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Support Staff

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Tennessee Library Support Staff Want Equitable Compensation, Career Ladders and Continuing Education

TLA Survey Results

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Emerging trends, such as the information commons model, e-reference services, e-enhanced patron empowerment features, and the increasing reliance on electronic resources, have allowed support staff to assume duties that were formerly performed only by professional librarians. In many cases, the additional duties that accompany these emerging trends have come with no corresponding increase in compensation.

While the typical patron doesn't differentiate between the professional librarian and the support staff worker, employees are hired, assigned work, paid, and promoted according to these classifications. Recognizing that changes in library work were rapidly transforming the duties and needs of both library support staff and professional librarians, in 1996 the Executive Board of the ALA [Library] Support Staff Interests Round Table ([L]SSIRT) appointed a Strategic Planning Process Steering Committee to identify the concerns of support staff and to recommend strategies to address their most pressing needs. The results were released in 1997 and are available at www.ala.org/ala/lssirt/lssirtstratplan/strategicplanb/strategicplanning.htm.

In 2004, members of the Tennessee Library Association Paraprofessional Roundtable (TLA-PPRT) conducted a survey to determine whether problems reported in the 1997 ALA LSSIRT survey were similar to those affecting Tennessee workers. Respondents answered questions concerning pay, educational opportunities, their membership in professional organizations, their possibilities for advancement, and ways their job responsibilities have changed over the course of their career. The goals of this survey were to identify concerns of Tennessee support staff, to discover concerns that might not have been reported in former surveys, and to see if, during the seven-year interval between surveys, the problems might have been reduced or remedied.

The survey asks respondents to examine a list of previously identified support staff concerns and to select five that should receive the highest priority from TLA-PPRT. The question also invites respondents to list other issues of concern. The top-ranked concerns follow:

1. Compensation not appropriate to level of education, experience, and responsibilities
2. Career ladders (few opportunities for advancement)

3. Access to continuing education and training opportunities
4. Lack of a paraprofessional certification program
5. Lack of recognition for contributions to libraries and librarianship

The lack of adequate compensation now ranks as the most pressing concern in the Tennessee study, whereas the ALA LSSIRT study finds the lack of career ladders (number 2 in the Tennessee rankings) to be most pressing. Both studies rank access to continuing education/training opportunities as the third most pressing issue. Durman notes that none of these concerns have been adequately addressed in Tennessee. They remain unchanged from concerns expressed in a similar 1997 study: only the order has changed slightly.

Durman discusses the three problems of highest concern to support staff in Tennessee, as found by the TLA-PPRT survey.

1. Appropriate Compensation.

Appropriate compensation for library support staff is a nation-wide concern, and the case can be made that Tennessee support staff are particularly ill-compensated: education has been historically under-funded in this state, and many Tennessee educators must cross state lines to find a well-paying job. That said, when respondents are asked if they feel they are being fairly compensated for the skills and knowledge they possess, 52 percent choose either “fairly well” or “very well.” Respondents to the question involving salary further fill in this financial picture. Sixty-one percent earn between \$15,000 and \$25,000, 17 percent earn between \$25,000 and \$35,000, while only six percent earn over \$35,000. Approximately 44 percent of respondents earn less than \$19,157 annually, the 2004 poverty threshold for a family of four as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh04.html).

2. Opportunities for Advancement.

Roughly 75 percent of Tennessee support staff feel that advancement in their current position is unlikely. Interestingly, 76 percent report that their responsibilities have increased, 23 percent report that their responsibilities have remained about the same, while only 1 (0.6%) reports a decrease. The majority of respondents (74%) are cross-trained to perform duties outside the range of their regular duties. This disparity between respondents’ perceived inability to advance in their current position and the increase of duties experienced by most workers leads toward the question of whether, in today’s rapidly changing library environment, workers are just expected to embrace new responsibilities without expecting a promotion or an increase in financial compensation.

When asked, “How likely is your library to hire from within when filling higher paying staff positions?” 80 percent of those surveyed respond either “somewhat likely” or “very likely.” The fact that the majority of respondents believe that they cannot advance in their current position, but conversely believe that their libraries hire from within when filling higher paying positions, may reveal a belief that not all departments create or fill higher-paying staff positions. More research could explore this apparent discrepancy.

3. Continuing Education/Training Opportunities.

The third most pressing concern identified in both the TLA and the ALA survey, “access to continuing education and training opportunities,” is further analyzed by the question, “How often does your library offer opportunities such as in-house training workshops for support staff to learn new skills?” Respondents to this question suggest that all libraries are not doing an equal job in this area. While 60 percent choose either “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently,” 40 percent characterize the frequency of their training opportunities as either “somewhat infrequently” or “very infrequently.” These responses seems at odds with the replies to the cross-training question; if staff are expected to keep up in this rapidly changing workplace while also constantly taking on new duties, shouldn’t there be frequent opportunities for continuing education for all library workers?

This problem could be compounded by the fact that only 44 percent of those surveyed report that their libraries have a continuing education program. In the follow-up question exploring the amount of funding libraries contribute to such a program, the top response was “unsure” followed closely by “100%.” As noted earlier, the wording for this question in the current survey may have confused some of the recipients. However, since the literature and many of the responses point to a greater than ever need for support staff training, the opportunities and funding for continuing education for support staff is an important topic for Tennessee libraries that merits continued research.

While libraries could probably do a better job informing their employees of educational benefits, the support staff community may not be pursuing these opportunities. Of the 143 respondents to the question, “Are you currently attending school?” only 16 (11%) answered “yes” and just three are studying information science. It is interesting to note that these three are also among the 19 who are members of TLA.

These three problems are often on the minds of administrators and library directors as well. Administrators have a great need to retain talented and well-trained workers. Today’s leaders are seeking resolutions for problems that encourage workers to leave the libraries for better opportunities elsewhere. Future studies should monitor how library administrators address these present concerns, and whether the solutions keep workers in the library as career-employees.

National Library Technicians Day Celebrated in Australia in May

Just as the ALA-APA encourages the library community to celebrate National Library Workers Day on the Tuesday of National Library Week, so the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) celebrates National Library Technicians Day (NLTD) on the Tuesday of Australian Library Week. According to the ALIA website, National Library Technicians Day promotes ALIA and library technician membership on a national basis and actively represents the interests of library technicians in national forums. On May 23, 2006, 230 library technicians and friends gathered in restaurants and meeting halls across Australia to celebrate with food, wine, awards ceremonies and trivia competitions. ALIA will next celebrate National Library Technicians Day on May 22, 2007. For more information visit Kevin Dudeney’s article on the ALIA website: www.alia.org.au/publishing/incite/2006/07/print.html?ID=80.

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