Paraprofessional staff: a review and report on current duty assignment in academic health sciences libraries in North America

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This paper reviews paraprofessional employment in libraries and examines the trend toward assigning increasingly complex duties to academic library paraprofessionals. During the spring of 1989, directors of academic health sciences libraries in the United States and Canada were surveyed to determine the duties assigned to paraprofessionals. The results show that paraprofessionals are assigned a wide range of duties, including supervising functional areas, such as circulation and interlibrary loan, and some tasks often considered professional, such as original cataloging and in-depth reference work. The findings illustrate the importance of the paraprofessional to librarianship.

Increasingly complex duties are being assigned to library paraprofessionals. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *paraprofessional* as a person without professional training to whom a particular aspect of a professional task is delegated [1]. During the spring of 1989, a survey was conducted to determine the type and level of duties assigned to paraprofessionals in academic health sciences libraries in the United States and Canada. The intent was to clarify which library duties are delegated to paraprofessional staff and to what extent paraprofessionals perform library work that has been considered professional. This paper reports the results of the survey and reviews issues affecting the library paraprofessional, including job overlap, work standards, training, and the initiatives of professional organizations.

BACKGROUND

In the early twentieth century, when a degree from a graduate library school superseded training and apprenticeship programs as the standard for entry into the field, librarianship began to be accorded pro-

fessional status. In North America, the status of nonprofessional library employees rose as well, and by midcentury the paraprofessional staff level, between the professional and the clerical levels, was defined [2]. Studies from the 1930s through the 1970s, however, reveal that librarians still performed a substantial amount of nonprofessional work [3-4]. The employment of paraprofessionals to alleviate this situation led to some blurring of the role of the library paraprofessional vis-à-vis the librarian, due to overlapping job assignments. Papers abound in the library literature concerning both the inability of the profession to define the differences between the responsibilities of the library nonprofessional and the librarian and the resulting discontent of the former.

In 1969, a major survey of staff in health sciences libraries was sponsored by the Medical Library Association (MLA) and supported by the Extramural Program of the National Library of Medicine, with David Kronick as principal investigator. The purpose of this comprehensive study was to determine the characteristics of the employees who staffed health sciences libraries and to judge their educational needs.

Included in the study was an investigation of professional and nonprofessional staff utilization. This was accomplished with a survey containing a job-task index, which was designed to measure the professionalism of the employee's work involvement across the spectrum of library jobs. One conclusion was that librarians were engaged largely in nonprofessional tasks: "individuals qualified to perform at a professional level have been side-tracked into nonprofessional positions. This condition represents a loss of professional talent to the field as well as a loss of professional status to individuals" [5]. One of the study's final recommendations was that library management procedures should be improved by the delegation of appropriate library tasks to technical and subprofessional personnel, so that professional personnel could be utilized as effectively as possible [6].

In 1970, the American Library Association (ALA) adopted a policy statement that categorized and described the responsibilities of library personnel at the professional and support levels. This document reinforced the concept of the library paraprofessional by defining three levels of support staff: the library associate, requiring a bachelor's degree; the technical assistant, requiring two years of education beyond the secondary level; and the clerk, requiring a high school education [7]. The ALA policy statement also directed librarians to concentrate on higher duties such as needs identification, problem analysis, goal establishment, and the integration of creative solutions into practice, as well as the planning, organizing, communicating, and administering of successful service programs. "Positions primarily devoted to the routine application of established rules and techniques, however useful and essential to the effective operation of a library's ongoing services, should not carry the word 'Librarian' in the job title" [8].

STANDARDS AND TRAINING

Another concern regarding the employment of library paraprofessionals was that the standards developed and maintained by librarians might be jeopardized if paraprofessionals were assigned broader responsibilities. This concern spawned interest in training for library paraprofessionals, and many training programs for library technical assistants were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of these programs were implemented in junior and community colleges, some offering a two-year degree as a library technical assistant.

MLA also recognized the implications of the employment of technicians as related to health sciences librarianship. MLA's *Ad Hoc* Committee on standards for Medical Library Technician Training was established in 1967 to define and characterize the job content of medical library technicians and to develop criteria and standards for instruction in medical li-

brary technician training. The committee's report was endorsed by MLA at its sixty-eighth Annual Meeting in 1969 [9]. The Committee on Medical Library Technicians (now known as the Health Sciences Library Technicians Committee) was then established as a standing committee by the MLA board in 1970, charged with promoting the establishment of training programs for health sciences library technicians. In 1974, MLA published the *Standards for Health Sciences Library Technicians and Programs* [10].

In 1976, another large-scale MLA-sponsored study was undertaken by Fred Roper to facilitate the development of certification requirements for health sciences library technicians. A survey instrument was designed to gather information about the employment, work experience, background, and personal characteristics of individuals working as technicians in all types of health sciences libraries. The questionnaire was sent directly to 2,025 technicians identified by 1,209 health sciences library directors in the United States and Canada. The data collected in this study included a measurement of the technicians' degree of involvement in certain library tasks. This measurement was based on a job task index, which asked the technicians to indicate how much a part of their responsibility selected library routines were. The tasks selected for the index were taken from MLA's *Standards for Health Sciences Library Technicians and Programs* and thus concentrated on duties considered to be nonprofessional. The tasks were assigned either a "high difficulty" or "low difficulty" numerical ranking, which was also linked to whether the tasks were primary or secondary job responsibilities. Job task scores then were correlated with other factors, such as size and type of library and salary.

Data correlations from the Roper study indicated that technicians working in smaller libraries generally were performing duties of a higher level than were their counterparts in larger libraries. Among the recommendations was that information should be disseminated to clear up the considerable confusion among health sciences library directors concerning the definition and utilization of library technicians [11].

TECHNICIAN "TAKEOVER"

The training programs and the granting of degrees to library technicians contributed to concern that, for economy's sake, administrators would hire technicians for positions better suited to professionals. Some feared that the two-year degree programs for library technicians would replace and usurp the professional graduate programs [12]. This fear of "technician takeover" was dispelled gradually during the late 1960s, when a perceived shortage of librarians was alleviated by increased hiring of technicians. During this period, it was generally acknowledged that library

technicians were essential to libraries, because, in addition to relieving the librarian shortage, technicians actually elevated librarianship by freeing librarians to concentrate on work requiring their professional knowledge.

In 1964, Gertrude Annan strongly supported the use of library technicians to help alleviate problems related to the shortage of librarians [13]. She compared the controversy surrounding the employment of technicians in libraries to the "long period of controversy and heated discussion" endured by the nursing profession regarding the acceptance of practical nurses. Annan emphasized the need for a clear delineation between library professionals and technicians and for standardized training programs to prepare library technicians to handle technical tasks, which would enable librarians to cope with new developments in library practice [14].

In the 1970s, the literature pertaining to the library paraprofessional continued to focus largely on training and education. In the 1980s, many papers began to describe the paraprofessional taking on broader responsibilities in the library, a topic often linked with automation. In an important paper on personnel issues in academic libraries, Allen Veaner contends that librarianship is characterized by discontinuity caused by the constant advance of professional knowledge, which requires academic librarians to continually devise new applications in the practice of their profession. The result has been rapidly changing professional responsibilities and expectations. Veaner further maintains that new technological developments constantly drive complex duties downward in the work hierarchy, while new complexities in programmatic and decision-making areas challenge professionals with new responsibilities as they shed duties formerly considered professional [15].

STUDY METHODOLOGY

A survey was designed to ask health sciences library directors about responsibilities regularly assigned to technicians within the functional areas of on-site public services and technical services. The survey was designed with the assistance of a sociologist specializing in survey research and was pretested by three academic health sciences library directors. In the spring of 1989, the survey was mailed to the 120 directors of academic health sciences libraries listed as full members in the *1988/1989 Membership Directory of the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries Directors* (AAHSLD) [16]. The AAHSLD membership represents academic medical and allied health sciences libraries in the United States and Canada.

Two questions were asked to determine the level of technicians' supervisory responsibilities within each functional unit, including whether technicians were assigned the overall daily supervision of the

unit or assigned to supervise specific functions. Examples of the functions technicians might be asked to supervise were included with each question. Additional questions were designed to assess the level of job duties assigned to technicians within the functional areas. A total of forty-four questions were asked (Appendix).

Unlike previous studies employing detailed task analyses to determine job responsibilities, this survey asked the library director whether specific duties were assigned regularly to technicians. The specified duties were not limited to the assignments typically associated with library support staff but included responsibilities often considered professional, such as original cataloging, in-depth reference, database searching, and selection of materials for the collection. The job assignment questions were organized by level of job complexity; to eliminate ambiguity, specific duties were mentioned as part of each question. Anonymity was assured.

To simplify the analysis, all library paraprofessionals were defined as technicians. The following definition was used:

A health sciences library technician is a paraprofessional library employee who works within the framework of established library policies and technical practices to effect good medical library service. Health sciences library technicians have a working knowledge of the methods and practices in specific functional areas of library operations and services. Higher level technician positions may require considerable knowledge of some of the fundamental concepts and practices of library science.

The respondents were cautioned that positions of a clerical or secretarial nature were not included in the definition.

Because the questionnaire was to be answered by library directors, not by the subjects themselves, the authors hoped to avoid the problem inherent in self-assessment—that is, the tendency to overrate oneself.

Ninety-four surveys were returned, yielding a 78% response rate.

SURVEY RESULTS

Supervision

Table 1 shows, by functional unit, positive responses to the question of whether technicians are assigned daily overall supervision. Circulation leads the other functional units, in that 85% of the directors have assigned the responsibility for unit supervision to paraprofessional staff. Paraprofessionals also are frequently assigned to supervise the interlibrary loan and document delivery units in over 75% of the libraries surveyed. In almost half of the libraries, technicians are assigned to supervise the serials control unit, and in over 40% they supervise the acquisitions unit. In none of these libraries do technicians super-

Table 1
Technicians assigned to supervise or manage unit

Unit	% of technicians assigned
Circulation service	85 (n = 79)
Interlibrary loan/document delivery	77 (n = 77)
Reference/information service	6 (n = 6)
Database search service	(n = 0)
Collection development	6 (n = 5)
Cataloging	17 (n = 15)
Acquisitions	43 (n = 37)
Serials control	48 (n = 43)

vise the database search service. Also noteworthy are the infrequent positive responses regarding reference and information services and collection development.

Table 2 shows positive responses regarding whether technicians are assigned to supervise specific duties within the functional unit. The responses indicate that technicians are assigned to supervise some duties within all of the areas, with the most heavy involvement, again, in circulation and interlibrary loan units and the least involvement, again, in the supervision of database search activities.

Assigned duties

Table 3 indicates whether technicians are assigned to perform duties of relatively low complexity. Clearly, technicians are assigned these routine duties within all of the functional areas covered by the study, and again, their activity is the highest in circulation and the lowest in database search services. The authors suspect, however, that the lower percentages reported in interlibrary loan and database search services result from less complex duties being assigned to clerical, not paraprofessional staff.

Table 4 indicates whether duties of a complex nature are assigned to paraprofessional staff. Questions pertaining to the assignment of complex duties were not included under circulation, acquisitions, and serials control, because comparable complex duties were not defined.

Table 2
Technicians assigned to supervise specific duties

Specific duty	% of technicians assigned
Circulation service	99 (n = 91)
Interlibrary loan/document delivery	91 (n = 82)
Reference/information service	53 (n = 49)
Database search service	10 (n = 9)
Collection development	66 (n = 59)
Cataloging	76 (n = 63)
Acquisitions	68 (n = 58)
Serials control	74 (n = 64)

Table 3
Technicians assigned to duties of lesser complexity

Duty	% of technicians assigned
Circulation services	
process fines/reserves, charge/discharge material	98 (n = 91)
Interlibrary loan/document delivery	
retrieve materials from stacks	80 (n = 75)
photocopy materials	73 (n = 63)
prepare materials for mailing	77 (n = 68)
Reference/information service	
answer ready reference/directional questions	82 (n = 75)
refer reference questions to professional	84 (n = 76)
Database search services	
explain service/costs to client	64 (n = 58)
package searches for clients	53 (n = 48)
Collection development	
search files to determine order status	84 (n = 76)
Cataloging	
search files for copy	91 (n = 76)
catalog from copy	83 (n = 70)
file cards	81 (n = 64)
Acquisitions	
process orders, receipts, invoices	89 (n = 76)
Serials control	
check in issues, process claims	92 (n = 79)

Complex duties are assigned to paraprofessionals in all of the areas included in this part of the study but not to the same degree as duties of lesser complexity. Almost half of the directors indicated that complex duties are assigned to paraprofessionals in the cataloging unit. There is also considerable assignment of complex duties in reference and information services. It is likely that the high number reported for the interlibrary loan and document delivery unit is due to the selection of duties that were

Table 4
Technicians assigned complex duties

Duty	% of technicians assigned
Circulation services	
Interlibrary loan/document delivery	
bibliographic verification	86 (n = 78)
location determination/referrals	93 (n = 84)
Reference/information service	
answer in-depth reference questions	27 (n = 25)
perform ready reference online searches	38 (n = 34)
Database search services	
take search requests/interview users	34 (n = 31)
formulate search strategy	17 (n = 15)
Collection development	
select materials for collection	8 (n = 7)
Cataloging	
perform original descriptive cataloging	35 (n = 29)
select subject headings	44 (n = 37)
complete authority work	52 (n = 44)
assign classification number	46 (n = 38)
Acquisitions	
Serials	

less complex than those selected for the other functional areas.

DISCUSSION

Job overlap

Because work assignments for professionals were not assessed in this study, the extent of job overlap between librarians and paraprofessionals cannot be gauged. The evidence suggests, however, that work assignment overlap is prevalent, at least among the ninety-four health sciences libraries participating in this study.

Broader responsibilities

Because overall supervisory and complex duty assignments are reported in substantial numbers, this study affirms that paraprofessionals routinely perform duties and processes that once were considered professional. Supervision over major functional areas, original cataloging, and in-depth reference work are prime examples of this phenomenon. Further study could determine the number and level of paraprofessional staff assigned these complex work assignments.

The results of this study also appear to corroborate Veaner's premise that complex duties are driven downward in the work hierarchy. Veaner and others attribute this trend primarily to technological development. Economic pressures, paraprofessional career development issues, and faculty status (with librarians concentrating on teaching and research) could be additional reasons. It has been suggested that this shift in job responsibilities in academic libraries is due more to the impact of technology and funding than to administrative decisions resulting from serious research into the nature of work roles in libraries [17].

The results of this study reveal what *activities* are assigned to the paraprofessional. There is no indication of the level of accountability delegated to paraprofessionals by library administrators in the assignment of either supervision or duties. Discussions of paraprofessional work analysis in the library literature emphasize that accountability ultimately determines the level of responsibility for a job activity and that the level of accountability is normally the factor that distinguishes the professional from the nonprofessional [18].

The recent literature includes many papers that agree that duties considered professional in the past may no longer present a professional challenge. Perhaps as librarianship evolves, librarians are focusing more and more on the planning, organization, and administration aspects of librarianship, as recommended in the ALA position statement and as professional status requires.

CONCLUSION

Library technicians are prominent in academic health sciences libraries and play an important part in providing library service. They are assigned a broad spectrum of work assignments that include jobs at all levels of complexity and supervision. In many academic health sciences libraries, technicians perform complex critical processes once considered more appropriate for the librarian. Libraries are delegating complex assignments, and one hopes that in so doing they are using both professional and paraprofessional staff as effectively as possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX

Survey

Duties

Please indicate which of the following duties/functions are regularly assigned (i.e., officially part of the job description) to any library technician (see accompanying definition), either full or part time, in your library. Circle the answers that apply. Note: it is possible that each answer will be affirmative. Clarifying comments are welcome.

A. PUBLIC SERVICES
1. Circulation Services
   a. Day-to-day supervision of circulation services: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific functions within circulation services, e.g., fines, reserve processing, charging or discharging of materials: yes   no
   c. Perform circulation duties, e.g., processing fines, reserves, charging materials out: yes   no
2. Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery Services
   a. Day-to-day supervision of the service: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific duties within the unit: yes   no
   c. Perform the more complex duties:
      (1) bibliographic verification: yes   no
      (2) location determination, referrals: yes   no
   d. Perform the less complex duties:
      (1) retrieving material from stacks: yes   no
      (2) photocopying: yes   no
      (3) preparing materials for mailing: yes   no
3. Reference and Information Services:
   a. Day-to-day supervision or management of the services: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific duties with the unit, e.g., shelving of materials: yes   no
   c. Perform the more complex reference duties:
      (1) answer in-depth reference questions: yes   no
      (2) perform ready-reference online searches: yes   no
   d. Perform the less complex reference duties:
      (1) answer ready reference or directional questions: yes   no
      (2) refer reference questions to professional: yes   no
4. Photocopy Services
   a. Day-to-day supervision of photocopy services: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific duties within the unit: yes   no
   c. Perform duties in the unit; e.g., operate photocopier, take photocopy orders: yes   no
5. Database Search Services:
   a. Day-to-day supervision or management of the service: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific duties within the unit: yes   no
   c. Perform the more complex duties:
      (1) take search requests, interview users: yes   no
      (2) formulate search strategy: yes   no
      (3) run searches: yes   no
   d. Perform the less complex duties:
      (1) explain services and costs to clients: yes   no
      (2) package searches for clients: yes   no
6. Collection Development:
   a. Day-to-day management of the collection development: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific duties within the unit, e.g., file searching, bibliographic verification: yes   no
   c. Perform the more complex duties:
      (1) select materials to be purchased for the collection: yes   no
   d. Perform the less complex duties:
      (1) search files to determine order status   yes   no

B. TECHNICAL SERVICES
1. Cataloging:
   a. Day-to-day supervision of the cataloging unit: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific duties within the unit, e.g., searching for copy, filing cards, data entry: yes   no
   c. Perform the more complex cataloging duties:
      (1) perform original descriptive cataloging: yes   no
      (2) select subject headings: yes   no
      (3) complete authority work: yes   no
      (4) assign classification number: yes   no
   d. Perform the less complex duties:
      (1) search for cataloging copy: yes   no
      (2) catalog materials using copy from another source: yes   no
2. Acquisitions:
   a. Day-to-day supervision of the acquisitions unit: yes   no
   b. Supervision of specific duties, e.g., orders, receipts: yes   no
   c. Perform processing duties, e.g., orders, receipts, invoice approval: yes   no
3. Serials Control:
   a. Day-to-day supervision of serial control unit: yes   no
   b. Supervise specific functions, e.g., check-in, claiming, ordering: yes   no
   c. Perform serials control duties, e.g., check-in, claiming: yes   no