

# RAISED

# BY

By James G. Neal

Integrating the new generation of feral professionals into the academic library

# WFO

**Academic libraries now hire** an increasing number of individuals to fill professional librarian positions who do not have the master's degree in library science. Instead of appointing librarians with the traditional qualifying credential, they hire staff to fill librarian positions who hold a variety of qualifications, such as advanced degrees in subject disciplines, specialized language skills, teaching experience, or technology expertise.

Academic libraries are also creating a wide range of new professional assignments in such areas as systems, human resources, fundraising, publishing, instructional technology, facilities management, and other specialties that demand diverse educational backgrounds. Additionally, responsibilities formerly carried out by librarians are frequently transferred to support staff and student employees. There is also a new cohort of MLS librarians who have received their degrees through distance rather than residential programs.

The implications of these trends for the academic library work force and for the condition of the academic library workplace need close study. Historically, the shared graduate educational experience has provided a standard preparation and socialization into the library 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. We are only beginning to see 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. It contrasts the distinctions between the "classic" professions like medicine and law and other kinds of professional occupations. Numerous studies focus 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 they achieve. The library profession has consistently struggled to defend its special base of knowledge, yet it has always been viewed as heavily dependent on the employing organization and not professionally independent. This ambiguity about the professional characteristics of librarianship suggests that educational preparation for the field does not have an impact on socialization into the field comparable to other professions.

## The ties that bond

An important aspect of the diversification of librarian professionalism and the diffusion of relevant backgrounds is the linkage of the professional employee to the employing organization. A subtle but influential exchange rela-

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tionship or psychological contract between individuals and their employers exists in all organizations. It is based on the status of membership (where do I fit in?) and the quality of membership (how well am I supported?) in the organization.

These bonds are part of organizational commitment. They demand strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values. The individual is expected to be willing to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization and to harbor a strong desire to maintain membership in it. We should question whether a library employee's academic background, professional status, and/or job responsibilities strengthen his or her bond to the organization.

# LIVES

## Toward cultural authority

Among the purposes of graduate professional education, in relationship to those served or treated, is giving students the knowledge and values to transform their identity so they are prepared to carry out the role and status of a professional. The good LIS programs seek to inculcate professional values

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and beliefs and, through role taking and identification with others, contribute to the adoption and internalization of a professional self-image. This identity as a 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 a relationship to those served or treated, a professional strives for legitimacy and independence, or what some sociologists refer to as cultural authority. It is not clear whether the professional education experience for librarians produces these outcomes. If it does,

then the expanding diversification of the professional pool in the academic library will produce cultural challenges that must be managed. If LIS programs don't deliver cultural authority to their graduates, then the various strains of professionals now entering academic libraries may integrate more consistently and effectively.

## The relevance of the MLS

It is widely documented that librarianship draws students from a vast range of academic and occupational backgrounds. Their frequent second career status is often discussed by librarians. Many either move to the field from jobs in other professions or after stints in academic assignments. 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. The issue is whether the decision to become a librarian and to proceed through an extended educational program is 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. A program at the 1985 American Library Association annual conference focused on "The MLS—For the Public Good or for Our Good." It dealt with the wide-ranging debate on the topic of qualifications for the profession and the role of the degree as credential preference or requirement. Some believe the applied or practical emphasis of library education and its heavy stress on fundamentals undermine the professional focus on critical concepts, creative strategies, and methodological rigor.

## Enter the Ph.D.'s

Several programs to bring Ph.D. holders into librarian assignments were launched among a group of research libraries in 2003. This focused the profession's attention on the persistent trend to populate the professional ranks in academic libraries with people from alternative or nontraditional academic backgrounds. It raised once again fears about the integrity of the MLS and the professional character of librarianship.

As John Berry noted in an editorial (*LJ* 11/1/03, p. 8), 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 indi-



viduals to fill specialized positions, especially when these skills and viable candidates cannot be found in standard library professional pools. There have been calls for "fast track" education programs or even "executive MLS" experiences to prepare individuals with different but relevant credentials and backgrounds for librarian assignments. As the number of such individuals increases 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 or library professional.

## New professional jobs

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 regional and national levels.

## Blurred staff status

Another trend dating back to the technology changes starting in the late 1960s has been the tension, or more accurately 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, librarians have expanded their teaching activities on campus, involvement with research teams, and participation on broad collaborations on campus and externally and have focused on innovative and entrepreneurial application of technology.

Moving tasks once performed by librarians to support staff has become a trend. 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.

Online education is bringing accredited graduate pro-

grams in librarianship to an expanding audience of interested students. Many of the library schools provide blended experiences, combining physical and virtual classroom time. An expanding number of offerings 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. Some question whether students going through the online programs are being extended opportunities for effective socialization into the profession. They ask 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.

Libraries add value to an academic community in the form of information acquisition, synthesis, navigation, dissemination, interpretation, understanding, and archiving. New ar-

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reas are emerging and already evolving for academic libraries as publishers, educators, research and development organizations, entrepreneurs, and policy advocates. The MLS may not provide the requisite skills for the development and advancement these new areas demand.

## The untamed librarians

These necessary developments in the preparation of librarians, in the hiring and organization of staff, and in the definition of professional roles in academic libraries suggest the metaphor of "untamed" vs. "domesticated" professionals. Academic library administrators must be more sensitive to the diverse background, interests, aspirations, and "hunger" of these new professional staff. 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; the ability to recruit and develop new expertise in the organization and to integrate with compassion and understanding the multitude of "fauna" now seeking to work in our setting will be a critical measure of success.

Library professionals prepared and socialized outside the traditional MLS education channel have been "raised by wolves." They may fit effectively or be creatively disruptive in the transformed libraries we are seeking to create. Either way, they are needed for their important contributions to academic library innovation and mutability. They will grow in their influence and relevance to the future academic library. ■

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