



Investigations

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Fewer positions and higher level skills. Library technicians: is this your life?

What defines the boundaries between the work carried out by library technicians and that of librarians? What kinds of skills are expected of technicians? And are there jobs out there? The answers are: it's not clear; increasingly higher level; and yes, but decreasing. These are the findings of a large survey about the role of 'paraprofessionals' (the term used in the article) undertaken by the manager of a technical services area at Washington State University Libraries.

The researcher distributed an online survey through United States and international discussion lists, attracting over 800 responses, more than half of which were from paraprofessional (55%) library staff. Most were from the US, but Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Canada were also represented in the responses. The term 'paraprofessional' takes in a number of position titles including library assistant, library specialist, library associate, and library technician, and these respondents listed required qualifications as a bachelor's degree, a library associate degree, and a two-year diploma. Although terminology and qualification standards reflect the academic library environment in the US, the results of the survey might resonate with Australian information professionals. For example:

- Over half the respondents reported that technical

services positions for paraprofessionals had decreased over the last five years;

- There is very "little difference in the high-level skills required" for paraprofessional and professional positions;
- The 'complex duties' carried out by paraprofessional and professional positions are similar; and
- Staff development for paraprofessionals was primarily in the form of in-house training and time to attend local and state conferences.

The blurred boundaries between paraprofessional and professional positions have been the focus of discussion since 1923 and this research indicates that very little has changed. Terms attempting to differentiate the roles in the past have applied 'routine', 'operational', and 'technical' to the paraprofessional position, but the skills reported by these respondents suggest a very different reality. There is a perception that technology has driven the expansion of complex skills for paraprofessionals. There is also regret that while their duties may have become 'higher-level', the financial remuneration has not. It is interesting that 'management and supervisory skills' were required by a much higher proportion of paraprofessionals than their professional colleagues, which may relate to the finding

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Zhu, L. (2012) The role of paraprofessionals in technical services in academic libraries. *Library Resources & Technical Services*, 56(3), 127-154.

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that paraprofessionals gained extensive experience due to their staying power in positions and this, in turn, led to more responsibilities.

Making the jump to professional positions through an additional qualification can overcome both the financial and administrative barriers between paraprofessional and professional roles. The incentives for undertaking these qualifications were mostly in the form of 'work schedule adjustment' and there is a general sense that opportunities for promotion of paraprofessionals are limited. As the paper states (quoting an earlier author), paraprofessionals "are not there due to love of money".

Zhu's is a lengthy article (the last twelve pages are the survey questions) and not entirely encouraging given the findings that emerged parallel those that have peppered the literature for decades. It is, however, useful to remind the profession generally that this is an issue that remains with us to address.

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