
The North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association: A Force at Work for the Nineties

Judie Stoddard

Over the past two decades technological advances have altered the traditional image of the library as the storehouse of the printed word. Today's library houses increasingly complex automated systems for information retrieval in reference, technical services, and circulation functions. Professionals and paraprofessionals alike are becoming specialists and technicians as they are trained to perform more tasks by machine. Boundaries between their roles are growing less distinct as support personnel perform more tasks that formerly were considered part of the professional librarian's responsibilities. The support staffs need for training in both new and traditional library services is gaining recognition in library literature as a growing number of states investigate training programs for the paraprofessional.

In December 1987 Patsy Hansel, then president of NCLA, announced the formation of a new committee to study the issue of paraprofessional participation in NCLA. This committee was to consider how NCLA could best serve paraprofessionals and what structure would most encourage their involvement. The committee consisted of Ann Thigpen, Sampson County Public Library, Meralyn Meadows, Stanley County Public Library, and Judie Stoddard, Onslow County Public Library. The committee surveyed paraprofessionals in public, academic, and school libraries to determine what jobs they currently held, whether they were interested in NCLA and an association for paraprofessionals, and what their career goals were. Using the *American Library Directory* and the *North Carolina Education Directory* as guides, paraprofessional staff in 292 libraries were queried. By April 1988 the committee had received responses from 726 paraprofessionals. Only 61 were members of NCLA, but 481 showed an interest in joining, with additional membership in a roundtable for paraprofessionals. Of the respondents, about thirty-four percent worked in Circulation, thirty percent in Technical Services, twenty-

two percent in Reference, twelve percent in Childrens, six percent in Administration, and 4.5% on Bookmobiles. Twenty percent represented Branch support staff. These paraprofessional needs were as diverse as the types of libraries employing them. Community college and academic support staff seemed to voice even more desire for assistance than public library personnel. Survey response from school media personnel was, unfortunately, very sparse. Reaching them with the survey was difficult because of the nature of their communications system. Those who did respond reflected the same interests and problems as the others but their access to time and funds for training was even more limited.

A petition with the signatures of 100 NCLA paraprofessional members was presented to the Executive Board at the July meeting and roundtable status was granted. More than 120 paraprofessionals attended the organizational meeting held in November at the Durham County Public Library. Debbie Wolcott, chair of the Paraprofessional Forum of the Virginia Library Association, gave the keynote address. In order to give everyone a chance to speak and to gain a consensus of the areas of most concern, participants were divided into discussion groups. Following reports from each group, the assembly selected a name for the organization and formed a steering committee.

The principal issue that emerged was the need for training. Across all types of libraries, paraprofessionals were most interested in receiving information that would increase their efficiency and boost the overall productivity of their libraries. In addition to being challenged by new technologies, support staff reported that they are being placed in authority over their peers and may be temporarily upgraded to fill vacant professional positions. There is a need for travel funds and time for workshops and training to enhance communication, reference and supervisory skills. Paraprofessionals outnumbered professional staff in most libraries but they do not receive as much

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staff development or outside training as they would like. Rather, the limited funds are offered to professionals.

Paraprofessionals in school libraries are probably in the most difficult position. As mentioned in the survey results, they rarely have time or funds to travel, and there are so few of them in a school system that their needs are neglected. Communication and reference skills are greatly needed in interactions with their patrons.

Another important concern of paraprofessionals centered on the need for standardized job classifications and descriptions. Uniformity across all types of libraries in the state would eliminate some of the existing confusion about salary variations and make job hunting easier. More accurate job analysis, which is a difficult task in this time of increasing automation, would show better what training is needed and make coordination simpler for those who plan continuing education programs. Because their job titles and descriptions are so diverse, paraprofessionals find it very difficult to communicate and exchange ideas when they do attend workshops and attempt to network.

In May 1989 the newly formed North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association offered its first workshop. Dr. Ernie Thompkins, Director of Training for the City of Winston-Salem, presented "Improving Staff Communication." The workshop was offered both in Wilson County Public Library and at Appalachian State University in Boone in order to reach the most participants. A total of 127 paraprofessionals attended the two sessions. Duncan Smith, Director of Continuing Education at North Carolina Central University, acted as program coordinator.

The work of the new committees was only beginning. The NCLPA newsletter was published four times before the 1989 NCLA conference and Kathleen Weibel was chosen to be the Paraprofessional Association's keynote speaker at the conference. Ms. Weibel, Director of Libraries at Ohio Wesleyan University, had addressed many paraprofessional concerns in her article, "I Work in a Library, But I'm Not a Librarian," published in *Library Personnel News*.¹ This was used as the theme of the Association's conference programs. Ms. Weibel addressed, among others, the issues of the diversity of job classifications and job titles, and what to call someone who does not hold an M.L.S., but works in a library. At least 75% of the 210 paraprofessionals attending these sessions indicated that this was their first NCLA conference. The conference schedule also included a series of table talks on time allocation and plan-

ning staff development programs for library support staff.

The major objectives of the Paraprofessional Association are to inform both professionals and support staff about the various concerns and options of the organization, to establish a network across the state, and to encourage active support of NCLA and the Association. With the NCLA conference, paraprofessionals became visible participants in the library community.

In the Winter 1990 issue of *Library Personnel News*, Robert Veihman, Library Technical Assistant Program Coordinator for the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, spoke to the library

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community's need to recognize the place of the trained library technician in today's technologically advanced libraries.² He encouraged the growth of LTA programs nationwide and emphasized that professionals should appreciate the technician as an assistant and not use them as a substitute for a librarian.

Veihman also called attention to a new magazine devoted to library support staff, *Library Mosaics*. The premier issue of this bi-monthly journal was published in September/October 1989. In answer to the growing need of support staff for information, the magazine hopes to provide a national forum, featuring articles by and about support staff. A calendar of national events, a job hotline, and a classified job clearing house will fill a real need, as well. Articles will report on new technologies and information geared to improving the efficiency of the paraprofessional. Articles, stories, and letters to the editor are welcomed.

One of NCLPA's goals is to encourage a study of support staff wage scales as part of the effort to standardize job descriptions, recognizing that counties and regions differ in their abilities to provide funding for support staff. Professionals have an NCLA recommended salary scale. Why not one for the trained paraprofessional?

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of more duties that had previously been performed by professionals to support staff were the top ranking trends that appeared in an informal survey produced by the staff of *Library Personnel News* in 1987.³ During the following year several articles appeared which argued that diminishing financial resources are shrinking staffing options in libraries. Funds are being channeled into technical training for paraprofessionals. Those positions are being given more responsibility and authority. Those changes are not only taking place in technical service areas but in public services as well. Reference desks in both academic and large public libraries are beginning to be staffed with paraprofessionals or with teams composed of a professional and paraprofessionals.⁴ Workshops on reference skills, patron service, and supervision are proliferating as a result. Associations and roundtables are forming to urge the profession to recognize that these changes are inevitable and essential in providing quality library service, and that they require encouragement and funding.

Along with other NCLA roundtables, the NCLPA is beginning this new biennium by participating in the 1990 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services. A Position Paper prepared for the conference identifies five major concerns of paraprofessionals.

- Continuing education which could lead to certification. It is hoped that in time the State Library will recommend pay scales for the various levels of paraprofessional positions.

- Training in automation and new technologies to meet increasing challenges and demands made on paraprofessional staff.

- Training in administering policies, such as latchkey children, unattended children, and the homeless, that affect the public.

- Training formats which support staff may use for staff development programs; for example, networking and discussion groups, seminars, and conferences held regionally or state-wide.

The North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association's experience is being repeated in other states and interest in the needs of library paraprofessionals is being advanced. The future of our libraries will be guided by technology and the quality of service will be determined by the degree to which we prepare and train our support personnel.

References

1. Kathleen Weibel, "I Work in a Library, but I'm Not a Librarian," *Library Personnel News* 2 (Winter 1988): 8.
2. Robert Veihman, "Library Technical Assistant Training Provided," *Library Personnel News* 4 (Winter 1990): 8.
3. "Personnel Management Trends," *Library Personnel News* 1 (Summer 1987): 20.
4. Marjorie Murfin, "Trends in Use of Support Staff and Students at the Reference Desk in Academic Libraries," *Library Personnel News* 2 (Winter 1988): 10-12.



Happy New Year

The Wilson County Public Library: A History, by Patrick Valentine and Marshall Daniel, summarizes the story of public library services in Wilson County, N.C. The authors trace library origins to 1899, when members of a new book club began the Wilson Library Association. In 1939, a certified librarian was hired and an impressive public library building occupied. By 1989, the library, now with several branches, had over one hundred thousand volumes. (1990; Copies of this fifteen-page pamphlet are available at no charge while supply lasts from Wilson County Public Library, P.O. Box 400, Wilson, N.C. 27894-0400.)



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Unsolicited articles dealing with the above themes or any issue of interest to North Carolina librarians are welcomed. Please follow manuscript guidelines delineated elsewhere in this issue.

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1. *North Carolina Libraries* seeks to publish articles, book reviews, and news of professional interest to librarians in North Carolina. Articles need not be of a scholarly nature, but they should address professional concerns of the library community in the state.
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3. Manuscripts should be submitted in triplicate on plain white paper measuring 8½" x 11".
4. Manuscripts must be double-spaced (text, references, and footnotes). Manuscripts should be typed on sixty-space lines, twenty-five lines to a page. The beginnings of paragraphs should be indented eight spaces. Lengthy quotes should be avoided. When used, they should be indented on both margins.
5. The name, position, and professional address of the author should appear in the bottom left-hand corner of a separate title page.
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Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings*. (New York: McGraw, 1965), 416.
Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1979): 498.
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Issue deadlines are February 10, May 10, August 10, and November 10.

