

Please Sir, Could I Have Some More?

Public Librarians and Salaries

By Tracey Simon

In the mid-1970s, when I told my parents I was considering becoming a librarian, they shuddered; to them, it was a one-way ticket to impoverished spinsterhood. Since they held the purse strings to my education, I surrendered my ambitions. Thirty years later (and married), I obtained my MLS and became a librarian after serving as a marketing coordinator for a non-profit enterprise. The change came with a difficult-to-swallow \$14,000 pay cut. I also had to deal with knowing that my sister-in-law, a dental hygienist with an associates degree, was outstripping me by about \$20,000 in salary. Today, she still makes more, although the gap closed slightly. So, I began to question whether society values librarians. Are we really worth less than someone who cleans teeth? If not, how do we remedy the situation?

I believe that there are two major causes of this discrepancy. One is gender discrimination, which dates back to Mevil Dewey's day. He believed that librarianship was an excellent career choice for college-educated women of high character who would also be a "cheap source of literate labor."¹ The second cause, how librarians and our work are perceived, is rooted in the first but is more subtle and pervasive. However, efforts to change this can transcend the gender issue and bring faster, better, and more permanent results in the area of salaries.

In 1913, Gratia A. Countryman wrote in an article entitled "Librarianship" for the book *Vocations Open to College Women*:

The salaries of trained librarians are not tempting... No one enters any kind of educational work for the sake of financial reward, but for something better.²

And like other predominantly female-populated professions, such as nursing and teaching, altruism towards the betterment of the community was a major reason these low-paying occupations seemed attractive, especially for the genteel educated woman.

A top female librarian in Ms. Countryman's time could expect to receive \$1,081 per annum, which included, on average, six weeks vacation. She was also expected to work at least 42.5 hours a week.³ Compared with elementary school teachers that same year, who averaged \$547 per annum, librarians appeared to be doing quite well.⁴ On closer examination, the difference was minimal. Teachers worked fewer hours a week, were not required to work a full year, and more often than not, boarded with families in their school districts. Despite the decent-sounding salary, which encouraged them to go into librarianship to become self-sufficient, most women actually did so to support parents and siblings. Much of this "great salary" went to pay the bills of others.

Today, the salaries of public school teachers, probably public librarians' closest cognate in terms of education, training, and experience, surpass those offered in our field. Based on statistics from a survey conducted by *Spectrum: The Journal of State Government* (Summer 2002), the average public school teacher salary for year 2000-2001 in the Northeast was \$40,056. (This figure was arrived at by taking an average of the average salaries in the New England states of New York, New Jersey and Delaware.) Compare that with \$33,269, the average public librarian's salary for the same year in the same part of the country.⁵ The following year, there was not much improvement. In 2002, the average public librarian's salary was \$33,590.⁶ Admittedly, these statistics do not give a true "apples to apples" comparison, as the teachers' salary survey did not indicate whether these were starting salaries as did the librarians' survey. However, looking at the hourly rate paid to public librarians and public school teachers of equal standing in terms of education and experience, per the United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov), teachers in the Northeast region (defined as New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania) made an average of \$ 46.79 per hour, while librarians made \$40.88 per hour.⁷ Add in benefits, vacation, and other perks that come with teaching, and the gap gets wider.

The news gets even more depressing. Salaries for systems analysts and database managers—jobs for which businesses actively recruit librarians—start at about \$61,000 a year, nearly twice the starting public librarian's salary.⁸ New MBAs who have education and training levels similar to MLSs can expect to make an average starting salary of \$80,000, plus potential signing bonuses of \$10,000.⁹

In her article “There Is No Honor in Being Underpaid,” Abby Kalan, an adult services librarian in New Jersey, said that based on her home state's cost of living, her salary of \$34,765 prevented her from joining either her state library association or ALA. The good news, she wrote, is that according to the New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, her family qualifies for low-income housing. She adds that her children qualify for state-subsidized health insurance, because on her salary “even the federal government does not anticipate a worker being able to afford health insurance for his or her children.”¹⁰

A number of ways exist to help raise the salaries of librarians, each with varying potential for success.

One of the earliest methods used was job-hopping. In the beginning of the 20th century, library boards, particularly in small communities, often did not want to appoint out-of-towners to permanent positions. If a librarian was lucky, after a few temporary positions, she might land a permanent one. But she couldn't think of staying long if good wages were her goal. There was probably little impetus for a board to raise a librarian's salary once a permanent appointment was made. She would have to raise her own salary by taking a better paying job elsewhere. This popular strategy had its limitations: early moves were quick and easy to make, but once a librarian reached into the higher pay strata, opportunities to move were fewer and far between.¹¹ Also, it only improved the salary situation for the individual rather than the entire profession. Vacancies could always be filled by someone who would take less pay.

While the same strategy could be used today—for example, moving to the West because salaries are better there—it would still only benefit the individual.¹²

American Libraries columnist Will Manley suggested that the main reason librarians are underpaid is simply because we continue to agree to work for low wages.¹³ But if you want to work in your chosen field, and if those are the only salaries available, what are your options? It would be great if librarians, collectively, would start turning down poorly paying positions so that employers would get the picture. As Jennifer Kutzik and Janet Lee explained, if salary ranges for open positions were published and the posted salaries were low, they feel that fewer people would apply for those jobs.¹⁴ Human resource screeners could then return to their administrators to lobby for increased salaries based on an unsatisfactory applicant pool. It would be tough going for a while—who wants to be unemployed for any amount of time until salaries come up?—but it could work well. However, could it work in a civil service setting? What of the undesirable candidate who meets all the criteria and is willing to accept the low salary? And what if there were an influx of candidates from other counties or states who were even more poorly paid? What drive would there be to increase salaries?

Next month (2, no. 5), Tracey suggests other strategies that have been used and can be used successfully to raise salaries in public libraries.

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