
Paraprofessional Groups and Associations

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ABSTRACT

THE 1996 EDITION OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S *National Directory: Library Paraprofessional Associations* lists forty-six active library paraprofessional associations or subsidiary groups in the United States. Since the mid-1960s, starting with the formation of the Council on Library/Media Technicians (COLT), the number of these groups has grown. They take a variety of forms, from the independent association or group to the round table or section of a larger library association. They exist on national, regional, state, and local levels. The groups share common elements in the reasons they were formed and their members' expectations. The author reviews why paraprofessionals began to form associations, looks at a sampling of the associations with their common and dissimilar elements, and examines their place within the community of library associations.

INTRODUCTION

The first step in examining the growing world of paraprofessional library associations and groups is to look at the reasons for their emergence and continued growth. As of 1992, an estimated 352,815 people were employed in academic, public, and school libraries within the United States. Of those, 62 percent are in the ranks of paraprofessionals (Lynch, 1995, p. 60). Uncounted are many more who work in special and corporate libraries. Staffing patterns in academic libraries in the United States and Canada reveal that the ratio of paraprofessionals to professional staff

has increased. Research shows that one-fourth of academic libraries claim to have more paraprofessionals and fewer librarians on their staffs today than in the past. In some cases, it is reported that this trend is the result of the number of librarian staff positions shrinking, while in others it is because the paraprofessional staff positions have increased (Oberg et al., 1992, pp. 220, 221).

In the past, the traditional boundaries between the duties of librarians and paraprofessionals were more readily apparent than they are today. The paraprofessional's tasks were clerical in nature. They were limited to duties such as filing, shelving, checking books in and out, and doing basic descriptive cataloging. That is no longer true. Today, the duties of paraprofessionals cover a diverse range of responsibilities with no clear delineations or boundaries. During the 1980s when many libraries were changing their approach to job assignments and responsibilities, little was being done to track those changes and their effect on library paraprofessionals. In 1991, Larry Oberg noted "that librarians have remained aloof from the day-to-day needs and concerns of their uncredentialed coworkers is a truism of our experience, our literature and the activities of our professional associations. Although an intense process of 'off-loading' tasks . . . has occurred over the past twenty or so years, the effects of the process have been largely ignored and stand in need of analysis" (p. 3). When he wrote this, Oberg was in the midst of surveying academic libraries to find out just what paraprofessionals were doing. He found that: "In both technical and public services, paraprofessionals are routinely assigned tasks that in the past they were rarely, if ever, allowed to perform" and that "a high degree of overlap exists between the work that is performed by librarians and that performed by support staff" (Oberg et al., 1992, pp. 215, 232). Of the academic research libraries surveyed, 16 to 23 percent assign collection development to paraprofessionals (p. 225). In cataloging departments, paraprofessionals are doing all levels of cataloging: copy cataloging (92 percent), original descriptive cataloging (51 percent), and original subject analysis and classification (36 percent). Even the once sacrosanct reference desk of reference services is no longer solely covered by librarians in 74 percent of the surveyed libraries (p. 224).

Oberg reported on academic libraries. However, the new paradigm carries through to public libraries where there can be even more of a blur. With librarians called upon to fulfill more complex library responsibilities, library paraprofessionals are often on the "front line" providing service to the library patron. Deborah Halsted and Dana Neeley (1990) point out that, as backup to the librarian, paraprofessionals are often the sole workers fielding questions and providing service on evenings and weekends (p. 62). It is also true that public libraries do not always hold to a rigid interpretation of the title "librarian" when conferring the desig-

nation as a job title. In 1993, only 41.1 percent of the public library librarians in the United States held an MLS from an American Library Association (ALA) accredited school (Lynch & Lance, 1993, p. 67). Library size has much to do with this phenomenon. Often librarian positions in smaller libraries are filled by one who would be considered a paraprofessional in a larger library or library system. "Only a few of the libraries serving populations of less than 10,000 have MLS librarians, while all libraries serving populations of 100,000 or more employ them" (p. 67).

If library paraprofessionals occupy positions that were once held to be the purview of only the librarian, one must ask how they are being prepared for the changing complexities of their jobs. "It is important that all staff, from the top of the hierarchy on down to the lowliest clerk, now be informed about library issues and be able to react intelligently to patrons' requests. This is achieved by communication within the organization and by access to continuing education and staff development for all staff" (Wakefield, 1992, p. 26). Halsted and Neeley (1990) urge that attention be given to staff training, both through in-house programs and off-site courses, to prepare them for their responsibilities. They also suggest that paraprofessionals be encouraged to join existing library associations, because, as association members, they can participate in the type of continuing education offered only in the conference setting. The authors also note that library associations that do not already provide for paraprofessional membership must create a place within their groups for library technicians and welcome their membership (p. 63).

At the time Halsted and Neeley were urging library associations to be inclusive, library paraprofessionals were already moving to satisfy their own needs through a major burst of association building. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many new round tables and sections were forming especially within state library associations. Oberg (1991) saw this upsurge as an indication of the library profession finally showing "signs of interest in the condition of paraprofessionals" (p. 4). This was also the period of the creation of two independent state paraprofessional associations in New Jersey and New York.

THE NEED TO ORGANIZE

Library paraprofessional groups did not just materialize out of thin air, especially those aligned with parent library associations. For the groups to flourish, there had to be an atmosphere of cooperation and inclusiveness within the profession of librarianship. With only a few exceptions, most pioneers of the library paraprofessional organization movement found positive acceptance within their state associations. This article examines individual paraprofessional groups; however, two surveys and a

series of focus groups conducted in the early 1990s will emphasize the reasons library paraprofessionals felt the need to organize.

The formal Research and Action Agenda for Support Professionals in Libraries (RAASPIL) casebook survey was conducted by Virginia Gerster and Meralyn Meadows (in press) as a part of the American Library Association Office for Library Personnel Resources Standing Committee on Library Education (SCOLE) World Book-ALA GOAL Award Project on Library Support Staff. Gerster and Meadows mailed the RAASPIL surveys to known state paraprofessional associations and to ALA state chapters. They sent a follow-up survey to those state associations responding that they had groups in the formative stage. Gerster and Meadows first wanted to discover what was available for paraprofessionals. Next, they wanted to learn the organizational structure of the groups and their relationships to their state associations, and finally, what were the concerns of the groups. The first *National Directory: Library Paraprofessional Associations* was compiled from information gathered from the RAASPIL survey (Gerster & Meadows, in press). Besides the survey, the SCOLE World Book-ALA GOAL Award Project conducted focus groups around the country to ascertain the concerns of individual paraprofessionals. More than 500 people participated in forty-two focus groups. Twenty-three of the groups were comprised only of paraprofessionals, fourteen were of only librarians, and twelve were a mix of librarians and paraprofessionals. The results of the focus group discussions were published by the SCOLE World Book-ALA GOAL Award project in a preliminary summary and as ten issues papers (American Library Association, 1991a, 1991b).

Individual opinion was also the focus of a survey conducted in 1993 by the California Library Association (CLA) Membership Committee (Owen, 1994). The purpose of the survey was to determine why paraprofessionals joined their state associations, how they were enticed to join, what they expected from membership, and whether their expectations had been met. The survey was sent to members of the CLA Support Staff Interests Round Table and posted on the Internet LIBSUP-L discussion group for library paraprofessionals. A report of the survey results was submitted to the CLA Membership Committee (Owen, 1994).

The RAASPIL survey identified twenty-five organizations in twenty-one states. New York and Ohio had more than one group. The Arizona Library Association Library Technicians and Paraprofessionals reported the earliest founding date of 1969 (Gerster & Meadows, in press). The CLA survey received forty-one responses from paraprofessionals in seventeen states (Owen, 1994). Though the questions on the surveys differed, common threads emerged in the responses. The reasons individuals gave for joining associations matched the reasons the association representatives gave for the creation of their groups. Their problems were also similar.

Gerster and Meadows found that most state associations were helpful in the initial organization process of the paraprofessional groups. Support was both moral and logistical. Some state associations were quite generous with logistical support, which included seed money, access to databases, and mentors. Moral support was provided through public and private statements of encouragement and acceptance. This vocal encouragement was considered vital to the success of the organizations during their formation periods (Gerster & Meadows, *in press*).

Not every paraprofessional association received such positive response to their attempts to organize. Some found that the state associations were engrossed in meeting the needs of their librarian members (Gerster & Meadows, *in press*). Others reported feeling that librarians wanted to compartmentalize them within the associations. One person was told it was nice that there was a round table for nonprofessionals to join because they would not be interested in librarians' activities (Anonymous, personal communication, November 1993). There is also a fear by some librarians that paraprofessionals will somehow dilute the professionalism of the library associations: "The blurring of the distinction between librarians and paraprofessionals is a serious transgression for an association that seeks to represent members of the library profession" (McCulley & Ream, 1995, p. 3). Ed Gillen (1996) stated:

I find it ironic that the same individuals who view support staff inclusion as a threat to their professionalism, continually point to the low number of support staff in professional associations as proof that support staff don't care about the profession or want to get involved. I also find it ironic that these same individuals commonly compare support staff to vital or strong anatomical parts like the backbone, or the heart, of their library yet fear support staff will weaken the profession and professional associations.

Acknowledgment of the expansion of paraprofessional groups within state and national library associations has led some to justify the acceptance of the groups. "Clearly, these associations have taken the path of collaboration with, and hopefully controlling, the trends toward increasing employment of paraprofessionals rather than confronting the trend in an attempt to protect the prerogatives of professional librarians" (Sandler, 1996, n. p.).

Individuals responding to the CLA survey agreed that expressions of encouragement were important and influenced their decision to join an association. The encouragement often began with the way in which individuals learned that an opportunity existed for participation in professional growth experiences. The majority (52 percent) said they initially discovered their state associations through contact with librarians with whom they worked. One commented: "My boss asked me why I was not a member." Peer recommendations (19 percent) came next and personal

awareness (17 percent) ranked third, as some paraprofessionals noticed that librarians disappeared on a periodic basis and asked why. They then explored membership in the associations on their own initiative. Others (12 percent) answered that they found out by attending conferences or did not remember how they learned about the library association (Owen, 1994).

Though associations grow strong only when members actively participate, being more than "paper" members can be difficult for paraprofessionals. The level of institutional support for professional development activity by paraprofessionals varies. Official recognition for professional development is expected and rewarded for librarians. This is not so for paraprofessional personnel. Or, as Marshall Berger (1997) reminds us, in the past "support staff rarely attended round table discussions, held retreats or in-service days, or traveled to library conventions. Librarians were the librarians and support staff were, simply put, support staff" (p. 63).

Since, today, individual paraprofessionals seek out and participate in professional growth opportunities, as evidenced by their increased membership in professional associations, it is relevant to ask who is paying for it. Some libraries do help their staff in these efforts, but not all, and, in some, the assistance is offered with no real expectation of acceptance (Owen, 1994). The level of support varies by type of activity and size of the library. In-house, local, or regional continuing education events are often supported with both release time and some money. The story is different for participation in national associations and events sponsored by those associations. The larger membership of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) remains supportive while backing at smaller academic libraries drops off significantly. Sixty-eight percent of ARL libraries versus 32 percent of the smaller academic libraries give release time, and 61 percent versus 24 percent assist monetarily (Oberg et al., 1992, pp. 228-29). Significantly, this means that there are many libraries, especially smaller ones, at which paraprofessionals receive little support for participation in national activities. This may be because there is the question that, while participation in activities and associations may enrich the individual, "the benefits to a library system are more nebulous" (Sandler, 1996, n. p.). As more libraries recognize the value of encouraging all staff to reach their fullest potential, the level of assistance should improve.

Regardless of the level of assistance they receive, paraprofessionals must also make personal commitments of time and money to ensure the success of their groups and associations. They do so because they believe in the value of association membership. That perception of value lies behind the reasons paraprofessional groups are created. Overall, paraprofessional associations are primarily concerned with issues directly identified as important to their paraprofessional members. This is not to say

that the groups are not interested in wider issues of promoting literacy, freedom of information, and the survival of libraries in our society. Groups that are a part of a parent library association encourage their members to move beyond the round table or section to become involved in a broader scope of activities. Nevertheless, the need to address paraprofessional issues is the primary reason the paraprofessional groups are founded.

The RAASPIL survey identified six general categories of concern to library paraprofessionals. Pay equity was at the top of the list, with recognition and educational opportunities sharing a close second. Additional categories included access to career ladders, access to continuing education, and the elusive category of respect (Gerster & Meadows, in press). The SCOLE World Book-ALA GOAL Award Project on Library Support Staff focus groups identified ten areas of concern. The issues were certification, basic education, continuing education, MLS Librarian/Paraprofessional communication and mutual respect, compensation, advancement, responsibility without authority, terminology, role definition, and staff morale (American Library Association, 1991a).

The CLA survey allowed multiple answers to the question, "What do you want from the organization?" Networking opportunities ranked highest (51 percent); library paraprofessionals viewed as invaluable their ability to talk with others who had similar interests in order to share ideas and to learn from each other. Continuing education opportunities (36 percent), respect (29 percent), and professional development (24 percent) were also considered important (Owen, 1994) as they were in the RAASPIL survey. A new issue on the CLA survey was the ability of the individual to contribute to broader library issues. Twenty percent of the respondents indicated that this was important (Owen, 1994). Remember, the CLA survey asked about personal concerns while the RAASPIL survey sought group concerns. On the individual level, the ability to become involved in addressing issues facing the library community was important. One respondent clearly stated that her reason for joining a library association was, "to participate in a professional organization that is concerned with libraries and the people who work in them" (D. Wagener, personal communication, December 13, 1993). The importance of paraprofessionals becoming involved in library issues, as individuals and within associations, was emphasized by Ann Symons (1997) when she advocated "enlisting every ALA member to champion funding, access, and intellectual freedom." She further stated she wanted, "everyone who works in every type of library—catalogers, reference librarians, circulation clerks, school librarians, library directors—to join with users, trustees and friends to speak for the public's right to participate in a democracy" (p. 52).

Since the initial tally of library paraprofessional associations by Gerster and Meadows in 1992, the total number of active paraprofessional associations, as listed in the 1996 edition of the *National Directory: Library*

Paraprofessional Associations, has increased to forty-six (American Library Association, 1996). Most organizations are linked to their state library associations, while a few are independent. Though the directory list has lengthened, not all paraprofessional organizations are recorded. Many library systems and special associations nurture their own groups. Still others exist independently to serve a limited function. The histories of some groups will show how they reflect the concerns of their members. This information was gathered from responses to questions that the author sent to officers of a random sample of the associations listed in the *National Directory* and from the groups' newsletters. The questions asked for information about organizational structure, history, their relationship to other groups, leadership development, and member benefits.

The Council on Library/Media Technicians and the Support Staff Interests Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA/SSIRT) are two paraprofessional groups that are nationally organized, and only one is an independent association. The histories of these two groups are intertwined.

COUNCIL ON LIBRARY/MEDIA TECHNICIANS

The Council on Library/Media Technicians began thirty years ago. The acronym COLT originally stood for Council on Library Technology. The organization was founded in 1967 by people involved in two-year associate degree programs for the training of library technical assistants. For the most part they were librarians and library educators who wanted an organization that would meet the needs of their programs' graduates. Richard Taylor, Sister Mary Rudnick, Charles Evans, Dorothy Johnson, Betty Duvall, Noel Grego, and Alice Naylor were some of the original founders (Slade, 1996). Two other members who are still active in paraprofessional issues today are Raymond Roney and Margaret Barron. Roney is the founder and publisher of *Library Mosaics*,¹ the only print journal for library paraprofessionals in the United States. Barron later became president of COLT. These forward-thinking individuals recognized that the paraprofessionals of the future would be called upon to provide increasingly more technical service to the libraries in which they worked. They also believed that education should not end with a certificate or associate degree but continue throughout one's life. The objectives they established are as follows:

COLT Objectives (abridged from the COLT Bylaws):

- To function as a clearinghouse for information relating to library support staff personnel
- To advance the status of library support staff personnel
- To initiate, promote, and support activities leading toward the appro-

priate placement, employment, and certification of library support staff personnel

- To promote effective communication between and among all library staff at all levels
- To initiate, promote, and support research projects and publications for *the* advancement of knowledge and understanding among library support staff personnel
- To study and develop curricula for the education of library support staff and develop appropriate standards for that education
- To cooperate usefully with other organizations whose purposes and objectives are similar to, and consistent with, those of COLT (Council on Library/Media Technicians, 1996)

Less than ten years after its founding, COLT was well established as a national organization for library paraprofessionals and was also no longer being led just by librarians and library educators. The paraprofessionals in its ranks had gained their own voice. COLT's membership was opened to all library staff, not just those connected to library technical assistant education programs, with its members representing the full spectrum of those who work in and care about libraries. Though the acronym stayed the same, the group's name was changed to the Council on Library/Media Technicians.

According to COLT President Kent Slade, as an independent organization, COLT has "an opportunity to avoid a lot of the red tape that might prevent us from addressing some issues that might be seen as controversial . . . [and be] able to plan for our own future, to deal with our finances the way we wish, to be able to publish a range of materials and to offer an alternative to other groups out there." Listing drawbacks, Slade mentions: "We lack the visibility to effectively draw on the talents of thousands of members in various ways and have to rely on the hundreds instead" (K. Slade, personal communication, February 4, 1997).

COLT's independence does not prevent it from working closely with other groups with similar objectives. To this end, the organization became an affiliate of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1976 and has cooperated with ALA in many mutually beneficial projects. When SCOLE conducted its series of nationwide focus groups in 1991, COLT members acted as facilitators for many of these lively discussions. Two recent projects in which COLT has been involved are the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) task force on meeting the continuing educational needs of library paraprofessionals and the ALA Committee on Education's task force to study the need to revise the criteria for library technical education programs. Additionally, COLT's annual conference has often been held in conjunction with the ALA Annual Conference. Proximity to ALA has enabled COLT to draw on the

expertise of ALA members as speakers and consultants. Recently, COLT expanded the conference site criteria to include other venues because it no longer needed to rely solely on librarians as speakers. Speakers are now drawn from throughout the library community including the ranks of paraprofessionals (Council on Library/Media Technicians, 1996).

The issues that COLT addresses are many and some are quite complicated. Certification is one of long-standing concern. In 1981, COLT formed a special committee to study the advisability of certification for Library/Media Technical Assistants. The committee consisted of representatives from the American Library Association, the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, the American Association of Law Libraries, and other interested groups. The Certification Committee prepared a survey to obtain information that could be discussed and debated. The committee concluded that the time was not ripe for certification, and the group shelved the work for another day. That day has come, and COLT is again conducting nationwide surveys and meetings to assess the need and acceptance of a national program for voluntary certification of library paraprofessionals because library paraprofessionals place national certification near the top of the list of their issues and concerns. Certification is a complicated question with no easy answers. However, as long as certification remains a concern for library support staff, COLT will continue to address it as an important issue (Slade, 1996).

Library Technical Assistant (LTA) education is another issue important to COLT members. As is happening with Masters of Library Science programs, Library Technical Assistant programs are closing at an alarming rate, decreasing from a high of 157 schools in 1981 to 115 programs by 1992 (Council on Library/Media Technicians, 1996). COLT supports a comprehensive examination of this situation and is cooperating with others to develop solutions to this disturbing trend. It also publishes a directory of Library Technical Assistant programs. The group continues to address the issue of continuing education for library paraprofessionals through regional workshops and conferences. COLT encourages participation in innovative programs such as the "Soaring to Excellence" teleconference offered by Illinois' College of DuPage.

In 1996, COLT had more than 500 members with chapters in Northern and Southern California, Washington, D.C., and north Florida. COLT chapters are one way that the association provides leadership opportunities for members. Chapters are responsible for their own governance within guidelines set by the national association. They are free to develop workshops, newsletters, job lines, and anything else that meets the needs of local members. While conducting these activities, chapter members develop professional networks and hone their organizational and

leadership skills, skills that are important for the individual and the organization. Individuals benefit when they transfer these skills to their work and personal lives. The organization benefits when the local leaders extend themselves into national positions.

Not every COLT member belongs to a local chapter. In some areas of the country other strong local or state paraprofessional organizations already exist. In those areas, members are encouraged to support the local group while maintaining their involvement in COLT. Still others live in isolated communities with little face-to-face contact with people outside their area. For them, networking opportunities at conferences and the ability to keep up with national issues, news, and events via *Library Mosaics* is invaluable. *Library Mosaics* is the primary communication medium for members along with mailings to the members. Since the journal's inception in 1988, COLT members have received a subscription as a member benefit. While it is an independent publication, each issue of *Library Mosaics* contains two pages of COLT information. In April 1997, COLT debuted its own home page.² To spread the word about these and other networking resources dedicated to paraprofessional issues, COLT publishes a brochure with addresses and subscription information for listservs, home pages, and print and electronic journals.

SUPPORT STAFF INTERESTS ROUND TABLE

The Support Staff Interests Round Table of the American Library Association was created in 1994, growing out of a Membership Interest Group (MIG) formed to assess the desire of more than 300 ALA members to have a round table devoted to the interests and concerns of library paraprofessionals. Leaders in the MIG were AnnaMarie Kehnst, Betty Arnold, Pat Clingman, Peg Earheart, Deb Wolcott, and Meralyn Meadows. The formation process of the round table was not without some controversy. While the MIG was developing its round table proposal, members of the COLT Executive Board, most of whom were also members of ALA, were examining the possibility of COLT providing the nucleus of an ALA round table. At the 1992 Annual Conference in San Francisco both groups submitted petitions to the ALA Committee on Organizations (COO). Because of the similarity of the petitions, COO rejected both and proposed that the two groups meet at the 1993 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Denver to discuss their common goals and to resolve the conflict (Earheart, 1993, p. 6). Both COLT and the MIG withdrew their petitions with COLT deciding to remain an independent organization (Council on Library/Media Technicians, 1993). A new steering committee was formed, consisting of MIG members and COLT members who supported the concept of an ALA round table for paraprofessionals. The committee wrote a new petition with the following statement of purpose:

To provide an arena within ALA for addressing a wide variety of issues of concern to library support staff, including, but not limited to basic training programs, education, career development, job duties and responsibilities and other related issues for the purpose of fostering communications and networking among all levels of library personnel. To be responsible for the immediate dissemination of information to national, state, regional, and local support staff organizations. (Earheart, 1993, p. 6)

The ALA Council on Organizations accepted the new petition and sent it forward to the ALA Council where approval was immediately given.

With more than 200 members, the group provides programming at conferences and input to ALA on issues important to library paraprofessionals. Round table members serve on ALA task forces, committees, and workgroups. According to SSIRT President Jim Hill:

the membership is composed of proactive library personnel who are essential to the cultural, educational, and economic life of our nation's libraries. We are a racially and ethnically diverse group representing academic, public, school, corporate and special libraries. Our diversity of membership dictates a wide range of interests that frequently overlaps or complements other round tables. We do have our differences but they are balanced by a similarity of interest and activity with other ALA groups. (personal communication, April 14, 1997)

In 1996, the round table surveyed a sampling of library paraprofessionals across the country to ascertain what issues were of concern to them. Preliminary tabulations showed more than 800 responses (Gillen, 1997) from every state, and from Australia, Hungary, and most of the Canadian provinces (Hill, 1997). In the early responses, three issues stood out: (1) the blurring of support staff and librarians' roles, (2) access to continuing education and training opportunities, and (3) keeping up with technological changes (Gillen, 1997). The top three issues identified in the final survey report will be the ones on which the round table centers its strategic planning (Morgan, 1996).

INDEPENDENT STATE ASSOCIATIONS

The remaining paraprofessional organizations in the United States are local, regional, or statewide in nature. Some are independent, but the majority are linked to their state associations. The largest independent groups are the New Jersey Association of Library Assistants (NJALA) and the New York State Library Assistants Association (NYSLAA). At the time of their organization, both groups report there was little interest from the state associations for the paraprofessionals to join with them. NYSLAA Past President Dean Johnson says: "I hate to be blunt, but, [the New York Library Association] didn't want anything to do with us" (St. Lifer, 1995, p. 32). The groups have prospered without the connection.

NYSLAA has more than 500 members while NJALA membership exceeds 290.

The New Jersey Association of Library Assistants was formed in 1986. The organizational meeting was held at a one-day conference at Seton Hall University. Membership is open to anyone who works as a paraprofessional and does not have an MLS. Associate members are all who do not qualify as regular members. According to Linda Porter (personal communication, March 4, 1997), NJALA is an independent group, because, at its inception, the New Jersey Library Association offered only a \$50 subsidy that the group interpreted as a weak sign of support for sponsoring a subgroup. Today NJALA is content to remain a free-standing association. NJALA conducts a well-respected conference every June at Seton Hall University, offering twenty-four workshops during a two-day period. They also publish a newsletter three times a year and use their Web home page as a bulletin board for continuing-education courses and to inform paraprofessionals of other organizations. The only area of organizational concern reported by NJALA is the current difficulty they have in grooming new leaders. Porter echoes a common complaint when she says, "possible candidates still have problems getting the backing to be involved. They cannot get the time off [work] to participate" (L. Porter, personal communication, March 4, 1997).

The New York State Library Assistants Association was born of necessity. It found its roots in the New York State Library Clerical Conference of 1978. This conference was repeated in 1979 to the delight of New York library paraprofessionals; however, the 1980 conference fell through due to lack of an institutional sponsor. Though the conferences were resumed the following year, New York paraprofessionals began investigating ways to ensure its continuation. An executive council was formed to look into possible affiliations with other organizations, and not until all such efforts proved futile was the decision made to form an independent association. The group came into official existence in 1989 with 300 charter members (Selby, 1991, p. 14).

The NYSLAA vision statement reflects the climate that existed at the time of its formation:

We would like to see a library community in New York State where library assistants have a voice in decisions that affect their future, are valued for their contributions, recognized and rewarded appropriately, and where there is equitable access to professional development opportunities. NYSLAA will be a voice for New York's library assistants. We will lead the way in creating and supporting a system that will bring about real, positive change in the library community. Our Association shall be a place of competent professionalism and of community, where all our members can come secure in the knowledge that they will be welcomed for who they are; included actively and meaningfully in decisions that [a]ffect their lives; provided the

quality services they need; and challenged to realize their best hopes, dreams, and aspirations. (New York State Library Assistants' Association, 1997b)

While the group chose to form as an independent organization, the choice was not seen as irrevocable. In 1997, a fact-finding exchange was opened with the New York Library Association (NYLA). During the NYSLAA's annual conference, NYLA's president-elect urged the group to consider affiliating with NYLA. In response, the paraprofessional association decided to investigate exactly what such an affiliation would entail and what it would mean for the group. Any final decision will come only after much consideration and a vote of the members ("Fact Finding Committee Formed," 1997).

Though ensuring the continuation of the annual conference was a major project for the association, they quickly developed others. A state-wide Certificate of Achievement for library paraprofessionals was in development by 1992. By 1995, a two-year pilot program was in place with the first eight certificates awarded that same year. The program is based on a similar one in Utah. Points are awarded for a wide range of activities, including formal and continuing education, publishing, and participation in professional associations (New York State Library Assistant's Association, 1997b).

NYSLAA is an example of a highly successful independent state paraprofessional association:

[It] is now seen as one additional strong voice in support of New York libraries. NYSLAA members have sent letters in support of library legislation and NYSLAA has joined the other professional library associations in New York State in cosponsoring statewide library initiatives. They are now looking at paraprofessionals in a new light—as voters, as advocates, as lobbyists in support of libraries. (Gillen, 1996)

ROUND TABLES AND SECTIONS OF STATE ASSOCIATIONS

Most paraprofessional library groups are associated with their state library associations. Though membership is commonly open to anyone interested in paraprofessional issues, usually only a few librarians are active members. Because the groups are part of their state associations, one must join that group and then the paraprofessional round table or section. Often people will attend programs sponsored by the groups at their conferences or as a guest of the group before they actually join the parent association. According to Terri Dolan (personal communication, March 19, 1997): "I first visited the [Illinois Library Association] Forum for Library Assistants by attending an FLA business meeting at ILA's annual conference, became interested, and soon joined." The forum, which now has 113 members, was originally established to "investigate whether ILA should continue to try to integrate support staff needs and interests,

as well as librarians' needs, etc. The forum continues in ILA and the need for support staff/paraprofessional involvement continues to grow also" (T. Dolan, personal communication, March 19, 1997).

The Minnesota Library Association Support Staff and Paraprofessional Section (MLASSPS) is typical of most paraprofessional groups that are part of a state association. MLASSPS was formed in 1976 to enhance the professional image and status of Minnesota's library assistants, to further professional growth opportunities, and to provide a network for communication on libraries and paraprofessional issues. The original name of the group, Pages to Library Specialists Round Table, was changed in 1987 to the Library Support Staff Round Table. In 1996, the round table petitioned for and received section status, a recognition by the Minnesota Library Association Board that paraprofessionals are a growing force in the library workplace (V. Heinrich, personal communication, February 28, 1997).

The decision to align with the state association is still being discussed among the members of the Minnesota section. The cost of membership versus the perceived value of membership is questioned. As with most groups linked to a larger association, members must pay both association and round table or section dues. Since section meetings are usually held in conjunction with conferences or workshops and are thus open to anyone attending the event, some paraprofessionals question why they should join the section since they can attend meetings anyway. To answer this question, the leaders of MLASSPS emphasize the other services and benefits of a professional association such as lobbying for library issues in the state legislature, discounts for the annual conference and other events, and leadership opportunities within MLA. "We invite people to participate at whatever level they can" (V. Heinrich, personal communication, February 28, 1997).

Developing leaders for paraprofessional groups can be a daunting task. In Minnesota, section members are encouraged to participate at increasingly higher levels of leadership within the section and the association. Every section member who holds any leadership position (committee chairperson, officer, etc.) within the paraprofessional section or any other part of the state association is invited to attend MLASSPS executive committee meetings, and subsequent section officers are recruited from this pool of experienced leaders. "We began encouraging these leadership roles in the last few years and saw the fruits of this effort this past election for 1997 chair-elect and secretary as we had two candidates for each position. In the past, we often had just one person running for office, which doesn't make for very exciting elections, or for much feeling of choice for the members" (V. Heinrich, personal communication, February 28, 1997).

The section holds quarterly general meetings around the state of

Minnesota, providing networking opportunities to a greater number of paraprofessionals than might be reached by a single annual meeting. Their quarterly newsletter, *LinkUp!*, includes conference notices, job announcements, and other news and information directed toward library paraprofessionals. Programs are sponsored at the MLA annual conference. In 1996, seven sessions over a two-day period were presented. In 1997, nine programs are anticipated. The group has its own Web site to provide current information to its members. With respect to the intangible benefits for its seventy-two members, Virginia Heinrich (1997) stated:

The primary intangible benefit is an increase in both personal and job satisfaction, and the feeling that we too are professionals in our jobs. MLA has been very receptive to our leadership within the association, and I think that is very important. To me, it lends credibility to the whole movement toward the professionalization of support staff and paraprofessionals in libraries. Because of that, I feel it is very important to continue working within the association rather than break away as an independent group. However, should the association take a turn and become less responsive to our section, I would have no hesitation to break off and form our own association. (personal communication, February 28, 1997)

This undercurrent of fear of possible rejection by the parent organization cannot be ignored. Though public episodes of distrust between librarians and paraprofessionals within associations have been few in recent years, some have been highly visible. The Virginia Library Association (VLA) episode was played out in print with librarians and paraprofessionals from all over the country chiming in. In 1995, after the completion of the VLA Paraprofessional Forum's third successful conference, then-VLA President Linda Farynk wrote a column for the *Virginia Librarian* noting the contributions paraprofessionals made to VLA and questioned whether or not VLA had done all it could to make paraprofessionals welcome in the association. She suggested changing the name of the *Virginia Librarian* to one that would be more inclusive and representative of VLA members (Farynk, 1995, p. 2). The editors of *Virginia Librarian* asked if it would not dilute the association's professionalism. The arguments echoed the long-running debate on the professional status of librarians and role blurring and went on to challenge the commitment of paraprofessionals as a class to the concept of association membership and professional service (McCulley & Ream, 1995, p. 3).

Reaction to the editorials was immediate and widespread. *Library Journal* editor John Berry (1995) responded with an editorial decrying "exclusionary elitism" and supporting the name change (p. 6). While letters to both the *Virginia Librarian* and *Library Journal* were predominantly in support of the name change, some who did not agree questioned whether library associations should even allow paraprofessional membership. In the end, *Virginia Librarian* became *Virginia Libraries*, and

the editors resigned. "The debate made the association . . . stronger. . . . VLA has a sincere appreciation for the dedication, talents and accomplishments of the forum" (O. Turner, personal communication, March 4, 1997). Membership in VLAPF has grown to nearly 200 members and a past chair of the forum currently serves as VLA treasurer.

Other round tables have also grown to section status. The Nebraska Library Association (NLA) Paraprofessional Section started as a round table in the early 1980s and was elevated to section status about ten years later. In 1993, the Para-Professional Needs Committee, consisting of Jacqueline Mundell, Carol Speicher, Norma Methany, Linda Dehlerking, and Carol Lechner presented a proposal to then-NLA President Tom Boyle. For the next two years the committee worked to identify and organize "library employees with a career orientation, who share in the generally accepted goals and philosophies of libraries, and who either do not have an advanced degree in library science or who are not employed in a position designated as *professional*" (Lechner, 1992, p. 22). The NLA Executive Board granted the group round table status in 1985. Lechner remains active in the Nebraska Library Association, currently serving as the association's secretary. Membership in the section varies between fifty and seventy members (J. Winkler, personal communication, February 3, 1997). The section prefers the advantages of being a part of a large well-respected group, participating in the annual state convention, and being able to use association resources to promote section goals.

Kate Wakefield (1992), in an appeal to Kansas paraprofessionals, points out that membership in the round table has a twofold benefit:

The first is that it is good for paraprofessionals to have the opportunity to learn from their peers and to obtain needed skills. The second is that it is also good for the organization. NLA struggles to represent all those who work in libraries in Nebraska, and needs your ideas and your viewpoint to become stronger. The only way we can change the perception of those who doubt our abilities is to become involved, make our ideas known and show them that we are capable of anything. (p. 26)

Not all efforts to establish paraprofessional round tables or associations are successful. Though a paraprofessional roundtable of the West Virginia Library Association was formed about four years ago, it was disbanded after two years of inactivity per WVLA bylaws. WVLA has approximately 650 members, most of whom are trustees and public library personnel (K. Goff, personal communication, February 4, 1997).

Other groups depend on just a handful of people to sustain activity. In Maryland, the Associates, Paraprofessionals and Library Support Staff (APLSS), a division of the Maryland Library Association, was formed in the mid 1980s. Membership numbers are difficult to assess without differentiating between active and passive members because "everyone who

joins Maryland Library Association must 'profess' a division" (D. Skeen, personal communication, March 3, 1997). APLSS has approximately 150 members of whom only six are active (D. Skeen, personal communication, March 3, 1997). Library paraprofessionals in California used to have a situation similar to APLSS's. Originally, the paraprofessional group consisted of members of one of three association-wide constituent bodies, each with a seat on the association assembly. Library paraprofessionals were included in the California Library Employees Association (CLEA). Membership at CLEA's height was close to 150 people, though only a core group of about 20 was ever active (K. Files, personal communication, March 4, 1997). After association restructuring in 1992, paraprofessionals are now represented by the Support Staff Round Table, a much smaller group of only twenty-two members. This is partly because, now, many paraprofessionals have chosen to participate in other sections and round tables of the association. Kathy Files comments: "I would say that there are only about five or six of us active types left, [though] there are a *lot* of former CLEA members who are active in other sections/interest groups" (K. Files, personal communication, March 4, 1997). This reflects an interesting and controversial phenomenon of paraprofessionals being so successfully accepted into a professional association as to lose their separate identity. Since the California Library Association no longer identifies members by job title, assessing whether or not actual paraprofessional membership has dropped is difficult. Time will tell if the CLA experience is a story of evolution for paraprofessionals within state associations.

Even with reduced membership, the CLA Support Staff Round Table proves that size does not always equal less service and action. The group encouraged the 1996 CLA conference planning committee to designate the Sunday of the annual conference as Support Staff Super Sunday with core programs devoted to issues of concern to library paraprofessionals, with such success that the concept is being repeated at the 1997 conference. CLA is actively recruiting paraprofessional members. Paraprofessionals are recognized by CLA as integral to the operation of libraries across the state, and CLA encourages their participation and the round table (C. Braziel, personal communication, February 12, 1997). Perhaps some of those new members will rejuvenate the Support Staff Round Table.

Another evolutionary story is that of the paraprofessionals in Washington state. The group got its start as CLEWS or Classified Library Employees of Washington State, but the name was changed to Washington Association of Library Employees (WALE) in 1984. The original body, CLEWS, began in 1973, formed by a group of paraprofessional employees of academic libraries involved with the state of Washington's Higher Education Personnel Board (HEPB) and its attempt to standardize position classifications and salary administration in Washington State institu-

tions of higher education (Parsons, 1997). This initial group developed and spread its influence to encompass a wider breadth of library employees than just academics. The question of organizing under the umbrella of the Washington Library Association (WLA) came up early. At first the vote favored remaining independent, but only a few months later this vote was reversed, as the group members decided they could be more effective within WLA. The group's petition for inclusion in WLA was granted in March 1974. The original aims of the group reflect the concerns of members: to recognize the needs of the support staff employees in the library field; to encourage the education of support staff library personnel; and to support the library profession (Parsons, 1997).

It is not unusual for paraprofessionals to misunderstand the function of professional associations when they first hear of them. As people became aware of WALE's existence, many thought it was "going to be like a union and be able to solve problems for them. This is not WALE. WALE is not a union or a bargaining agent. The purpose of WALE is recognition of the support staff library employee" (Parsons, 1997).

With the example of a strong paraprofessional group to its immediate north, Oregon paraprofessionals organized in 1991 as the Library Support Staff Round Table (LSSRT) of the Oregon Library Association. In 1992, they published a vision statement: "Recognizing that support staff need an awareness of library issues, both ethical and technological, LSSRT will provide a forum for voicing ideas, discussing concerns, and beginning positive change, while encouraging professional growth through networking, teaching and mentoring" (Cook & Wann, 1992, p. 12). To spread the word about the new group and to meet their constituency, the officers of the new round table traveled the state holding informational meetings. Growth has been steady. In two years the round table has grown from sixty-nine to ninety-three members.

The upsurge in the number of paraprofessional associations in the 1990s may be attributed to the new sources of exposure for the established groups that developed during the same period. With the publication of *Library Mosaics* and *Associates*,³ the electronic journal for library paraprofessionals, and the creation of the LIBSUP-L⁴ Internet discussion group, information about the activities of paraprofessional associations became more widely available. *Library Mosaics* devotes one issue each year to paraprofessional conferences, while the monthly calendar sections of both *Library Mosaics* and *Associates* let people know what is upcoming. The listserv provides a forum for lively discussion about the pros and cons of membership and is another venue for announcements. More recently, the Library Support Staff Resource Center⁵ World Wide Web home page was launched and provides yet another resource for the groups. Because of this exposure, paraprofessionals are traveling to attend conferences and returning with ideas and enthusiasm.

The Florida Paralibrarian Caucus developed out of one Floridian's attendance at the New Jersey Association of Library Assistants' 1989 conference. Virginia Gerster came back and excitedly asked if Florida had a group like New Jersey's. She did not find a group, but she did find support for one. It took her only one year to organize the first meeting of the caucus under the auspices of the Florida Library Association. The group now conducts its own highly successful annual conference along with regional workshops and seminars (Gerster, 1991, p. 22). Another addition to the ranks of library paraprofessional groups during the 1990s was the Arkansas Library Paraprofessional Round Table. The first organizational meeting was held in August 1992 when more than fifty people met at the University of Central Arkansas to discuss the feasibility of creating a paraprofessional group within the Arkansas Library Association (Washko, 1995, p. 26). The group worked fast and submitted a petition for round table status in October of the same year. Willie Hardin, director of Torreyson Library, University of Central Arkansas, planted the seed for the group by advocating its formation and serving as its mentor. Donna Washko and Sandra Olson did much of the work needed to get the idea to bloom. After the first organizational meeting, a committee of volunteers helped with the formation and growth of the organization. Donna Washko notes:

We organized because there was a need to provide training, workshops, and continuing education to paraprofessionals working in all types of libraries. We needed a network system. Public libraries, especially, were in need of workshops to prepare them for the new technology age in libraries. We chose to form as a part of the state association because we felt we would get more support from library directors and librarians if we were part of the established organization. (personal communication, March 24, 1997)

Not all states have paraprofessional groups within their associations. Excluding states in which groups have been disbanded, twelve do not have subgroups for paraprofessionals. These include Alaska, Idaho, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. Three states, Kentucky, South Dakota, and Vermont, report efforts to organize paraprofessional round tables within their associations (American Library Association, 1996). Some, like Alaska and Idaho, believe paraprofessionals are so well integrated into their associations that they have no need for a separate group.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Though the *National Directory: Library Paraprofessional Associations* is the most comprehensive listing of library paraprofessional associations, it is not complete. Many paraprofessional groups that are attached to city

and regional library systems are not listed. In New York alone there are at least eleven groups or associations, only four of which are in the directory. While most groups follow the association model with members and officers working toward a wide band of issues, others exist solely to facilitate a specific continuing education event. These groups are usually made up of no more than twenty people with the membership varying little from year to year. The Western New York Library Assistants, Reaching Forward South (RFS), and the California Paraprofessional Development Workshop are examples of these groups.

In New York, the Western New York Library Assistants (WNYLA) operates as part of the Western New York Library Resources Council. Formed in 1988, it consists of a core group of ten paraprofessionals who plan two workshops a year, usually in the spring and fall. The group has representatives from academic, public, and special libraries which enables them to develop workshop topics that address the needs of everyone in their area. Some workshops are held with NYSLAA, and the group hosted the 1995 annual NYSLAA conference when it was held in Buffalo, New York (R. Oberg, personal communication, March 19, 1997).

Reaching Forward South consists of fourteen members. RFS was formed in 1996 to provide Central and Southern Illinois library workers with a conference modeled on the highly successful Reaching Forward Conference in Northern Illinois. Kathy Perkins and Terri Dolan began the process and were soon joined by others. The independent group received seed money of several thousand dollars from Northern Illinois Reaching Forward (RF) (T. Dolan, personal communication, March 6, 1997).

RFS plans to limit attendees to their first conference to no more than 300. If the number of participants at future conferences starts to reach the 1,000 mark, as it has done at the Reaching Forward conference, RFS may follow the example of RF and affiliate with the Illinois Library Association. "At this time we want full control of what we are doing, where conferences will be held, etc. We want to tailor RFS to the needs and interests of paraprofessionals in our part of Illinois and to be accessible to those people who have expressed the desire for such a conference" (T. Dolan, personal communication, March 6, 1997).

The California Paraprofessional Development Workshop (formerly the Greater San Diego Paraprofessional Development Workshop) also exists only to provide a specific continuing education opportunity. According to its founder Bessie Mayes: "Our group is not a membership-based organization. We do not collect fees, nor do we print a newsletter (yet). We function solely as an annual yearly conference for those who are interested in our presentations" (personal communication, February 5, 1997). Each conference, since their first in 1993, has drawn from 125 to 150 participants. Mayes is the primary force behind the organization

of the conference. For the first conference, Joy Wanden, a COLT region director, served as her mentor, offering advice and support. Later, Mayes gathered a nucleus of like-minded people to join her: Judith Downie, Linda Osgood, Luz Villalobos, and Katie Quinn. Since then, only one person, Villalobos, has retired to be replaced by Cynthia Quinn (B. Mayes, personal communication, February 5, 1997). Mayes explains why the group is independent and why it prizes that status:

I created the conference in October 1993 to address . . . a glaring lack of training and support for paraprofessionals. The response every year from the paraprofessional community as well as the professional community has more than verified my initial assumption. The group is independent but receives occasional assistance from the Palomar [California] Library Association. Initially, this conference was created when support issues were just beginning to be recognized in the library community. So our group was formed at a really good period, a period of reflection in the library professional community about how the support staff was being perceived, their function and contributions in the library arena. There weren't that many groups around for guidance. COLT was the only official organization that I could turn to for help during this period. Consequently, our group had to be autonomous. . . . The major benefit of being autonomous is the advantage that all of the decisions are being made by the committee, independent of the library director at the conference setting. (B. Mayes, personal communication, February 5, 1997)

These comments stress the important role local groups play in providing continuing education opportunities for paraprofessionals. While Mayes was feeling a distinct lack of opportunity in her area, both the Support Staff Round Table of the California Library Association and the Greater Los Angeles Area Chapter of COLT were providing yearly workshops and conferences. The problem was that these events were not located where the San Diego area paraprofessionals could participate easily. Lack of access to opportunity has proven a strong motivator for paraprofessionals to develop their own opportunities. Many similar groups exist throughout the country, and these narrowly focused groups provide an important service to the library community. In the future they may make the evolutionary step to full association status as did the New York Library Assistants Association.

CONCLUSION

The success of paraprofessional associations is predicated on the hard work and dedication of members. This is because they are, as are most library-related associations, member-supported organizations, and their success is dependent on the efforts of member volunteers. These volunteers serve on committees and as officers on the national and local levels. Because professional-development activities are not normally required

for career advancement for library paraprofessionals, these volunteers often work on their personal time and at their own expense. The support they receive varies greatly, fluctuating with each home library's financial status and policies. A few people receive release time and all travel expenses, others receive only partial assistance, while the majority bear the entire expense themselves. No matter the level of financial assistance provided, a valued form of support is for administrators and supervisors to understand and recognize the importance of professional development for library paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessional associations exist because individuals, librarians, and paraprofessionals alike, perceive a need and find a way to meet that need, reflecting a recognition that paraprofessionals are an integral part of the library community. As such, they have been affected by the many changes overtaking the entire profession, changes such as increased reliance on computer technology, decreasing budgets, and challenges to long-held library values. These changes have significantly altered how library workers do their jobs, how they approach their careers, and how they relate to others. Once upon a time, those in the library community could count on knowing what the job would entail today, tomorrow, and next year. The basic skills and equipment needed were clearly identified. Change did occur, but it was usually with a period of adjustment. This is no longer true. Change occurs rapidly, almost daily. The only constant on which we can rely is change, change that will occur with or without active participation by library paraprofessionals. Many paraprofessionals, however, have learned they can have a say in how the changes affect them. They have reached out to participate in groups that will make decisions and, where necessary, they have created groups specifically modeled to meet their evolving needs.

Thirty years ago, library technology educators founded the Council on Library/Media Technicians to promote recognition and acceptance of library paraprofessionals as important members of the library team and to provide continuing education opportunities for its members. Today COLT no longer stands alone. The many groups of the paraprofessional organizing movement continue the traditions established by the forward-thinking educators of the 1960s. Organizations have grown to encompass all levels of library workers, each with shared visions and goals. They establish a climate in which library staff can come together to support each other and the issues important to them. They provide an opportunity for each member to grow personally and professionally to the benefit of the entire library community.

NOTES

¹*Library Mosaics*. Magazine for and about library paraprofessionals. Subscription: Yenor, Inc., P. O. Box 5171, Culver City, CA 90231

- ²Council on Library/Media Technicians (COLT) home page. Information about the organization and its activities. Retrieved November 6, 1997 from the World Wide Web: <http://lib-www.ucr.edu/COLT/>
- ³*Associates*. Journal for and about library paraprofessionals. Back issues available online. Retrieved November 6, 1997 from the World Wide Web: http://www.trinity.edu/departments/maddux_library/associat.html
- ⁴LIBSUB-L. Library paraprofessional discussion list [Online]. Subscription: Send message: subscribe libsup-L [your name] to: listproc@u.washington.edu
- ⁵Library Support Staff Resource Center. Home page of resources for library paraprofessionals. Retrieved November 6, 1997 from the World Wide Web: <http://rodent.lib.rochester.edu/ssp/>

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