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Valuing Professionalism: Discourse as Professional Practice

EMILY DRABINSKI

ABSTRACT

In the American Library Association's "Core Values of Librarianship" (2004), *Professionalism* is listed as one of the Core Values, but its meaning is not settled. Framed alternately as an incomplete achievement of professional traits or a process of identity creation, the professional status of librarianship has been subject to debate since the field began to take its contemporary form in 1876. Understanding Professionalism as a discursive response to an urgent present can enable the field to locate the value of that status outside of the workplace hierarchies that professionalization inevitably produces.

The daily work of librarians can seem like work requiring no particular training. For every in-depth reference question requiring specialized knowledge of sources or complex cataloging problem that relies upon a facility with emerging metadata standards, there are multiple questions about the location of the bathroom or the stapler, complaints about photocopy jams and library hours, and rote-copy cataloging that requires little more than knowledge of a handful of keystrokes. Librarians and technicians, interns and work-study students, all perform work in libraries ranging from the simple to the complex. But some of these library workers are paid more than all the others: those who graduate with an accredited master's degree in library and information science (LIS), the Master of Library Science (MLS).¹ This training accords librarians the status of "professional," and access to the top of the hierarchy produced by professionalization.

Definitions of what makes a *profession* are as vast as the literature of workplace sociology. These varied definitions generally approach discussions of professionalism as a study of what professions *are* rather than what

they *do*. Scholars tend to describe what makes a certain line of work a profession, paying less attention to what the process of professionalization produces. In library discourses about professionalization, writers tend to begin with a discussion of what constitutes a profession and then describe the ways that librarianship does or does not “measure up.” Glenn McGuigan (2011) offers a contemporary example of this paradigm. He describes a set of four characteristics that professions share: a specialized body of knowledge; a set of ethical standards; a professional association; and a range of workplace competencies that can only be carried out by workers with professional status. He next describes the ways in which librarianship is “in crisis” because of a failure to fully consolidate these four characteristics, and offers a set of strategies for making librarianship a more robust profession. Missing from McGuigan’s claim is a discussion of the impact of these efforts to resolve the crisis of professionalism: the production of a privileged group, separated and elevated in status, professionals only because some library workers are not.

What McGuigan and others who embrace this paradigm discuss less explicitly is that there are real material differences on either side of this divide. One of the most quantifiable of these differences is salary. According to the AFL-CIO’s Department for Professional Employees (2015), the median annual salary for professional librarians in the United States in 2014 was \$55,690. In contrast, library technicians earned a median of \$15.04 per hour, and library assistants only \$11.37.

The production of hierarchies infused with power and privilege is implicit in the professionalization process. It can therefore be surprising to find *Professionalism* enshrined in the American Library Association’s (ALA) “Core Values of Librarianship” (2004): “The American Library Association supports the provision of library services by professionally qualified personnel who have been educated in graduate programs within institutions of higher education. It is of vital importance that there be professional education available to meet the social needs and goals of library services” (n.p.). This commitment sits uncomfortably alongside other Core Values: equity of *Access* to materials, the role of libraries as an essential *Public Good*, and the *Social Responsibility* to solve problems are all values that center justice. Professionalism, among other effects, produces and inscribes inequities in the library workforce; as unselfconscious as it may be, Professionalism sits as a contradiction at the heart of the Core Values statement.

Missing as well from the professionalization literature is what professional status gives people on an affective level, including an excuse to gather, an affirmation that the concerns one has are legitimate, and the production of a shared intellectual space within which to address these questions. The value of professional status is real for those who achieve it, not only in terms of higher wages, but in the pleasures that a professional

community can bring: a group of people engaged in similar work who want to talk to one another about what they do.

In figuring Professionalism as a state to be achieved (or not) rather than as a series of effects emanating from professionalized practice, the literature focuses instead on the “crisis” of professional status. Norman Roberts (1991) identified “malaise” as a threat to librarians’ professional status in Great Britain. John Harer (2011) pointed to the risk of losing professional status as a central impact of the 2008 economic crisis on librarianship. Brian Crowley’s edited volume *Defending Professionalism* (2012) takes as its starting point the assumption that librarians’ professional status is under attack. Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby (2014) couch their analysis of librarian stereotypes through the effects that these have on professional status. Throughout the literature, Professionalism is understood as a status achieved once and for all, requiring consolidation and protection through urgent action on the part of librarians. As Paul Jaegar (2010) suggests in his review essay about libraries and change, “the reasons for crisis may change, but the need to be in crisis does not” (p. 290). Librarianship is always already responding to the crisis of Professionalism.

This paper suggests that while Professionalism is a Core Value, the value is not fixed; instead, Professionalism is continually produced and reproduced in the library discourse, always in response to an urgent present or impending future that requires a new form of consolidation. Whether rooted in concerns about garnering material advantages for present and future professionals or in the contradictions between Professionalism and the other Core Values of librarianship, the value is contested.

WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

While the definition of *profession* is a contested one, the urge to define it is broadly embraced. In the ALA’s “Core Values of Librarianship” (2004), Professionalism is left as an empty signifier, to be filled by library discourse: Professionalism requires professionally qualified personnel who have received professional educations. This statement does not attempt a definition beyond tautology: the professional as a type or style of education and service, which is not further elaborated upon. Given that the ALA bills itself as an association for libraries, not librarians, the question of what makes a professional is even more fraught. If the ALA in some ways constitutes the profession, the need for professional librarians is about the reproduction of the Association itself. The field must turn out professional librarians who can in turn work in and advocate for the professional body.

The library literature, both professional and trade, is rife with meditations on what it means to be professional and why it matters. Searching the phrase “librarianship as a profession” retrieves nearly 4,000 results across LIS databases.² The retrieved articles range from editorials arguing for the continued relevance of the MLS in a time of economic decline, to studies

of the density of tenure status in academic libraries, to articles fretting about stereotypes of librarians as either over-sexed or overly prudish.

From the perspective emerging from the Professionalism literature, *profession* means a set of characteristics that librarianship must attain if it is to consolidate as a full profession. Roma Harris (1992) suggests that this emphasis on shoring up these certain markers of Professionalism requires librarianship (a female-dominated profession) to reject feminine-coded practices in favor of adopting masculine “traits.” She identifies six normative traits of Professionalism that normalized as “trait theory”:

- An advanced university-based education
- A unique body of abstract knowledge
- A code of ethics for practitioners
- An orientation toward service
- Autonomy in the practice of work
- An association of members through which control is exercised over who is authorized to practice, and how such practice is to be conducted (p. 5)

As Harris argues, librarians concerned with achieving professional status on these terms are bound to prioritize these imperatives, rewarding stereotypically masculine behavior along the way, in part to secure the benefits that come with being recognized as a full profession. If librarianship achieves these traits incompletely, she suggests, then the field can only be considered a semi-profession, and the material gains afforded to professionals will also be only partially acquired. For example, the ALA accredits library schools but does not have formal licensing requirements like lawyers and doctors do; therefore the field is underpaid relative to these others. Credentialing in particular leads to professional status and its material rewards as a field “gain[s] control over markets for its services” (Estabrook, 1989, p. 288). A push to consolidate credentialing centralizes power, accruing material gains to professional librarians, but at the cost of other values and priorities.

Professionalism can alternatively be understood not as the acquisition of traits but as the production of an identity, made and remade in part through the discursive contestation of Professionalism itself. Pagowsky and Rigby (2014) note the proliferation of these discussions in digital media as a response to a “zeitgeist” that requires “articulating the value of libraries and librarians” (p. 1). In political economies of crisis and austerity, claims to status become more urgent as fields attempt to secure to themselves access to diminishing capital, both social and material. Deborah Hicks (2016) deploys discourse analysis to argue for a constructivist definition of Professionalism, suggesting that the “interpretive repertoires” the field uses to talk about itself determine the scope of professional practice. Understanding Professionalism as a process rather than an achieved state redirects attention from librarianship’s lack to an exploration of

the effects—both good and ill—of professional status. Constructivist approaches also make room for the discourse of Professionalism to be itself constitutive of librarianship as a profession. It is the field's engagement with these questions that in part produces the field as a profession.

In the next section, I turn to a series of moments in the field when these questions are engaged. For the most part, the discussion of Professionalism emerges out of concerns about conditions in the present or the fast-approaching near future. This analysis suggests a framing of Professionalism as a guard against, as well as a facilitator of, change. More than anything else, valuing Professionalism means valuing the work of articulating the present and responses to it.

PROFESSING THE PRESENT

The professional identity and practice of librarians has an origin story in 1876, when a group of librarians, including Melvil Dewey, C. A. Cutter, Samuel Green, and others, gathered in Philadelphia to call for the establishment of a professional library association (ALA, 2008). The decision to organize an association certainly represents the acquisition of one "trait" of professionalism, but it also signals a professional practice: gathering together to discuss and document a field of work.

In his work on structures of memory in the sciences, Geoffrey Bowker (2005) suggests that when disciplines document themselves, they "permit both the creation of a continuous, useful past and the transmission sub rosa of information, stories, and practices from our wild, discontinuous, ever-changing past" (p. 9). In other words, documentation allows for the discursive production of the present by a disciplining of what has come before. The usefulness of this work for librarians is the production and reproduction of things like the documentation of associations and meetings and the creation of journals and reports, all of which simultaneously require the work of professionals (as they have been conceived of so far) and create an alibi for professional status. If only professional librarians can survey the present and make claims about it, then surely we need professional librarians.

That first meeting of what would become the ALA resulted in the publication of a report on the state of libraries in the country. The report, *Public Libraries in the United States of America* (United States Bureau of Education, 1876), provided information on academic, theological, and public libraries, gathered between 1870 and 1876. It also presented "the fruits of the ripe experience and best thought of eminent librarians" (p. xiv) in the form of a list of things that librarians ought to concern themselves with: library buildings; the organization and management of both public libraries and academic libraries; a survey of current U.S. bibliography; classification schema; periodical indexing; book preservation; periodical literature; reference literature; and approaches to records management

(p. xv). The report both interpolates the incipient professional librarian as a worker informed by depth of practice and theory, and defines what would be the domain of professional work. The warrant for these initial steps toward professional status is the rapid growth and expansion of the American library, in the exigent present of 1876. Libraries “greatly multiplied” and “continued to increase in unexampled ratio” (pp. xi, xii) during the years surveyed by the report. Action was necessary.

Part of the response to this exigent present was the adoption of a second trait of Professionalism: formal education. Changes in U.S. libraries were articulated as technical, requiring skills of “scientific objectivity and neutrality” (Garrison, 1979, p. 9). These were skills that could be taught in formal training programs. As *Public Libraries in the United States of America* noted, “the opinion is gaining ground that only a man specially trained for it can successfully fill the place of librarian” (United States Bureau of Education, 1876, p. xiv). For the ALA, a commitment to professional library-training programs would be embedded in its Core Value of Professionalism more than a century later, as would the Association’s self-defined role in evaluating and accrediting schools of library education. Despite its persistence, the call for training would continue to be framed in terms of an exceptional present.

TEACHING PROFESSIONALS

Professionalization required a model of teaching that extended beyond apprenticeship models or technical instruction. Not all education for libraries was or is equal; for the ALA, the master’s degree is what counts for professional librarian education. Training on the job or in certification programs might produce skilled library workers, but these employees are not classified as professionals nor are paid as such. The American Library Association–Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) has developed a library support staff certificate program that provides competency-based training “designed to recognize the value and accomplishments of Library Support Staff” (Library Support Staff Certification, n.d., n.p.). Efforts like this one aim to ameliorate the inequity produced by professionalized work environments, but the distinction of the master’s degree remains.

The content of that master’s degree has been contested since Dewey proposed the first professional library school at the 1883 ALA meeting (Wiegand, 1996). In its infancy U.S. librarianship was organized and dominated mostly by college-educated, upper-class men, although the library labor force was largely female (Garrison, 1979). Dewey argued, within the context of the rapidly expanding role of public libraries, that the “new librarianship” required professional education: “Librarianship means today quite a different thing from what it meant twenty years ago” (p. 3)—from Dewey’s perspective, certainly, due to his own innovations. While clerical (feminized) work was still critical to a functioning library, the role

of libraries in uplifting and edifying the working class, ordering materials selected for that purpose according to Dewey's scheme, and the provision of reference services all required professional training. Dewey's School of Library Economy at Columbia University was established for this purpose in 1887. Although not his priority, professional training could elevate the status of women working in libraries—a factor that librarians would turn to again and again in claims to professional legitimacy.

The ensuing decades saw the institutionalization of professional library education, a process that called for its own documentation through reports delivered at various professional meetings. At the 1903 ALA meeting, the Committee on Library Training provided a report on the present state of library education. The Committee sought to provide “a careful investigation of all discoverable sources and a clear presentation of the conditions thus brought to light” (ALA, 1903, p. 83). The work of the Association required apprehending the present and articulating a coming future, both of which would invariably demand the entrenchment of the professionalization process. The Committee asked seventy-two questions in its survey of library schools, many of which simply documented practice; for example, determining the number of hours spent in instruction, or whether the instructors revise the work of classifying and cataloging from the same edition as that used by pupils.

The report resulting from this survey produced a recommendation for the appointment of a second committee charged with producing a “tract on ‘Training for librarianship,’ making a brief statement of a wholly satisfactory standard for each type of school, to which shall be appended the names of such sources of training of different kinds and grades as fully meet this standard, this statement and list of schools registered as fully meeting the standard to be revised for the annual report each year” (p. 98). The professionalization process granted power to the ALA to determine what was necessary for professional library education, as well as a demand to always be in flux: revising standards in response to changes in an always exigent present.

The call to both fix and change professional education quickly became a trope in professional discourse, one that pushed to the side questions of equity and exclusion in favor of reiterating the urgent demand for professionals, always now more than ever. In 1919 the ALA commissioned another report to survey the state of library training, again in response to an exigent present, one in which past practice had been in response to needs altogether different from those facing contemporary libraries. Charles Williamson argued, in his 1923 Carnegie report *Training for Library Service*, that “the difficulty of supplying libraries with assistants who were skilled in handling such detail and possessed of enough general understanding of the significance and importance of care and accuracy seems to have led the first schools to shape their curricula to meet the needs of the time,

which was natural and desirable” (p. 4). The first three decades of library training were insufficiently attentive to the production of a clearly distinct professional class, he suggested, resulting in “a shortage of persons fitted for the higher grades of library work” (p. 4). This situation required the field to more clearly parse the differences between clerical library staff and professional librarians “for the sake of the profession,” he argued, in order “to elevate the standards of library service” and make “some distinction between professional and sub-professional or clerical grades of library work” (p. 5). Williamson’s suggestions included requiring the bachelor’s degree and increasing specialization in library education. In other words, making library education more rigorous would make it more professional, a move that in turn would increase the demand for professionals. Williamson contended that U.S. libraries had an incipient demand for professional librarians that would become “actual if the schools were equipped to turn out well-trained specialists” (p. 91). Both the present and immediate future demanded the production of a professional class.

The argument here is not that conditions were not changing in U.S. libraries—they were. The number of libraries with 50,000 or more books in their collections had increased from eighteen in 1876 to 140 by 1900 (Singer, 2010, p. 253). The “war work” of librarians with soldiers overseas and on ships during World War I facilitated connections with the Carnegie Corporation that would lead to even more growth in libraries (Sullivan, 1986, p. 146). In elevating library education standards, librarianship could increase pay and attract more people to the field. For Williamson (1923), professionalization was necessary to raise salaries for a subset of library workers, arguing that “wherever the incompetent are allowed to compete with the competent, the former will win when competition is waged on a salary basis” (p. 123). More rigorous professional education would produce competent workers whose higher wages would be deserved, given the quality of their education. For Williamson and others, the material benefits that would accrue to professional librarians required the production of lower paid library workers, necessary at least in part to warrant higher salaries for the professional class.

PROFESSIONALIZING IN THE PRESENT

By 1987, a hundred years after Dewey opened his library school, Williamson’s vision of a professional status that required both the bachelor’s and an advanced degree in librarianship had become standard in the field. Courses in reference work, cataloging and classification, and materials evaluation and selection remained core subjects of study. The demand to change practices and redefine standards in response to a rapidly approaching future also had not changed.

In late 1986 the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* published a special issue on the state of library education, anticipating

the hundredth anniversary of Dewey's School of Library Economy. The issue's editor, Charles Patterson, framed the contributions as an essential exploration of values and practices, critical "because of the urgent and important need for us to understand and to change" (p. 139). Where Williamson cited the growth of libraries with large collections as the warrant for revising library school curricula, Patterson pointed to "wars, emerging nations, Sputnik . . . and the advent of the 'information explosion' [as the] impetus for the expansion of libraries and library service of all kinds" (p. 139). Williamson argued that a bachelor's degree was necessary because of the importance of a deep grounding in the liberal arts; Patterson suggested that the growing emphasis on instruction in libraries required "a better and more broadly educated faculty member [who] recognizes the importance and necessity for research and investigation" (p. 140). Like his forebears in the discourse, Patterson saw the need for change as more urgent than ever: "In the past, these needs have evolved and emerged as being diversified and extremely complex in our profession. As we attempt to understand more fully our universe, they will become even more so in the decades that are before us" (p. 141). Again, librarianship faces impending crisis that demands immediate intervention.

The exigent present is marshaled as a reason for taking action that consolidates professional identity. In its most recent iteration, the ALA's Committee on Accreditation (COA) has institutionalized acting on a shifting present. Founded in 1956, the Committee is charged "to develop and formulate standards of education for library and information studies for the approval of council" (ALA, COA, 2015a, p. 9). The most recent revision of the accreditation standards give primacy to the responsiveness to change. The first standard, "Systematic Planning," requires that programs engage in "continuous review and revision" of goals and objectives (ALA, COA, 2015b, p. 4). The second standard addresses the curriculum, and while it includes some parameters regarding academic content, it also stresses that the curriculum must "evolve in response to an ongoing systematic planning process" (2015a, p. 5). Indeed, four of the seven aspects that define the standard are related directly to producing evidence that a program is engaged in constant curricular change.

WHAT WE VALUE WHEN WE VALUE PROFESSIONALISM

When the Core Values were adopted in 2004, the ALA adopted "an essential set of Core Values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice" (n.p.). Defining its Core Values in this way, the Association makes the claim that they are essential, immutable, and unchanging in a changing world. In the very act of being so named, however, these Core Values become subject to debate, ideas to be struggled over in both discourse and practice. Universities choose workers with disciplinary doctoral degrees rather than MLS holders for professional librarian positions (Bell, 2011);

primary and secondary school libraries frame arguments for resources around the importance of having a professional librarian in the classroom (Patterson, 2013). Others argue that an apprenticeship model is better-suited to the kind of work that librarians do and thus urge jettisoning the professional degree (Kelley, 2013). The claim to “immutability” paradoxically renders the Core Values always already mutable.

Whether Professionalism ought to be a Core Value is a prescriptive question, one not answered in this paper. Professional status divides workplaces, producing wage inequities that mirror those in broader society. Professional status also produces the meetings and conferences, journals and blogs, and roundtables and interest groups that connect professional librarians to one another. There are advantages in both money and affect that accrue through the engine of professionalization.

And yet, the field must balance these advantages against the damaging production of exclusion and inequity in contradiction with the other Core Values of the field. In order for some people to be professionals, other people must be nonprofessionals and excluded from the circle of privilege that professionalization affords. The pleasures of professional discourse might be acquired without these exclusions and in fact be enhanced by broadening the range of voices and experiences invited to speak. Higher wages might best be won on the ground of inclusive struggle across library workers. Rather than simply valuing a category of worker, the field might usefully articulate for itself what we value when we value Professionalism.

NOTES

1. Libraries often include other kinds of professional workers who lack the MLS: archivists and information technologists, for example. The distinction between professional librarians and paraprofessional library staff is the focus of this paper.
2. The databases consulted (both current and retrospective) were: Library and Information Science Source; Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts; and Library Literature and Information Science.

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