50th Anniversary Feature—

Personnel Issues for Academic Librarians: A Review and Perspectives for the Future

Sheila D. Creth

For fifty years, the personnel issues of greatest concern to academic librarians have centered on professionalism, assignments and responsibilities, credentials and compensation, and status and role within the library and the academy. While positive changes have occurred regarding these issues during this period, many remain unresolved as librarians continue to struggle to define their place in the academy. The current environment in scholarly communication and higher education is providing an opportunity for librarians to define a future that will ensure their central role in the educational process and thus resolve these remaining age-old questions.

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ne of the more striking aspects of the library personnel function from 1939 to date is how consistent the issues and con-

cerns have been. It also is clear in reviewing the literature that the environment external to higher education has influenced both the particular issues of concern to academic librarians and their response. The most prevalent issues have been professionalism, assignments and responsibilities for the librarian, status and role within the library and the academy, credentials, and compensation. These issues, which are interrelated, have generated a host of other issues including faculty status, collective bargaining, classification schemes, ratio of professional to clerical staff, participatory management, representation of women in administrative positions, peer review, evaluation processes, professional development, and release time for research. And yet another issue surfaced in the 1970s of considerable concern to academic librarians: the fear librarians will be replaced by computer or information specialists in the high-tech information society of tomorrow.

Along the academic library continuum from the small college library to the largest university library, the interest and response to these issues has, not surprisingly, varied. Has there been progress or improvement on personnel matters during this fifty-year period? Even on this agreement may depend on how one feels about the changes that have occurred and the pace of change.

The two fundamental personnel issues are position responsibilities and performance expectations for academic librarians, and their professional status—two issues that are inexorably tied to one another.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

It is not possible to address the issue of

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role and status, or professionalism, of academic librarians unless one first examines the primary assignments and responsibilities of academic librarians both past and present. After all, what we do is what we are within the context of the academic environment. While the broadly stated objective for academic librarians, to organize and provide access to knowledge, has not altered, the way in which it is accomplished, the environment in which it takes place, and the actual duties of librarians have altered over fifty years. Nonetheless, the question of whether the work of librarians is intellectual or routine and clerical in nature continues to be asked, and this has affected the view of librarians as professionals.

The American Library Association began to identify professional activities as early as 1927 by developing classification schemes for professional and clerical positions.¹ The first such report to focus specifically on academic libraries was issued in 1929.² The ALA issued two additional reports on classification and pay plans for libraries in institutions of higher education, in 1943 and 1947.³ While a 1939 report on public libraries recommended three categories of staff—professional, subprofessional, and clerical—academic libraries continued to use only professional and clerical positions.⁴

In the 1947 publication it was noted that knowledge other than of librarianship might be considered essential, and in situations in which a person has specialized knowledge appointment should be as a professional.⁵

A shortage of librarians beginning in the late 1940s no doubt was largely responsible for the attention given to defining professional and clerical responsibilities as well as an appropriate ratio of professional to clerical staff. A major study was undertaken for the University of California library system in 1947 to address "two major interrelated problems" of the postwar era.⁶ "The first of these problems lies in student enrollment, which is rising with each semester to unprecedented figures, so that library facilities and services which may have been adequate before the war are now quite inadequate. . . . [and] the lack of sufficient qualified librarians and the deficiency in usual library salary scales.¹⁷⁷

The result of this study was to establish four levels of librarian positions as well as a classification plan for library assistants. The authors stated that

the present shortage of librarians can be partially offset, and their work limited to strictly professional duties, by increasing the number of high-level subprofessional employees who can relieve librarians of a host of duties which verge on professional activity but which can effectively be performed by subprofessional men and women with considerable education and library experience.⁸

Throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s the matter of librarians' assignments along with the related issue of the ratio of professional and support staff continued to be discussed. Louis Wilson and Maurice Tauber in 1945 suggested that "many libraries are using professionally trained personnel to perform clerical or subprofessional tasks."9 And Edwin Williams raised the issue of shifting the balance of professional to nonprofessional staff in order to relieve librarians from assuming such a large percentage of routine tasks.¹⁰ A decade later, Archie McNeal conducted a study of fifty university libraries to assess their ratio of staff in 1940, 1948, and 1954 and concluded that "it is evident that a trend toward a higher ratio of clerical to professional staff is developing but it cannot be assumed that this is a purposeful trend. Rather, it is more likely a result of growth, and of necessity imposed by the increasing demand for pro-fessional librarians."¹¹ McNeal strongly endorsed a reconsideration of staffing patterns and assignments in the concluding remarks of his 1956 paper:

In summary, it is proposed that administrators consider the duties of the professional members of their staff, and attempt to utilize professional competence in the performance of work that will challenge and lead to further development of professional skill. Just as the repetitious phrases in a second-grade reader dull the interest and enthusiasm of an experienced reader, so will the assignment of clerical routine stultify the energetic professional librarian.

It is further proposed that the subprofessional

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be nurtured and encouraged, and that this group be given such training and advancement as may be possible. Recruitment interests can often be served through observant utilization of special skills within this category.

Finally, the clerical staff, properly assigned and properly supervised, can accomplish effectively and efficiently much more than it is permitted to do in libraries. Proper delegation of responsibility, with commensurate authority, is essential to good staff organization.¹²

Despite such frank examination of librarian assignments as represented by the literature, Olga Bishop stated that "by the end of the 1950s librarians still had not been able either to convert their defined professional duties into full-time professional positions in any type of library or to achieve recognition as a professional by the public."¹³

Meanwhile, beginning in the 1960s, professionalism became a topic of interest to social science researchers. William Goode, a sociologist at Columbia University, published the results of his study in 1961 in which he compared librarians to the set of characteristics he considered central to professional activities.14 In the context of his professional model, he found that librarians did not measure up, and he questioned whether they would ever become full-fledged professionals. He recommended the following actions to increase the professional nature of librarians' work: (1) heighten the caliber of recruits, (2) increase the number of years of formal education, (3) ensure that professionally qualified persons do not spend time on purely clerical tasks, (4) increase funding for library research to develop the knowledge base, and (5) change the view of the library from a museum or storehouse to a service-oriented organization. He even suggested that a new category of "research librarian" be created.¹⁵ Goode indicated that success in developing professionalism "means changing the relations between professional and client, the professional and other professionals, the professional and the general public, and among the colleagues in their professional community."16 In 1964 two other sociologists published results of their studies of professionals which included librarians.1

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Both Amitai Etzioni from Columbia University and Harold Wilensky at the University of California expressed reservations that librarians were professionals within the context of their definition. A social scientist at the University of Minnesota focused on the relationship between professionalism and bureaucracy and included librarians as one of eleven groups in his 1968 study.18 Richard Hall found that while librarians held certain philosophical beliefs, these were not strongly supported in reality. For example, though his study demonstrated that librarians held a belief in service to the public which "includes the idea of indispensability of the profession and that the work performed benefits both the public and the practitioner," he questioned whether librarians really promoted their services.¹⁹ Hall also found that librarians' belief in self-regulation and feeling of autonomy was among the lowest compared with other groups in his study. Specifically he found that librarians ranked among the highest in terms of hierarchy of authority, division of labor, rules, procedures, impersonality, and technical competence, which in his view indicates a higher degree of bureaucratization.20

Goode completed a second study as a follow-up to the 1961 study, and to his earlier conclusions he added others which are reflected in the following statement: "The public is not convinced that there is a basic science of librarianship: the skill is thought to be only clerical or administrative. . . . his most important reference and validating group—university professors—is not likely to alter its judgment of the knowledge-base of librarianship."²¹ There were several criteria used in these studies that excluded librarians from the definition of a professional: academic preparation, the development and application of new knowledge, activities and duties that were clerical in nature, and the lack of a collegial environment. A focus on duties and assignments, and the role of librarians within the organization beyond their specific assignment continued to receive attention by librarians in the 1960s and 1970s.

Robert Downs and Robert Delzell conducted a survey of library personnel at the Universities of California, Illinois, and Michigan.²² They concluded that academic libraries were beginning to consider the three levels of positions recommended in earlier reports—professional, subprofessional, and clerical. They also addressed the need to establish a ratio of professional to nonprofessional staff so that librarians would not have to spend time on elementary and routine tasks, obviously still a reality for many librarians at the time of their study in the early 1960s.

Elizabeth Stone conducted a study of randomly selected librarians and concluded that with regard to decision making, goal setting and experimenting with new ideas, librarians felt that administrators were not fostering organizational conditions that would encourage, even minimally, professional growth.23 In contrast to these findings, Robert Presthus, in his study of the organization and authority structure in libraries, determined that while librarians perceived an external administrative control over their activities, they appeared to prefer this administrative authority over control by colleagues. He concluded that librarianship attracted individuals with high dependency needs.²⁴ Presthus also measured librarians' response to accommodating change and found that two-thirds were generally ambivalent in their reactions ranging from "reluctant acceptance" to a "wait-andsee" attitude. Based on results of his study regarding librarians' attitudes toward change and independence, he expressed a concern that library work might be taken over by default by information specialists.25

In his study, Kenneth Plate determined that 69 percent of the department heads in large university libraries thought of the new professional as an "intern rather than as a professional equal and believe that only after a period of apprenticeship (which may range from six months to three years) can the subordinate be permitted to participate in the decisionmaking process."²⁶

By the beginning of the 1970s, the complex and often confounding questions regarding appropriate assignments and duties for librarians and, by extension, their professional status and role had been reviewed, studied, and discussed extensively. During the next decade, it would be clear that not only did these personnel issues remain unresolved but that they would be addressed with even more passion as new dimensions surfaced: faculty status, collective bargaining, participatory management and collegial governance, and affirmative action. There is little question that the social context of the late 1960s and the 1970s brought an urgency to bear on these issues.

William Axford describes the 1969 ALA convention as "the meeting which served as a catalyst for the explosive release of a reservoir of pent-up discontent within the entire profession . . . [when] such issues as women's liberation, ethnic power, gay liberation, library governance and the social responsibilities of libraries brushed aside the traditional ALA concerns as the focus of the convention."27 Within this context Axford describes the reaction of academic librarians to the topic of faculty status in the following way: "The academic librarian's contribution to these revolutionary festivities was roaring approval of a motion presented at the ACRL membership meeting which established as a major ACRL goal the achievement of full faculty status for all academic librarians."

He goes on to say that "it was too bad that the assembly did not devote equal attention to the serious consideration of 'attendant responsibilities' " referring to librarians' willingness, in his view, to accept equal status with the faculty without fulfilling expectations for scholarly pursuits.²⁸ Furthermore, Axford states, "Many academic librarians, perhaps even a majority . . . tend to be strongly service and task-oriented rather than truly professionally motivated—much more concerned with procedural details and dealing with the inevitable daily crises than in the macrocosm of librarianship and higher education in all its historic dimensions."²⁹

Following the 1969 ALA conference, the Association of College and Research Libraries established a committee to develop standards for faculty status for academic librarians, which were eventually accepted. Throughout the 1970s the literature is dotted with articles in which librarians argue the appropriateness of faculty status.

A series of viewpoints on the identity of academic librarians presented an interesting contrast among eight individuals responding to the lead piece written by Axford.³⁰ Axford suggests that there had been little real gains for academic librarians with regard to faculty status, and therefore their professional recognition within the academy. He indicates that the social and economic context of the 1970s created an environment in which success for academic librarians receiving faculty status was limited by the intense competition for tenured positions on campus as the growth and expansion in higher education not only leveled off but declined.31

In her response to Axford, Beverly Toy, in addition to agreeing with his position on the requirements for faculty status for librarians, identifies other challenges that exist for academic librarians, including those from library assistants concerned with the "equal pay for equal work" issue and information scientists "claiming their superior qualifications to manage libraries."32 Maurice Marchant's response focused more on the persistent issue of activities and responsibilities of librarians that act to limit their participation in scholarly activities. He identifies two factors that need to be addressed: "release from the performance of low level repetitive functions and enrichment of the librarian's role by adding high-level cognitive skills, requiring high scholarly attainment, that enhance the library's performance."33

A major change occurred in libraries beginning in the 1970s that would, over time, have a dramatic impact on how work was accomplished, who performed certain activities, and ultimately organization design and the process for decision making. With the introduction of OCLC (the Online Computer Library Center) the era of computing was ushered into libraries; the implications of this technology on the library organization were not immediately recognized and would evolve over the next decade. The national cataloging database provided by OCLC shifted the traditional division of work between professional and support staff as fewer librarians were needed to handle what had previously been viewed as the most intellectual of activities. In addition, a relationship between library staff and members of the network emerged, particularly as evaluation of performance standards became a public activity rather than a local one and members of the network made judgments about a specific library's performance.

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The importance of network relationships and consortial decision making began to develop in the 1970s and continues to this day to influence the approach by academic librarians to technological developments and other programmatic and operational matters such as collection management. With the advent of computer technology, the activities of academic libraries began to alter, but equally important was the fact that their role as a member of a network or consortium became as important as their independent status had been in the past.

Based on her analysis of job advertise-

ments, Mary Wells shows that a shift did occur in the requirements and responsibilities for academic librarians between 1959 and 1979. Among other findings, the author determined that there was a notable increase in demand in the 1970s for computer expertise, communicative ability, administrative ability, computer work, and administrative duties as well as for faculty liaison, personnel work, and work with specialized subjects and bibliographic instruction.³⁴ Wells concluded that academic librarians were required to "bring more to their jobs, especially in the realm of education . . . [and that] there was strong evidence that the basic education requirements for entry into librarianship had become more structured and stringent."35

These findings by Wells were supported by a study conducted by Ronald Powell and Sheila Creth in 1985 to determine the knowledge required during the first ten years of the careers of academic librarians.³⁶ The authors found that while a core of traditional library knowledge is still highly valued, knowledge of management and automation are also highly valued by this group of librarians. Planning, personnel management, budgeting and staff training ranked high in importance as well.

Meanwhile, the issue of faculty status continued to appear in the literature with both supporters and detractors conducting studies and reporting on local interpretation of faculty status for librarians. In his article, John DePew contends that the reports that librarians have made great progress in achieving faculty status fail to identify the exceptions made for librarians in the application of faculty status.³⁷ Based on his analysis, DePew contends that "even after more than a decade of 'implementation,' it appears that full faculty status is almost impossible to achieve. Breakdowns most often occur in the areas of tenure, rank, leaves, and length of appointment, creating a sort of quasistatus."38 He suggests that ACRL should revise the standards in order to make them attainable and enable librarianship to grow as a profession on its own merits. DePew feels that "faculty status is inappropriate for librarians because it creates

tensions that obscure the proper role of the librarian, and it interferes with the effective delivery of library services by diverting librarians' energies and attention from those services."³⁹ On the other hand, Robert Sewell, in writing about faculty status at the University of Illinois library, indicates that principles of collegiality, academic freedom, and tenure, and the concept of the librarian as teacher and researcher are viable and highly beneficial to the academic library environment.⁴⁰

In their article, Fred Hill and Robert Hauptman indicate that their focus is not on "whether librarians should be accorded faculty status, but rather whether they deserve it, and more importantly, what they should do with it once it has been bestowed."41 They then present a model for faculty status for librarians which can be summarized in the following statement: "there are conditions under which a librarian deserves faculty status, and these are precisely the same conditions that obtain for any faculty member at an institution: teaching, researching, and publishing."⁴² It would appear that the concept of heightened status and roles for academic librarians has succeeded or floundered along the following lines: the willingness and desire of the individual librarian to pursue recognized scholarly activities (research and publishing) as an experformance, pectation for the willingness of the university to fund the library so that librarians' schedules allow time for research, and, finally, attention to the type of assignments and role within the library organization that contributes in large part to the definition of librarians as professionals.

In the future, the status of librarians within higher education undoubtedly will rest more on how they develop and structure their role vis-a-vis students and faculty in the vastly different information society. If librarians play a pivotal role in organizing and providing access to the vast range of information in multiple formats, if they are the ones to assist individuals through the labyrinth of information sources, and if they play a leadership role in designing and directing the information world, then their role on the campus should most definitely provide them with a status of full partner in the educational endeavor.

Patricia Battin, in her article entitled "The Electronic Library—A Vision for the Future," indicates that the library will be the knowledge center of the academic enterprise, and that librarians, "far from being extinct in the electronic university... will be in greater demand than in the more serene and organized world of the book."⁴³ It is also clear that the traditional duties of librarians will take on new form and that some activities should be set aside while new ones are added to the plethora of services offered by the academic library.

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Over the decades, the perception of the passive role of the academic library has declined and almost disappeared. Librarians no longer are guardians of warehousesbuying materials that the faculty select, shelving it and waiting patiently at a designated location for a student or faculty member to decide they have a question. Instead, librarians have assumed responsibility for building and managing collections in all the complex manifestations that implies, e.g., resource sharing, publisher and vendor relations, and preservation. They have established active user education programs to aggressively inform the academic community about resources, and there is evidence that they are assuming a leadership role in the design and implementation of computing technology as it affects the delivery of information locally and nationally. All of this suggests that within the library organization, librarian responsibilities and the attendant knowledge required to perform effectively have increased in both new areas and depth of traditional ones.

There is also evidence that librarians within their organizations have taken on

greater responsibility for decision making as the focus has shifted from a bureaucratic, and often autocratic, environment to one that relies on participation and shared responsibility. This organizational approach, coupled with the effect that automation has on work flow and communication, should contribute to a natural integration of a collegial environment into the academic library. More and more the focus of communication and decision making in academic libraries will be highly dispersed, with actions determined by teams and committees that connect people across the organization rather than through a hierarchy that relies almost exclusively on a vertical orientation.

The individual librarian will accomplish his/her work through a series of networks within the library, across the campus, and throughout the nation with colleagues in other institutional libraries. There will be greater independence for the individual, and for small working groups, than has existed in the past primarily because of the structure and pace of information technology. The organization, dispersal and access of information is changing; therefore, libraries must change in order to participate in this highly sophisticated system of information exchange and transfer. The bureaucratic structure of the library organization, which has so limited participation for librarians beyond their specific and narrow job assignment, should dissolve. In addition, those activities which have been of a limiting nature will be accomplished via the computer, and still others will be assigned to support staff as greater reliance on computer data locally and nationally grows. Finally, new demands for organizing and accessing information are on the horizon and librarians should seize the opportunity to ensure a central role in the design of the information system.

There is a tremendous opportunity for librarians to use their considerable knowledge of languages, academic subjects, automation, and, of course, the organization and access of knowledge for the support of the scholarly endeavor. There is an opportunity to define more clearly, and in this way to strengthen, the role of the aca-

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demic librarian. If academic librarians are able to articulate a clear vision for their central role in higher education and act on this, they will achieve a valued place within the academy and receive the deserved respect of faculty colleagues.

The issue of professional status is related inexorably to how librarians feel about themselves, as well to the responsibilities they assume and the contributions they make within their own library and campus and more broadly to their profession. Others cannot bestow status; academic librarians will earn a sense of professionalism and the respect of faculty if they create an active, visible, and critical role for themselves in the education and scholarly process. There have been changes over the past fifty years in responsibilities assigned to librarians, but there has also been a reluctance too often to relinquish duties and to accept change. If academic librarians do not want to find themselves entangled in the same issues for the next fifty years, without resolution or progress, and possibly left behind by the information society, then it should be a priority to identify the way in which librarians will contribute as members of the educational and scholarly community, and to recognize and act on new opportunities even when risks are apparent. The risks are far greater if academic librarians venture nothing, if they are cautious in actively designing the future.

Veaner issued a challenge to academic librarians when he said,

We need to catch up with the new reality and we need to discard old realities; we need to look forward and not backward. . . . Librarianship is an evolving profession and must continue to evolve. A universal hallmark of any profession is adaptability. The pace of change is not even remaining constant—it is quickening. If we cannot respond to the challenges now facing us and cannot adapt to change, then we can be sure that some new institution or service agency will arise in response to public need.⁴⁴

A review of the past fifty years should provide academic librarians with much to be proud of in the arena of organization improvements and personnel administration. But there is also a sense that academic librarians have bogged down on certain issues, particularly in resolving these age-old questions about role, status, responsibilities and clarification and redefinition of what is considered professional work within the library. As Veaner has suggested, we need to address our energy now and for the future in identifying and responding to the new reality, indeed to help shape and define that reality. In doing so, academic librarians should be assured that their activities will be professional in nature and their status assured within the academy.

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