

# Are You the Librarian?

The face of quality library service depends on drawing a wider circle in our profession

by Jennifer S. Kutzik



Stephen M. Ravencraft

# S

o just what *do* support staff say when asked, “Are you the librarian?” “I do answer ‘yes’ to that question because the general public does not know the difference between a librarian and an information services assistant,” related Padma Polepeddi of Westerville

(Ohio) Public Library. Linda Hearn, a 26-year library veteran without an MLS degree, holds the title of “assistant branch librarian” and always answers, “Yes.” But Joan Neslund of Ellensburg (Wash.) Public Library countered: “If a patron asks, I say ‘Yes.’ If I am asked by another professional, I say ‘No.’”

Binary thinking, at the root of Western philosophy, leads most of us into either/or mode. A person is a librarian or isn’t, is a professional or isn’t. But the real world is more fluid and complex, with each person challenging or accepting boundaries all



JENNIFER S. KUTZIK is information technology technician II at Colorado State University’s Library Technology Services Department in Fort Collins.

the time. “We are all performing jobs that only those with the MLS would have done just five years ago,” states Mary T. Kalnin, a 33-year employee at the University of Washington in Seattle. “I also try to stop myself from saying ‘I just work here.’ It seems to belittle the job that nonlibrarians do,” says Linda Patterson, circulation supervisor at Multnomah County (Oreg.) Library’s Central Library.

## How staff COPE

“I can remember it like it happened yesterday,” recalls Dorothy Morgan, business manager of Liverpool (N.Y.) Public Library. As president of the American Library Association’s fledgling Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT), she approached the ALA Executive Board in January 2001 to petition for a third Congress on Professional Education (COPE 3). “I felt so passionate about the issue. . . . I let them know I was speaking on behalf of LSSIRT; that I was only one voice out of thousands for support staff.”

In May 2003, over 150 delegates representing Association leaders, administrators, educators, and support staff gathered at the third Congress on Professional Education to brainstorm future directions for the professional development of library workers (*AL*, Aug. 2003, p. 36–37).

Their first task was to identify what support staff do well. Each small group generated extensive statement lists that included such attributes as “fill vital roles,” “understand collections and materials,” “understand users,” “are the faces of the library,” “use teamwork concepts,” and “have a service attitude.”

The stories of library workers are as diverse as the libraries represented within ALA. With terms of service ranging from three months to over 30 years, some feel the library calling early in life. “In 6th grade, I ran the Van Buren Elementary circulation desk during recess while the librarian took her afternoon break,” reported James Farmer, head of access services at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. “As a teenager, I volunteered in the library at the Cheyenne Veterans Affairs Medical Center,” recalled Trish Palluck, resource-sharing specialist for the Wyoming State Library in Cheyenne. Many bring rich experiences to library service from previous posts as health care personnel, teachers, bus drivers, mail carriers, editors, bartenders, jewelers, herbalists, and full-time parents.

Many library support staff have earned advanced degrees up to the doctoral level. However, some MLS-holding delegates to COPE 3 were surprised to learn that not everyone working in a library aspires to obtain an advanced library degree. When the issue of upward mobility was discussed, support staff delegates made a strong case for a career lattice that offers parallel promotional opportunities. “I don’t see any advantage in today’s working environment in libraries to pursue a costly MLS degree,” said one staffer who preferred to remain anonymous. “I like what I do as a principal library assistant,” stated Ellen Brewer of Ocean County (N.J.) Library.

The perception that degreed librarians spend too many hours in meetings or compiling endless reports deterred Betsy Miller, senior library technician at Robins Air Force Base in Georgia, from pursuing her MLS. “I prefer to do ‘library work’ (a.k.a. ‘play with the books’),” she explained. Amy P. Underwood, who has served for 28 years at Ohio University-Zanesville/Zane State College, echoed that sentiment, saying, “I don’t really want to do management, so I’m content not to pursue the MLS.” “I had a choice,” mused Steve Mitchell, a 19-year

professional of the Estes Park (Colo.) Public Library. “Get an MLS degree and become a library administrator, or finish my novel and become rich and famous. I chose to finish my novel, *Steve McQueen Would Be Proud* [Xlibris Corporation, 2001]. I’m not rich or famous, yet.”

In these times of shrinking budgets and retiring workers, many support staff administer the full gamut of library functions without possessing an MLS or MLIS degree. “I am the sole employee in this library,” stated Eva Anderson, library administrator at Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado. “I order the books, catalog and recatalog the books, hold seminars for the faculty, work with the teachers on curriculum mapping, keep a nice display case, and do random bits of research.” Even workers with advanced library degrees may find that a support staff position is the right fit for them, or is a necessity due to a lack of positions requiring an MLS or MLIS in their desired region.

### *Does loyalty pay?*

Are long-term library employees rewarded for their loyalty, or do they choose to stay for the variety of work and adequate benefits despite a lack of perceived advancement opportunities? “I think it depends on the library system and if you can continue to grow and learn within that system,” says Heather Rivera, a 26-year veteran of Newark (N.J.) Public Library. “I think if the work is engaging, challenging, and you are respected, then it always pays to stay,” asserts Dee Wilson, who has worked 17 years at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Sue Knoche reported that East Tennessee State University in Johnson City awards a \$100 longevity benefit for each year of employment to offset the lower salaries in that geographic area. Linda Patterson of Multnomah County Library testified, “We are paid more than most places that I am aware of. So, financially, it would not pay for me to move.”

But the issue of the pay discrepancy between librarians and support staff continues to be a thorn in many a staffer’s side. “You



**“As a teenager, I volunteered  
in the library at the Cheyenne  
[Wyoming] Veterans Affairs Medical  
Center.” —Trish Palluck**



don't get paid for the work you do—it's very demoralizing," laments Irene Shown of New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. "Even after 20 years, I don't make what an entry-level librarian starts at." Given the latest salary statistics, library workers in general bemoan a "serve, suffer, and sacrifice" reality when it comes to compensation that is commensurate with that of their MLS-holding colleagues.

### *Does certification hold a key?*

Numerous support staff rally behind library technical assistant (LTA) programs, or general certification of support staff skill sets, as tools to higher pay. Some workers believe job qualifications requiring the LTA degree or certification would facilitate moving to better-paying positions at other libraries.

In partnership with ALA's Office for Human Resource Development and Recruitment, LSSIRT's Certification Committee developed a survey instrument to help determine the level of interest in, and the perceived benefit of, a voluntary certification program. To provide more information on current practice, Jenifer Grady, director of the ALA-Allied Professional Association, recently began compiling the variety of certifications available to support staff nationwide. "There are conflicting currents," e-mailed Sarah Vaughn of the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. "Do we want certification to take on more duties . . . or does that weaken our status by making us a cheap and ill-supported alternative to MLS-holding librarians?"

### *Growth by Association*

ALA began targeting support staff recruitment in 2001 with an ongoing, reduced-rate offer of \$59 for membership in ALA, LSSIRT, and either the Reference and User Services Association or the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services. "I joined when they offered a reduced price for support staff for a trial period," reported Jane Ternes of Walla Walla (Wash.) Public Library. In September 2004, the Association introduced a new library support staff dues category and rate of \$35

(AL, Sept. 2004, p. 6) LSSIRT, in particular, experienced rapid growth from these initiatives.

Still, the ongoing recruitment challenges are numerous. To foster an "each one, reach one" effort, the ALA Member and Customer Service Center has prepared a peer-recruitment kit called "Sharing Connections," available at [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org). Many support staff are not aware of the new rates and believe membership is still too costly. Others report they could never afford to attend national conferences, nor do they believe current conference programming addresses their continuing education needs. "Until recently, I didn't think ALA had much to offer for support staff, but it looks like they are starting to change," said Lisa Adams of Richland (Wash.) Public Library.

Certainly, ALA conference programming to address support staff needs has made noticeable strides. Offerings from ALA's Public Library Association have grown from one or two programs geared to library assistants' continuing education at previous Spring Symposiums to four at this year's March 7–9 gathering. At the 2005 Annual Conference in Chicago, an inaugural ALA "Conference within a Conference" will offer a reduced-rate experience to support staff. With more emphasis on the professional development of all staff, forward-looking library deans and directors are encouraging support staff to join their professional organization and, when feasible, attend conferences.

Through years of service and dedication to their libraries, support staff have chosen the career of information provision, a career of honor. However, it is a choice whose future holds many options and directions. The challenge will be for the profession—and ALA—to more clearly define that future.

Then, when a patron comes to a library service point and asks, "Are you the librarian?" without hesitation, the staff member will answer, "I *am* a library professional. How may I help you?" ❖



**"I had a choice. Get an MLS degree and become a library administrator, or finish my novel. I chose to finish my novel." —Steve Mitchell**

