation, but also the new tensions that are created among different flavors and classes of information professional.

Another related phenomenon that should be monitored is the proliferation of new professional assignments in academic libraries and the formation of professional-level classified management or technical assignments in jobs once held by librarians. These professional staff may bring experience working in a library, academic, or service setting, but are not expected to present MLS credentials. In fact, other degrees and thus different expertise are typically favored and recruited. The annual salary statistics of the Association of Research Libraries document the expanding number of positions in functional specialist, computer systems, and administrative services assignments. Thus another class of professionals has entered the academic library environment, often in key leadership or in critical support positions. Drawn from a wide array of academic backgrounds and work experiences, they increasingly

challenge the standards and practices of library professionalism. Often not burdened by the professional and scholarly responsibilities of the academic librarian, they may question the relevance and impact of librarians in the institution and on the regional and national levels.

Another trend dating back to the technology changes starting in the late 1960s has been the tension, or better, the divide between librarians and other personnel groups and the progressive “professionalization” of the traditional support or clerical staff. Some authors have defended the “privileges and elite status” of librarians and advocated the “fencing off” of librarian rank, prerogatives and authority. As librarian roles in the academy have been redefined, and as librarians have expanded their teaching activities on campus, involvement with research teams, participation on broad collaborations on campus and externally, and focused on innovative and entrepreneurial application of technology, the move to support staff of tasks once performed by librarians has progressed. Increasingly, staff and librarian work together on important strategic and management initiatives, leading to schizophrenic organizational cultures and sometimes inequitable conditions. As technology has assumed increasing amounts of the routine work of the library, there has been a profound intellectualization and blurring of responsibilities across the academic library organization. Task overlap can lead to confusion and conflict.

A final observation is the role of online education in bringing accredited graduate programs in librarianship to an expanding audience of interested students. Many of the library schools provide blended experiences, combining physical and virtual classroom time. But there is an expanding number of offerings that are

completely online and rely on the talents of the teacher, the adequacy of the technology infrastructure, and the sophistication of the course management system to provide a rich educational experience. One might question whether students going through the online programs are being extended opportunities for effective socialization into the profession, and whether the loss of the collegial and mentoring relationships that are implicit in a residential setting is a viable sacrifice. The trade-off between delivering graduate library education to underserved areas and to individuals trying to juggle family, work and learning and the loss of effective integration into the profession must be recognized and accommodated through appropriate compensatory strategies.

Do these developments in the preparation of librarians, in the organization of staffing, and in the definition of professional roles in academic libraries align with the metaphor of an untamed versus a domesticated personnel condition? Academic library administrators must be more sensitive to the diverse background, interests, aspirations, and “hunger” of the new professional staffing realities. They must commit to a more “ferocious” staff orientation and training commitment, and seek out creative opportunities for employees to “pack” together more routinely. They must provide more effective training for managers in working with more ambiguous definitions of professional and more blended staff participation. Academic libraries are being forced to cope more routinely with “savage” and competitive conditions, and the ability to recruit and develop new expertise in the organization and to integrate with compassion and understanding the array of “fauna” now seeking to work in our setting will be a critical measure of success.