
Recruitment & retention in your own backyard

By Patricia A. Kreitz

Encouraging paraprofessionals to become librarians

The crisis facing our profession if we cannot recruit new librarians into the field has been discussed at length at conferences and in the professional literature. Many librarians feel that there is nothing they can do to help recruit because the underlying problems are ones of low pay and a negative public image—areas that are difficult to address in a concerted way let alone for one person to influence. In fact, low recruitment into the profession and low retention, particularly of minority librarians, are large and multi-faceted problems which individuals within the profession may quite naturally feel unprepared or unable to solve. However, by applying one of the environmental movement's key admonishments, "think globally, act locally," we can begin to identify areas within our daily work lives where we might realistically make a difference. It is the purpose of this article to suggest a number of practical actions, not all of which take a large time investment, that individual librarians can implement within their own workplace to encourage library staff to consider a career in librarianship.

Working closely with paraprofessional staff on a daily basis gives us a ready-made pool of potential recruits. Although a number of recruits to the profession have traditionally emerged from this group, this number could be significantly increased if individual librarians were to take a more active role in encouraging paraprofessionals. This role does not have to turn someone into a salesperson but, in fact, can be a natural extension of one's daily activities and interests. In this article I would like to describe

a number of actions librarians can take to attract paraprofessionals into the profession.

Before attempting to encourage paraprofessionals to consider a career in librarianship, it is helpful to know what affects such decisions. The respondents to an informal poll of paraprofessionals who decided to pursue an MLS said that two very important factors in their decision-making process were: 1) a vision of librarianship as a challenging, rewarding career, and 2) a positive mentoring experience. Other factors were: proximity to a graduate program in librarianship; support (financial and flex time) from the library in which they were employed; and a desire to use academic skills without becoming a researcher or teacher.

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When asked if they would have chosen to pursue a career in librarianship if they had not already been working in a library, each person answered negatively. When asked what it was about working in a library that influenced their career choice, several mentioned that they were provided special or unique opportunities through which they discovered how rewarding librarianship is. The rewards inherent in our profession are not automatically communicated to paraprofessionals through their routine interactions with librarians since much of what we do on a daily basis may appear to the

nonprofessional observer as inexplicable and a significant amount of our professional activity may be done outside the workplace. Thus a very important part of attracting paraprofessionals to librarianship is communicating information about the intangible benefits of the field, focusing mainly on those activities that rarely overlap with paraprofessional duties. Providing paraprofessionals in your organization with the opportunity to learn more about professional activities such as research, writing, conference participation, continuing education, and teaching, and with the opportunity to observe or experience at some level the high degree of autonomous responsibility most librarians are given, could help them view librarianship as a challenging, open-ended profession.

Be an active role model

Lecturing at paraprofessionals about how much fun one is having as a librarian is unlikely to be very convincing. Just as in other areas of human communication, one very effective way to deliver this message is through role modeling. While being a role model is traditionally defined as a passive activity—someone is admired for skills in a certain area, accomplishments, knowledge—there are several ways this modeling can be facilitated in a more deliberate and structured way to provide more opportunities to inform. Active role modeling can help paraprofessionals see the pleasures and challenges in what we do. Active role modeling could be something as simple as a bag lunch or a series of meetings in which librarians share their professional activities with library staff.

Providing paraprofessional staff with an opportunity to hear about an individual librarian's research, writing, and/or teaching activities can "model" some of the more rewarding opportunities that professional librarians enjoy. Staff who have done internships, rotations, or who have served as chairs or officers of professional groups could discuss their experiences. A bag lunch where several professionals describe their meeting and conference participation could give paraprofessionals insight into the national and international nature of our profession, the advocacy role we play in national information concerns, and the profession's diversity of interests and activities. These meetings could be as formal or informal as desired but should be organized with the intention to communicate the variety and challenge of what we do to paraprofessionals. As-

sociation acronyms should be avoided, questions should be welcomed, and professional staff should be encouraged to allow their paraprofessional staff to attend.

Staff newsletters can be an effective role-modeling tool if used with care. The newsletter editor might do an occasional interview article on an individual librarian highlighting the person's current responsibilities or activities as a way of explaining the variety of professional roles available in the field. Such an article might focus not only on the individual's responsibilities and professional activities, but also bring in the ways in which that person's subfield of librarianship touches broad issues of national concern—all things that distinguish the professional from the paraprofessional. Having the interviewee discuss his or her background and reasons for entering the profession might strike a familiar chord with paraprofessionals reading the article and make them feel that they too can be successful. Staff newsletters can also be used to alert staff to articles in the professional literature selected particularly to communicate the profession's wide variety of concerns. If meetings and bag lunches to inform staff about the nature of librarians' work and professional activities are difficult to arrange, short articles in the newsletter from staff attending workshops, seminars, and courses might substitute.

Demonstrate commitment to learning

For paraprofessional staff who are attracted to library work because of the opportunities it presents for furthering their own learning, the strong personal and institutional commitment librarians have to continuing professional education can be very attractive. This commitment can be communicated to paraprofessional staff by holding meetings or bag lunches at which librarians describe continuing education programs attended and relate them to their job responsibilities. Librarians who are instructors or presenters may wish to organize a "dry-run" for library staff, particularly inviting paraprofessional staff to attend.

Another way to inform paraprofessionals about the amount of learning required to stay abreast of professional concerns is to convince your administration to provide paraprofessionals with opportunities to participate in professional conferences, programs, and meetings. Obviously local activities are the easiest to pro-

vide access to in terms of the expense involved. However, depending upon an organization's budget, support for even one paraprofessional per year to attend a state or national meeting might be possible and could produce wider local impact by expecting that person to report back to all library staff on his or her experiences at the meeting. In order to make the experience as positive as possible, paraprofessionals attending national or state meetings should be paired up with experienced professionals either from their own organization or from a pool of "meeting mentors" which are usually available from the national/state organizations. If state or national attendance is not financially possible, try to encourage attendance at local meetings and workshops. Many paraprofessionals never hear of these events since they are often announced in membership newsletters or flyers posted in a central (and often inconvenient) place. Attendance at meetings and continuing education programs not only helps the individual paraprofessional enrich his or her work skills and models the commitment we have to continuing education, but provides a glimpse of our "professional world" and facilitates relationships with librarians from other institutions who might also serve as role models.

Be a supportive mentor

So far, we have dealt primarily with ways librarians can model for paraprofessionals those rewarding parts of our career that are hard to observe in the normal workday. However, of equal importance to those paraprofessionals attending library school who were informally interviewed for this article was the personal support or encouragement that they received from either their supervisor or another librarian. The importance of personal encouragement for developing interest in a career is confirmed in *Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring* by Margo Murray, which describes companies successfully using formal mentoring programs they deliberately developed to recruit new employees into unpopular fields.¹

Murray quotes numerous mentees who affirm that they would not have chosen a particular career or have been as successful if not for the mentor who inspired, challenged, and often informally educated them.² The kind of relationship that develops between a mentor and mentee relies on trust and respect and evolves over time; it cannot be forced on either side. While to some librarians this one-on-

one mentoring role may seem intimidating or time-consuming, there are a number of practical mentoring activities individuals can undertake which do not necessarily require a large commitment of resources or time but which would encourage paraprofessionals to consider going into the profession and which would bring a sense of personal accomplishment to the librarian undertaking them.

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One of the least time-consuming and perhaps most effective actions to take is to tell paraprofessionals of their potential and to encourage them to go to library school. This can be done in the time it takes to go on a coffee break together!

Invite paraprofessionals to serve on committees

One way to give paraprofessionals supportive hands-on experience is to provide opportunities for them to serve on internal library or department committees. Committee chairs should ensure that the committee membership routinely includes paraprofessionals. Suggest that your library develop a policy that sets aside an appropriate number of slots for paraprofessionals on all library standing committees and that your library administration reward supervisors for encouraging their paraprofessional staff to serve on these committees. A chair of a committee with paraprofessionals on it could provide them with encouragement perhaps by setting some time aside to discuss with each paraprofessional individually the committee, its charge, and some of its history.

In order to help them feel more informed and thus able to participate, the committee chair should help them fill in background by providing copies of last year's committee minutes or other reading. The chair should also be sure not to let the professionals dominate committee meeting discussions to the exclusion of the paraprofessionals on the committee.

If paraprofessionals do not have a lot of on-the-job time to spend on committee activities,

it is helpful to identify short projects or ones that complement their own job responsibilities so their supervisor will not see their participation as diminishing significantly their time to work on their primary job. At the end of the committee's work, acknowledging all members' contributions to the committee might include the writing of a specific letter to a paraprofessional's supervisor detailing the value of his or her contribution. Such a letter can be extremely encouraging to both the paraprofessional and the supervisor.

Librarians who supervise or work closely with a paraprofessional who they think would be an asset to the profession should encourage that person to volunteer for committees whose work will provide a sense of the profession's concerns or a glimpse into the library or department's policy and decision-making process. The supervisor of a paraprofessional who is serving on a committee might ask the committee chair to fulfill the "mentor" role described above for the paraprofessional. The supervisor ought to discuss with the paraprofessional committee member the amount of on-the-job time that will be realistically available to work on committee projects and what that supervisor expects and hopes the person will learn from serving on that particular committee. A regular meeting time between paraprofessional and supervisor to go over the committee's work will not only provide help and encouragement but also ensure that any conflicts between job and committee duties are resolved at an early stage.

Special projects can demonstrate rewards of the profession

Another structured way to mentor paraprofessionals is through projects or internships. This could be as informal as an individual supervisor assigning a special project or could be as formal as a competitively awarded rotation or internship that is only available to paraprofessional staff. The projects or internships chosen can, if structured carefully, give the paraprofessional a sense of mastery and confidence that will encourage him or her to see the profession as rewarding. Projects are easy to brainstorm—there are always worthy ones waiting to be done—but some that might be considered are: creating a product such as a pathfinder or a display; analyzing and developing recommendations for how to handle a problem such as food in the library or cataloging

backlogs; or learning new skills such as budget monitoring or negotiating with vendors.

Some internships might be very structured such as a rotation to another department where the paraprofessional is trained in all or part of the work of that department, or extremely unstructured where the person simply observes a librarian as that person works, thus learning more about a particular aspect of the profession. This kind of unstructured observation works extremely well in management internships since the "product" is rarely concrete.

To be successful, projects or internships should have a definite beginning and ending date so that the paraprofessional is not put into a position where a professional or semiprofessional activity has been taken on indefinitely without appropriate fiscal rewards. There should also be one professional who is responsible for the project or internship and who is willing to take the time to meet regularly with the paraprofessional. An advance agreement should be made that these meeting times are coaching sessions set aside to help the paraprofessional learn, solve problems, and achieve the maximum successful learning experience. The professional acting as coach should be clear that although high standards can be set and a useful product or report expected as an outcome, the main reason for the project or internship is recruitment. The paraprofessional should not be put in a position, either through neglect or an excess of ambitious enthusiasm, where she or he will fail. This mentoring relationship takes extra time but comments by paraprofessionals choosing librarianship as a career show that this effort to connect personally with potential recruits can make a difference.

Paraprofessionals are a ready-made pool of potential recruits worth our time to develop. Communicating the joys and challenges of our profession to paraprofessionals and mentoring and encouraging them to consider librarianship as a rewarding career not only helps solve a broad, multifaceted problem facing our profession, but brings satisfying if intangible rewards to the librarian willing to invest even a modest amount of time and energy in encouraging another person's development.

Notes

¹Margo Murray, *Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), p. 34.

²*Ibid.*, p. 16–18. ■

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