

A Survey of Rural Libraries & the Role of the Librarian

A survey was published in a recent edition of *Rural Libraries* (Volume XX, No.2 2000, pp. 8-28). The survey was created to determine how rural librarians feel about the importance of their profession, what they feel are the most important aspects of their jobs and if they feel they make a difference in their communities, as well as how committed they are to their field, and what they feel is the future of librarianship and libraries. Robert Flatley undertook this research using the Census Bureau's definition of rural, which includes cities with populations less than 2,500.

Some of the results are noted:

Reasons given for choosing a career in librarianship: The most popular answer was. "I enjoy working with books." The following descriptions were used to characterize the rural librarian's work: rewarding (92%), service-oriented (92%), challenging (75%) and intellectually stimulating (73%). **The major drawback was the majority did not feel their positions offered recognition and status.** (Emphasis U*L)

"'Interacting with the community' is what librarians like most about their jobs."

Librarian's primary complaint? "Not enough money to buy new materials or technology."

Why have librarians historically been underpaid? Number one reason: "The community lacks funds" followed by "The public does not value librarians." However, 98% feel the public library contributes to making life better in the community, 99% feel the library has made a difference in people's lives, and 88% feel it plays a vital role in the community. Far less (47%) feel the library contributes to the economy of the community.

What conclusions can be drawn from this survey? When discussing why librarians have been historically underpaid and addressing their primary concern that there is "not enough money to buy new materials or technology", Flatley suggests, **"Because the public does not value librarians, the community lacks funds for libraries."** (Emphasis U*L)

The researcher disagrees that libraries do not contribute to the economy of the community. He says librarians need to "consider the economic value of the services they provide [and] make citizens aware of the expense involved in providing free materials, free programs for adults and children, free access to the Internet and other computerized information resources and especially the free personalized service provided by the library staff. ...Librarians need to more aggressively promote what they do and make people aware of what a bargain the American public library really is." A good time to launch your marketing and awareness campaign is right now!

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U*L Editorial Comment – Better Salaries & Pay Equity for Librarians

This is a comment on the two sentences in the immediately preceding article that received editorial emphasis.

The plank in our platform in the 2001 ALA Presidential election to which many people responded positively was the one concerned with better salaries and pay equity. Although the following is not a new thought, it bears repeating: people in professions that tend to be predominantly female are paid less than those in predominantly male professions. The main issue for pay equity is achieving comparable pay for positions of comparable worth (i.e. comparable experience, education, expertise, level of responsibility, etc.)

Social workers, librarians, teachers, and nurses get paid less than people in predominantly male professions that require similar education and training. As ALA President (2002-2003), we will appoint a committee that will produce research, information, and scripts/talking points/Q&A that will empower library workers to advocate for better salaries and pay equity with their supervisors, library directors, library boards, town officials, academic administrations, etc.

First and foremost, we must start with a sense of our self-worth as librarians. We must believe that we are professionals doing an important job that requires the education, expertise, and experience that we have. If we don't believe it, it will be very difficult to get someone else to accept it. Once armed with that self-esteem, the research, scripts, etc. will provide us with the information we need to advocate convincingly for better salaries and pay equity.

The more we succeed, the more our libraries will succeed. Once the community understands the importance of our work, it will understand the importance of our institution. That's the best way to put a stop to privatization of libraries and the downgrading of professional positions.

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