

Salary and Pay Equity Issues for Library Support Staff

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Introduction

Thank you, and good afternoon.

I'm standing up here today trying to represent library support staff and their pay equity issues. By ALA's numbers, two-thirds of all library workers do not have an MLS, so my task here is daunting. Fortunately, I've received help along the way, from library support staff all across the country. And I have some stories from them to share with you in a couple of minutes. Much of what I say here today is based on the many messages I received from support staff this spring. I will often quote directly from these responses, leaving out personal names and names of libraries, so as not to get anyone in trouble.

The messages came in response to my request for help in preparing for this presentation. I sent the request to LIBSUP-L, the library support staff email list. And I'd like to thank Mary Kalnin, the creator and listowner of LIBSUP-L, and the University of Washington, host of LIBSUP-L, for making this wonderful resource available for the last 10 years.

I'd also like to thank the Support Staff Working Group of the Salaries Task Force for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Description and Feedback

Not surprisingly, library support staff face many of the same pay equity challenges as their MLS colleagues. But as the largest segment of library workers, and as the segment that suffers the most from pay inequity, library support staff are chronically underpaid, sometimes to the point that federal or state assistance in the form of food stamps, or housing assistance, or heating fuel subsidies, is required.

From South Dakota:

<quote> My current position is the highest a paraprofessional may attain [in my library]. Starting salary, (don't laugh) is \$18,895/year. I am a single parent living on less than \$25,000 a year (child support and salary). If my house was not paid for, I would be living in a homeless shelter. I receive heating assistance from the state of SD in the winter. It is a sad state of affairs when state employees have to depend on state subsidies to make a living. <end quote>

From Indiana:

<quote> After eleven years here, my hourly wage is between \$9.00 and 9.50 an hour. I am responsible for software cataloging and I fill in with books, videos, and Web site cataloging when needed. <end quote>

If we take as a given that everyone in this room believes that librarian salaries are too low, and certainly that is something I believe and every member of the Task Force believes, then please also believe that library support staff salaries are too low as well. They are too low for the many years of experience, the educational level, the set of skills, and the daily responsibilities of today's support staff.

At the most basic level, the greatest desire of library support staff regarding salaries is identical to that of librarians – to receive fair and adequate compensation for the work they do.

From Washington: (this would be the real world Washington, and not Washington, D.C.)

<quote> I love working in a library and I really like my job. I have a Library Technician degree, but haven't been able to afford to go back to college and get my MLS. I don't think someone should be penalized for being unable to get a degree. All we've ever asked is to receive a fair wage for our work. When you see people doing jobs that require a lot less skill, yet are paid more, it's very disheartening. I think the thing I would stress is that we are just people, trying to make a living, who want a fair wage for an honest days work. We want to be recognized and appreciated for what we do, not treated like second-class citizens. <end quote>

One problem library support staff face, and I suspect this is true for some librarians as well, is having position descriptions that are very outdated and inaccurate.

From Ohio:

<quote> In addition to adequate compensation, a major thing that's needed, at least here, are new job descriptions. Most people here are working with a description that was created 30 - 40 years ago, so that what they're doing isn't adequately portrayed or accounted for. <end quote>

In general, library support staff belonging to unions often fare better than their non-union colleagues when it comes to salary. However, far too often support staff are seen as simply clerical help.

From Michigan:

<quote> Three years ago during unionization our biggest problem was trying to convince the clerical-technical union that our jobs were important, at least on a par with a faculty secretary position. At that point we failed, due to perception problems of the library as a whole. (I believe we suffered at that time from the trickle-down effect of general non-respect to librarians.)

[The] minimum entry-wage level for Library Assistant I is \$21,000; for LA II it is \$23,000. Faculty secretaries, however, are hired in at \$25,000. <end quote>

Now, there are support staff positions that are clerical in nature. My impression is that the nature of support staff positions has changed quite a bit over the last decade or two in response to technological innovations, so purely clerical positions are certainly in the minority. Still, we need to be able to distinguish those library jobs that really are clerical from those jobs that are so much more, and not have all library support staff positions lumped together.

From Parts Unknown:

<quote> I work in a university library, but compared to other places I've worked, the environment is pleasant. The pay, on the other hand, is less than desirable. Our director has done the best she can to improve the staff's [wages], but since we're classified as "clerical," getting pay increases comparable to, say, the unionized workers on campus, security, grounds, and IT staff is contingent upon a re-classification, which isn't likely. <end quote>

Low pay for support staff leads to the same kind of recruitment and retention problems that it does for MLS librarians. And the graying of the workforce applies to support staff as well as librarians. People are retiring, or leaving their good library jobs – where will we get replacements? One respondent offered the following:

From Tennessee:

<quote> I have 13 years of library experience and I am currently working to finish my undergraduate degree so I can attend library school. ALA offers scholarships to those attending library school, but no monetary incentive to get undergraduates to choose the library profession. It would be nice to see ALA recruiting at the undergrad level and offering incentives and help. <end quote>

And another from the “real” Washington, describing the situation of a colleague:

<quote> Her title is Supervising Library Associate. She manages a staff of 16-18 people which means she interviews, hires, evaluates, schedules, and trains all of these people. She works the reference desk 4 to 5 hours per day, and she is in charge of all the computers, copiers, and other machines meaning she can do small repairs on them. For all of this work, she does not get paid as much as the lowest paid librarian in our system nor does she earn as many vacation hours. She works as many hours on the reference desk as anyone. Ninety percent of the librarians in our system have no management responsibilities at all, yet she manages the 16 people which is more than [the total staff in] some of our smaller libraries, and does the machines to boot. <end quote>

I have since heard that this person is leaving the library - perhaps she's already left - and in fact is leaving libraries, and is pursuing a career in another field. Here's an experienced, hard-working, talented individual the library world is losing because she isn't getting paid what she feels she is worth.

Retention of skilled library workers of all types and at all levels is a serious problem.

The last few comments I want to share with you deal with the double whammy of pay inequity facing support staff. We can compare library support positions to positions outside the library community, looking for positions requiring similar skills and abilities and so forth. But support staff also face internal pay inequity. Increasingly, support staff are required to take on additional tasks traditionally performed by MLS librarians, often with no increase, or very little increase, in pay.

From Indiana:

<quote> I think that salary should reflect the kind of work that you do. Granted, education should be taken into consideration, but when you have 2 people sitting side by side, both creating original records, both participating in NACO and SACO, both equally contributing to the improvement of their institution, yet one is making a good \$20,000 more than the other because one is a librarian and the other isn't, then [the] question is, **why?** <end quote>

And from Oregon:

<quote> As a cataloging paraprofessional I can do original, enhance, bibco, authority work....all the stuff that 10 years ago only the faculty catalogers could touch.

Salary is an issue for me, [especially] since I'm supporting myself and my ill husband. My expenses keep rising -- rent, electricity, gas -- but my salary does not.

Libraries depend on underpaying us for what they used to define as "professional" work.
<end quote>

And there's something to think about - what makes work "professional"? Is it the work itself, or the person doing the work? In a *Library Journal* editorial dated Oct. 1, 2000, John Berry suggested that "Performance is what makes work 'professional', not a job title or a set of credentials." I agree.

Some Conclusions

Here are a few conclusions I've drawn based on the more than LIBSUP-L responses I received.

1. Unions, to those who have that option, can be a powerful force in compensation issues.

2. Your salary should reflect the kind of work you do and not the kind of degree you may or may not have.
3. There's a very strong connection between salary and respect. One of the best ways management has to show respect is to pay a decent wage. In other words, a measure of respect is the size of your paycheck.
4. Support staff do important work - most libraries couldn't function for long with just their MLS librarians - but support staff do not feel valued, as documented by low salary, minimal respect, few professional development opportunities, and so on.
5. ALA values education and offers scholarships and other financial help for those seeking an MLS. How about helping support staff without an undergraduate degree?
6. Across the board, with very few exceptions, all library workers are underpaid, librarians and support staff alike. And if there's a single issue that has the potential of uniting all library workers in a common cause, it is pay equity.
7. We may all love to work in libraries, love the people and the job and all of that, but that doesn't mean we need to take a vow of poverty.

Recommendations

And I have four recommendations to offer. Maybe we can think of them as suggestions or maybe talking points. See what you think.

1) ALA should gather salary data for support staff positions just the way it gathers this data for librarians. *Library Mosaics* has conducted salary surveys of support staff (the last was in 2000), state and regional library associations sometimes gather such data, and there have been some relatively small national surveys in the past, but ALA may represent the best opportunity to gather salary data for library support staff on a large scale. I'm pleased to report that progress has already been made in this area. The Support Staff Working Group of the Salaries Task Force met yesterday with Mary Jo Lynch, Director of ALA's Office for Research and Statistics, and I think it's looking promising that the ALA salary survey will be modified to include support staff.

2) There are dozens and dozens of different job titles for library support staff across the country, and all kinds of positions descriptions. A Library Assistant I in Nevada may have a totally different set of duties than a Library Assistant I in New York, and this lack of consistency makes it very difficult to address compensation issues. ALA's Library Career Pathways Task Force recently updated the "Library Education and Personnel Utilization" policy statement, and this revision (now known as the Library and Information Studies and Human Resource Utilization policy statement) was adopted by ALA Council in January of this year. ALA should encourage libraries to implement the categories of library personnel and other provisions of this document.

3) With the formation of an Allied Professional Association charged with working on such issues as certification and salaries, perhaps the time has come to give serious consideration to some kind of national certification program for library support staff. There are some certification programs at the state level – for example, the excellent program by the New York State Library Assistants' Association – and there has been work done on the national level by the Council on Library/Media Technicians, an affiliate of ALA. National certification of support staff could have a positive and lasting impact on support staff salaries.

4) My final recommendation is for all of us in the library community to please, please discontinue the use of the word “non-professional” when referring to library staff without an MLS. It is a divisive word, it is misleading, it is insulting. I realize it's not intended that way, but it is easily taken that way. And it's difficult enough to convince the people with the money to increase salaries for library staff without having a large segment of that staff referred to as non-professional.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, I want to say that it is an honor and genuine pleasure to serve on the Better Salaries and Pay Equity Task Force. It has been an extraordinary experience from the very start. I think it says a lot about the character of Mitch Freedman that he not only talked about having support staff representation on the Task Force, but that he acted on his convictions. I'm confident that this atmosphere of inclusion will continue throughout his presidency. But even more importantly, I hope a policy of inclusion becomes deeply ingrained in the membership and the leadership of the Association.

Thank you for your time.