

Why Am I a Librarian? Conversations with a Cross Section of the Profession

Martin Garnar

For this Colorado Libraries issue focusing on retirement, recruitment, and retention, I was asked to speak to a handful of librarians and write an article about their perspectives on the profession and their careers. The premise was that having a freewheeling discussion would (1) allow some topics to be expanded in ways not possible with a survey, (2) take advantage of the synergies that result when a group discussion takes unplanned directions, and (3) put a human face on the results that would otherwise be difficult to discern from a survey. My first task was to assemble a diverse group of volunteers, so I turned to LIBNET (the Colorado e-mail list for librarians) and posted a message in mid-January 2005. I hoped to have a small pool from which I could select six to eight librarians who represented a range of experiences and institutional settings. Instead, I had over 80 volunteers in a matter of days—clearly, this was a topic that excited librarians. At first, I tried to think of some way to include everyone in the discussion, but then I came to my senses and went with the original plan. Here's a rundown of the nine participants:

- Teacher librarian at a high school with one year of experience,
- Youth services librarian at a public library with two years of experience,
- Academic librarian with six years of experience,
- Prison library director with fifteen years of experience,
- Technical services librarian at an academic library with sixteen years of experience in academic and special libraries,
- Library consultant with nineteen years of experience in the library vendor arena,
- Public library director with twenty-four years of experience at a wide variety of libraries,
- Academic library director with thirty years of experience,
- Teacher librarian at an elementary school with over thirty years of experience; retiring this year

Geographic diversity was also a concern, so I sampled communities from across the state. In addition, gender was a factor in selection. Not counting myself, there were eight women and one man, which isn't far off from the actual proportion in the profession.

Now that I had the team assembled, my next challenge was to get us all together. Due to work and travel schedules, this was not to be. In the end, I met individually with one person, had a phone interview with another, and arranged a conference call for the rest of us. Prior to the discussions, I sent everyone a list of questions that we'd be covering, which you'll see as the headings throughout the rest of this article. So, now it's time to suspend disbelief and pretend that you're sitting in on the conversation. Here's what we had to say:

What brought us to the library profession? I don't know about you, but I always like to hear how people were first called to librarianship. One of the common threads is the diversity of work that

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comes with being a librarian. As for the initial motivating spark, these differed quite a bit. Some of the group spent time in libraries as users and liked what they saw, being especially attracted to the idea of the “library as place” and to being in a profession that “makes a contribution.” One of them volunteered in her local school library and pleaded to become the new librarian when a vacancy appeared, which she did upon the condition that she complete the appropriate education (she did). Others found themselves in research-oriented jobs and either went back to school to get a library degree or, in one case, was actually sent to library school by her employer so she could be retained as a librarian after her original position was cut. The library consultant was selling advertising when she met a corporate librarian and was attracted to the “coolness of the job.” Both of the teacher librarians started as teachers. One was already teaching and getting her master’s in educational technology. She found herself drawn to the elective library courses and eventually switched to the school library emphasis. The other teacher librarian went to Australia on a work exchange program as a teacher and ended up being assigned a librarian position because it was the only one left when she arrived. After two years of on-the-job training and enjoying her work, she came back to the US and got a master’s degree so she could continue in the field. All in all, most of us came to libraries after starting out on a different path and were glad to find something that fit.

What is our vision of librarianship? We had many ideas on this topic, so this is hard to boil down (but I’ll try anyway). We connect people with ideas, information, and (as some reactionaries insisted) books. We’re a service profession and are often the models of service for other parts of our institutions and communities. Technology is intertwined with how we see ourselves: as mediators for the public, as slaves to its constant changes, and as the losing side in the battle to shape technology’s direction. We strive to teach our users to be lifelong learners who can critically evaluate information. With increased quantity and decreased quality of information, we’re more important than ever. As a profession, we have instant credibility. We are the guardians of intellectual freedom and have an increasing role in educating the public about privacy. With all of those lofty visions, it’s amazing we can keep up with those expectations, so let’s turn to the next question.

What keeps us in the profession? Or, what do we love about the profession? The library consultant said that it’s “getting to do everything” that keeps her in the profession. Our service focus and ability to change lives were noted by a few people, including the prison librarian who feels that her job is the most personally rewarding work she’s ever done. Having new questions daily keeps it interesting. Rather than say, “We can’t do that,” we say, “How will we do that?” One of the academic librarians (and I concur) loves the academic setting and being part of the higher education system. Watching diverse student populations work together and inspire each other is another reason to come to work. On the other end of the education system, the teacher librarians like watching their students grow in their abilities. The new teacher librarian feels she’s been promoted and is on the cutting edge of education’s evolution. Finally, we’re a fun (and funny) bunch of people—why would you want to

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work anywhere else when your colleagues are so entertaining? Well, we could think of a few reasons...

What would cause us to leave the profession? Or, what do we hate about the profession?

Money and politics both came up, though not always in the same context. The directors said they don't like "grubbing for money" and hated having to make the hard choices that come with budget shortfalls. Looking at money from a different perspective, the problem of low salaries was cited by some as a reason to consider leaving. As for politics, this concept embraced both external and internal concerns. External issues included loss of support from school administrators and library trustees, forcing the retiring teacher librarian to have to fight for her job every year. In addition, doing battle with the state legislature over recent library-related legislation was "hard on the soul" of one participant. Internal institutional politics were cited by both those working in libraries and those in non-traditional settings. In fact, one of the participants revealed that she was days away from leaving her library for a job in a related field due to internal politics. Since similar positions at other libraries would have required a long commute, she started looking at non-library options, but noted that it was her librarian skills ("people and organizational skills") that got her the new job. The library consultant was emphatic that her identity as a librarian was based on her and not where she worked. I'll note that at least one participant (the prison librarian) said that she doesn't hate anything about her job and would only leave it if her position were eliminated.

What should library leaders do to recruit and keep librarians?

Let's tackle recruitment first. Despite the fact that we have our own action figure, we need to do a better job of communicating the "wow" factor of librarianship. Riffing on the stereotype portrayed by the Nancy Pearl doll, we noted that we have to stop defining ourselves as others see us and learn to embrace the nose rings within the profession. Being visibly outrageous and funny to the public would also help attract new blood. As for retention, we need better pay for all types of libraries and need to invest in professional development for all types of librarians. New librarians should be taught how to promote themselves and be given opportunities to socialize with other newbies, especially if they're the only new person in the building. Also, we need to watch that the front line librarians (who are often our newest folks) don't get burned out. Giving them other responsibilities that are meaningful is one idea, as is making sure they don't feel devalued by the replacement of front line professional positions with paraprofessionals. On the flip side, encouraging paraprofessionals to seek further education was seen as a good way to recruit from within. Bottom line: something needs to change, as the current lack of emphasis on retention means that the recruitment efforts will have to be redoubled to replace both the retiring and the disaffected.

How has the profession changed since we started?

Change has always happened, but not as quickly as it does today. Change is also hard to manage in rural areas that lack training opportunities, so it's been more keenly felt there. Technology was mentioned by almost everyone, one person remembered being told in the 1970s that "computers might have an impact on libraries." The librarian

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who's moving to the private sector was told that working with people and systems wasn't possible when she was in library school, but now that combination is almost required. Despite the impact of technology, the basic thrust of librarianship (organizing and finding information) remains the same. Someone voiced a concern about fewer technical services librarians and feels that there's been a "brain drain" as a result. In school libraries, the focus on standards has shifted what the library can do, though programs like Accelerated Reader and Readers Count have kept a strong emphasis on reading and literacy. On a different note, one of the newer librarians said that her "MLS feels devalued" and that if she knew then what she knows now, she would have skipped library school. The public library director has witnessed the decline of municipal libraries, as their lack of autonomy and budget control relative to library districts is a disadvantage. The director prefers the district model, as it gives libraries more "power over their future."

How do we expect it to change in the future? The profession will never stop changing. The librarian with the "devalued MLS" sees a swing back to a bachelor's in library science as a good middle ground between paraprofessionals and MLS holders. While more specialization in library operations was envisioned, the basic services "will remain the same." The retiring teacher librarian was blunt in her predictions of the future: elimination of the librarian's role in schools. The new teacher librarian sees a need to be multi-skilled and integrated with the rest of the school, but thinks that the profession might move back to specialization. We briefly mentioned virtual reference as something to watch, but most of us have no direct experience with it. The one librarian who regularly does virtual reference thinks that speed and multitasking ability will be paramount in providing this service. Lastly, if we're going to keep up with the changes in society that accompany generational shifts, we need to move from niche marketers to well positioned, broadly supported public institutions.

Are we doing what we expected to be doing when we pursued our master's degrees? At this point in the teleconference, we were getting VERY close to the end of our scheduled time, so the evil facilitator told them to keep it short. There were three unqualified responses of "Yes"; one response of "Yes, but not where I'm doing it"; four responses of "No" with comments about being retrained to do everything in a school except being a librarian, about the interesting path of becoming a prison librarian, and about the joy of finding an alternate career path; and one response of "I don't remember what I expected—library school was too long ago."

As we retire, what concerns us about the profession? I asked those folks closer to retirement to answer this final question, though some of the others couldn't resist. One concern is the growing perception that "anyone who answers a question is a librarian." Another is about librarians remaining useful to the community and finding ways to "get out of the stacks." Salary is a big issue. "We educate people to do attractive jobs and then don't pay them to stay in the field, so we lose them to other industries." The retiring teacher librarian is very concerned about the replacement of library professionals with people who lack the right training, as well as the impact of standardized testing on

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funding, since resources for the library are constantly being diverted to support testing. She's using her remaining time to gather data and make the case for a full-time librarian position as her replacement. Other concerns include having too many male administrators and not enough men in front line positions, as well as a general lack of diversity and "the growing government intrusion into our free information lifestyle." As many of the other concerns were already hashed out in earlier discussions, the tone then turned positive. "Libraries are staffed by conscientious people and are well managed. They are publicly well regarded, which is no small thing." In a great closing line, the greenest librarian of the group (the new teacher librarian) chimed in and advocated a continuing dialogue between all types of librarians, as it's the "only way to work together."

FINAL THOUGHTS FROM THE FACILITATOR

These people are passionate about the power of libraries and librarians. If we don't communicate this passion to our communities, we'll eventually be the only ones who care about libraries. To ensure our profession's future, we must continually demonstrate just how important libraries are, and remember that being a librarian isn't necessarily dependent on where we work. If you have any ideas on how to get our message to the larger world, then add your voice to this conversation. We (and by "we" I mean our entire profession) would *really* like to know.

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