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Librarians As Professionals



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ABSTRACT

What can librarians do to earn or enhance their roles as trusted professionals both inside and outside of the library? Nine practical action steps are suggested, including continued learning, participation in professional organizations, upholding the ethical boundaries of the profession, marketing professional credentials, dealing with stereotypes, giving attention to communication and appearances, and protecting margins for self-care.

Introduction

In my library internship at Walker Management Library (Owen Graduate School of Business at Vanderbilt University) many years ago, one of the categories we separated out of our student attendance statistics was “professionals.” When I asked Rosemary, the circulation supervisor, about it, she told me the number did not represent “professional students,” but graduate students in the professions, like the medical students and law students. Their graduate studies would lead to their profession. I then asked, “Should we count the library science students in that group too?”

I still think the answer is yes. Like the medical professionals and legal professionals, the information professionals have specialized knowledge and skills. Our graduate educations qualify us for our work; we often pursue additional specialties. We belong to professional associations. Our work requires ongoing professional development. There are ethical codes that govern our conduct. We see our work as vocation and calling.

So how can we promote the idea of the librarian as a professional, both in our academic institutions and in our own thinking? Here are some practical steps that will move us in that direction.

1) Continue self-directed learning.

As is true of other professionals, the field of library and information science continues to change. Even if you became a librarian last year or last month, something new has entered the scope of librarianship since then. You cannot be content with what you already know. You must venture outside your comfort zone to learn new ways of meeting the goals of your library. There will be

new technology, new services, new methodology, new expectations, and a new generation to serve. You must continue to learn about all of these areas. As the Red Queen told Alice, “You have to run as fast as you can to stay where you are.”

Note, too, that this learning is self-directed. Whether funding is available or not, you can read. Whether your employer sponsors the workshop or not, you can investigate. You are responsible for your own continued education. You also get to choose. You are the one who selects what you want to read, what you want to learn, where you want to learn it. So if you want to become an expert in RDA cataloging, you can. If you want to become an expert in database statistics or management theories or Swaziland dialects, you can. After all, you are the information professional, and you can find and benefit from that information.

Time, of course, is the issue. As Anne Houston recommended, you must find the balance between serving the patron in front of you and the patron of the future. You must control your schedule to make room for continued education, professional reading, and whatever growth avenues you choose to pursue. Some thoughtful library directors have made it a part of the job descriptions for librarians at the institutions they serve and held librarians accountable for it. As a professional, you must manage your calendar to make room for never-ending improvement through learning.

2) Value professional organizations and collegiality.

Though your professional organization does not examine and validate your credentials, participating in its activities is still part of your responsibility. Active membership (more than merely paying your dues) provides both outlets for service and opportunities for growth. Choose the professional organization(s) wisely. You may not have enough margin to participate in more than one, but invest well and enjoy the conferences, literature, products, and friendships that will develop through your membership. Both what you give and what you gain will be valuable in your professionalism.

Build relationships with other librarians, both within and outside of your institution. Shared wisdom, broader vision, extended experience, and validation of your perceptions will result. They will stretch you, but also embrace you and hold you up. The community of librarians uniquely reaches out to help its colleagues. That is who we are. Plug in.

3) Treat others with respect and honor confidentiality.

We know well that doctors and lawyers cannot reveal a client’s disclosures to them; librarians also must protect the confidentiality of their patrons. This can be awkward and require great tact. However, we should recognize and uphold

the ethical boundaries of our profession in this area as well as others such as copyright and fair use.

In addition, we should make our libraries places of safety for all kinds of people. They should expect our courtesy, fairness, and generous help. We must guard against prejudice while adhering to the policies of our libraries or academic institutions.

We must also guard against belittling those who come with little knowledge or experience in libraries. We owe the same courtesy to the freshman that we give to the graduate student or the faculty member. We receive their questions with patience and grace, and help to move them another step along their learning journey.

4) Recognize the credentials of librarians.

Gloria Meraz wrote that the major problem with librarian's professionalism can be identified by looking in the mirror. Perhaps we have been too modest to emphasize our academic credentials. Perhaps we are not treated as professionals because we have failed to help others see us in that role. We can add our academic degrees, titles, and credentials to our websites. We can print business cards. We can insist on appointments for reference consultations. We can build a system that requires that our patrons and colleagues see us as the professionals we are. But we cannot hide our lights under bushels.

5) Emphasize the difference in training and education.

A friend of mine once told me about her class in library penmanship for writing call numbers on the spines of books – really! That is not twenty-first century library education. As a professional, we are educated to understand the concepts, to diagnose what is needed, and offer answers to the problems. We do more than stamp books. The processes and procedures will continue to change. As a professional, you must confront the ever-moving targets and the ever-new landscapes, and identify the solutions to serve your patrons.

6) Deal with stereotypes and demystify the profession.

Some have suggested that librarianship, in the same way as nursing and teaching, has been considered a “woman's profession,” and therefore not given due respect. Twenty years into the twenty-first century, we need to drive a stake in that. We must articulate the value of librarians. We are better than internet search engines. We are equipped to meet the demands of our students and patrons; we are able to identify problems and offer solutions and wisely set a course to meet future needs. That should not be some well-guarded secret within our libraries or our institutions. Help to educate both those within the library and without to

recognize your contribution to scholarship, institutional effectiveness, and the goals of your institution. Speak up for your expertise, judgment, analysis, and insights as well as your preparation and field of knowledge.

7) Look and act the part of a professional.

It is too bad librarians do not wear lab coats.

We can, however, present ourselves as well-groomed and reputable professionals, choosing to look more like administrators than undergraduates. This is not to say that we must always be buttoned-up conservatives, wearing our glasses on the ends of our noses and our hair pulled back in buns. Our professionalism should be evident in our appropriate choices for attire, our cleanliness, and our concern about the tone we set for our libraries.

Professionalism should also be apparent in our demeanor and work surroundings. We should control our reactions and responses, and we should make certain our working conditions are conducive to the activities we perform. Our concern for the comfort and confidence of others should be evident in all of our interactions.

8) Make sure that communication, written and verbal, represents you well.

One misspelled word can ruin your reputation.

Communication, whether verbal or written, is vital to the image of the professional. This demands preparation and thoughtfulness, as well as extensive practice. Good communication is also a group effort, humbly requesting others to read what you have written for clarity and accuracy, and collaborating on ways to present information. There should be layers of proofreaders. In the organization and tone of your communication, you should be plainspoken and direct, but also gracious.

Websites, blogs, and even social media comments should be thoughtful and in good taste. While humor is always welcome, you want to be certain that it is appropriate and maintains the character you and your library want to convey.

9) Protect your time away from work.

We all knew that my doctor played golf every Thursday afternoon. No one thought it was inappropriate. His professional demands required him intentionally to find time away from the medical practice.

Librarians, too, need to practice self-care. The principal of Sabbath rest was established at Creation. We cannot expect to be on call 24/7 and continue to find joy in our work. As professionals, we must establish boundaries so that our mental and physical energies are well-spent; we want to protect the rest of our lives – our families and friendships, our church work and community service, our emotional and mental health.

If you have more work than you can do in your workweek, you must delegate more or determine what can be left undone. Otherwise you will rob yourself and others in order to feed the never-satisfied demands of your library. Yes, you can always do more, but should you? Guard your creativity, your thoughtful concern for others, your spiritual refreshment, and your physical health by allowing yourself to leave some of your work incomplete.

You will earn your reputation over time. It is up to you to earn the reputation as a trusted professional. Together, we can work to establish the role of the librarian as a trusted profession in our communities. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Reid serves as the editor for four devotional magazines at Randall House Publications and works part time at Trevecca Nazarene University as Online and Data Services Librarian. She has been a member of ACL for decades, has served on the ACL board, and has often presented conference workshops.

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