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# Library Association Staff: Roles, Responsibilities, Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

THE WORK OF MANY LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS would be constrained, some of it even impossible to accomplish, without the efforts of their employees. Staff create and carry out programs for association membership and assure continuity for the organization. Issues relating to staff roles and the responsibilities they have in associations are explored and reasons for their sometimes conflicting relationships with member volunteers are examined. Suggestions and recommendations for promoting effective use of these valuable partners on the association scene are offered.

## INTRODUCTION

With the American Library Association (ALA) again in the throes of executive turmoil—seeking its fourth chief staff officer in less than eight years—attention is focused on individuals largely overlooked in consideration of library professional associations—their employees. The ALA situation raises questions about the role that association staff members play in formulating policy, about their responsibility for the overall viability and direction of these organizations, and about their relationships with governing boards and member volunteers. Are staff employed simply to implement policy established by elected leadership or is there a more substantive expectation for program conception and development? Is conflict between staff and members inevitable as they pursue their parallel purposes? How involved should staff be in organizational planning? With officers changing annually in most cases, how important is staff sta-

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bility and longevity? Does staff turnover strengthen and renew the organization or does it threaten it? Does there come a point when staff have stayed too long for the good of the organization? Is there an optimum tenure for an executive director? For a senior program officer? For other employees? How well should staff be compensated? What personal qualities are most desirable in library association staff?

These and related issues were the subject of a review of the literature of librarianship and association management and the focus of subsequent conversations with a range of people intimately familiar with the workings of library associations and, more particularly, with the staff who work for them. Literature on the topic is sparse. Staff sometimes are mentioned in articles covering library associations generally or in the context of the responsibilities of executive directors, and staff issues occasionally have been raised by the library press in reports on the ALA executive leadership. Only Grace Stevenson (1967) seems to have written specifically on library association staff, while Peggy Sullivan (1976), drawing on Stevenson's work, covered staff roles in her treatment of various association issues. Even publications devoted to the more general topic of management of professional associations provide only passing comment on staff, usually doing so in reference to the work of the chief executive.

In order to assess current views on the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of library association staff and to explore other issues of relevance, more than a dozen experienced and knowledgeable individuals were interviewed. These included past presidents and officers of associations, committee chairpersons and members, executive directors, and rank-and-file employees, past and present. In some cases, respondents served, at different times, as both staff and elected leaders. Librarians from national, regional, and state associations and from varying types of library collaborative organizations offered their views. No single association received exclusive treatment, although the sheer size of ALA's staff and the widespread involvement of many librarians in its councils and committees offered greater opportunity for in-depth exploration of issues of interest, and therefore many of those interviewed had that organization as their framework. To solicit candid responses to sometimes sensitive questions, anonymity was promised to everyone. Questions were electronically mailed to interviewees, and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted. Some of those contacted submitted responses in writing (see interview questions in the appendix).

In a survey of state library association presidents conducted in 1994, Joy Thomas (1997) found that almost 60 percent of their organizations had paid employees. Most association officers and active members acknowledge the central importance of staff to their effective functioning. Staff give an organization "stability, credibility, and a consistently applied attention to purpose that volunteers can't provide" (Wolfe, 1984, p. 6).

Any treatment of library associations, therefore, would be incomplete without some consideration of these unheralded but highly influential individuals. With all of its recent turmoil, ALA is still stronger than ever, suggested one of its past presidents, because of the extraordinary stability and continuity of its staff. Staff are among ALA's greatest assets. The same can be said for most other library associations and organizations.

### ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, RELATIONSHIPS

An association has been defined as a "uniquely complex structure where decision-making authority and responsibility is divided between two groups of individuals—paid staff and members" (Wolfe, 1984, p. 298). But just how does that division occur? Do staff members share equally in authority and responsibility or is the norm found in Stevenson's admonition that "imperative to a sound, workable membership-staff relationship is the clearly understood and scrupulously observed tenet that the membership establishes policy and the staff works within [it]" (Stevenson, p. 279)?

Thirty years ago at the Drexel Conference on Library Association Administration, Vance Lockhart (1967), then a general manager of the American Society of Association Executives, described leaders and staff as having

tremendous responsibility to determine that their efforts guide, enhance, and stimulate the work of the membership, in no way providing a deterrent or restraining force to joint efforts. The job of the association administrator is to unleash the power of the members, and through the effective use of resources to provide the harness in which the members can work together productively. Only when this is done can the members of voluntary associations contribute to their fullest, and only then will the investment of time and energy be meaningful. (p. 254)

His emphasis on *joint "efforts"* suggests the key to successful working relationships between staff and membership some thirty years later.

At times, elected leadership and paid employees viewed staff roles very differently. Some staff believe they have much of the responsibility for the well-being of their organization but not sufficient authority to assure its soundness. On the other hand, presidents and committee chairs occasionally complained that executive directors and staff officers of highly visible programs had too much control for the good of the organization. The role desired of staff was most commonly articulated by association officers as one of facilitating and guiding without being resistant to the leadership of elected and appointed officials.

Individuals employed to manage an association's affairs need to know what is possible and what is not, have a broad view of member needs, and have an awareness of fiscal realities. Strong association staff is important

to the viability and vitality of librarianship. It is through associations that members share information, further their careers, and promote their profession. Association staff are specialists in process and planning. They anticipate issues with the agreement and direction of boards, membership assemblies, and committees, and they carry out the policies and programs they have helped develop and put in place. They are mediators, implementers, and occasionally innovators. The best among them demonstrate their creativity in group work, their vision manifested through others. They must keep things moving, they must make things work. And they must do so with annually changing officers and member leaders having different interests and agenda, with varying quality of volunteers, and sometimes with uncertain financial support.

In addition to these roles, staff are responsible for training boards and committees, orienting officers, and picking up the pieces of policy, program, and procedure when they are dropped by members. They are the corporate memory of the association (Stevenson, 1967, p. 278). At times they do too little and sometimes they do too much, but seeking a balance between providing support and guiding direction is their job.

Reflecting on the plight of executive directors, but with a comment that might be taken as applicable to most staff, a respondent to Thomas's survey observed that they "have terrible jobs. Each year the Council/President changes and each year the expectations . . . change. [They] must be flexible enough to bend with each president's views while still accomplishing the work of the organization" (see Thomas's article in this issue of *Library Trends*). Many suggested that ALA's theme programming each year is an extreme manifestation of the problem staff encounter with a continuing parade of presidents. Characterized (and criticized) by the executive director of another association as annually having a new "year of the president," this pattern, it was said, "whipsaws" staff in widely divergent directions, requiring major expenditures of time and money on pet projects and programs that have little chance of being pursued or built upon by their successors. Themes frequently are announced after elections with no affirmation of the membership despite their having significant fiscal implications. Staff, nevertheless, must support them.

A number of those interviewed indicated that staff roles have been changing over time, becoming stronger as the business of association work becomes more complex. Fiduciary responsibility rests heavily on their shoulders, particularly on those of executive staff. Conference planning and management is critical to the success, even to the survival, of associations large and small and depends heavily on staff work. Strategic planning that gives coherence to an organization's efforts but which avoids a lock-step approach blind to opportunity is a challenge for top level association managers. Both the literature and those interviewed suggest that, in this environment, neither a subservient nor a dominant role is in

the best interest of an association. Instead, a partnership, where authority and responsibility are clearly defined and indeed shared and where authorship of policy comes about through member-staff consultation, should be normal practice. The relationship between volunteer members and staff employees is changing. More and more there is a blurring of lines between roles; less and less is there a clear cut division of responsibility.

### CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Perhaps the most interesting of the issues explored had to do with the extent to which staff influence or inhibit change in the organization and their importance in assuring continuity and coherent program direction. Staff in professional associations have been compared to government civil servants (Stevenson, 1967, p. 277), and just as many federal, state, and local officials elected to office have been heard to complain about entrenched bureaucracies accountable to no one, so too have elected association leaders expressed concern over staff authority and influence. In the view of many, staff resistance to change is tied closely to longevity. As indicated earlier, staff are responsible for the long-term stability and health of a library association. They must keep the affairs of the organization on track, add new programs as necessary, and discontinue others that have ceased to be useful. They are expected to bring to a discussion of new initiatives a perspective born of experience, an understanding of organizational history, a broad view of membership needs, and a sensitivity to the environment in which libraries and library associations operate. They have the responsibility of assuring that any major change in policy comes about through appropriate consultation and takes into account any financial implications of the change. One respondent emphasized that staff have the responsibility for protecting the association, keeping it from fiscal and legal liability, assuring its development and growth. Members do not always understand how the organization is financed nor do they have the longer-term perspective of staff (Ernstthal & Jefferson, 1988, p. 4). Staff therefore might have to engage at times in a reasoned alteration of the program direction upon which a new officer has embarked or even resist an ill-conceived initiative. It is the obligation of staff, suggested one interviewee, to make certain that major policy changes are not undertaken without broad consideration of the membership or their representatives. A single person should not bring about a significant shift in direction for an association without the consent of at least the board of directors. And yet, what to one person is prudent hesitation about radical program restructuring to another is foot-dragging and obstructionism. A newly-elected association president intent on introducing what is perceived as essential change and encountering an executive director or staff member balking at a different approach might

very well argue that those employed to support the work of the leadership instead are subverting it. Almost every officer or former official interviewed acknowledged some experience with staff who resisted or interfered with needed change in the organization. Some staff were thought to be unduly conservative, unwilling to take risks. It was said that their knee-jerk reaction invariably is that there simply are not enough dollars to pursue the new programs sought. Staffers, on the other hand, indicated that officers often demonstrated insufficient understanding of the limitations under which library associations must operate. In an era of relatively restricted resources, insisted one executive, something must come off the table when another thing goes on.

Why, in the view of the officials with whom they work or even sometimes of their own colleagues, do staff interfere with change? One answer given was that the negative side of having capable, competent, and careful staff is staff that are too comfortable in their work to entertain any substantive redirection in areas for which they have responsibility. After developing strong and respected programs, staff either rest on their laurels or become so taken with their success that they fail to see alternative ways of accomplishing association objectives in changing times. In other cases, they become bored with their jobs, with the repetitive routine of annual conferences and committee appointments, and they look to innovate out of a desire to keep things interesting to themselves rather than for any benefit to the members they represent.

A former executive director reported that with job security comes interference with change. While staff are very important to continuity and stability, one opinion offered was that routine turnover of professional personnel was desirable. In this regard, some respondents differentiated between the position of executive director and staff at other levels of the organization, suggesting that stability in the top position was more important than in others. One person said that changes in programmatic staff rejuvenated the organization sufficiently to make regular replacement of the chief executive unnecessary. He also said that extended time in place is important if an executive director is to position an organization to make an impact on the profession. Another remarked that minimal turnover in support staff was essential, but that even these individuals could stay too long.

An argument made for longer retention of staff was that the learning curve in associations is a full year, that it takes at least that long for the cycles of committee appointments, budget development, conferences, and publications to be understood. At the end of that time, the officer normally moves on, while the well-trained staff member is available to orient and guide a newly-elected official. Frequent refilling of staff positions, it was said, is detrimental to the organization and to its ever-changing leadership, especially in smaller settings.

One reason given for professional staff staying too long in their positions was that the skills and abilities used in day-to-day association activity are not easily appreciated and valued in the profession and by search committees and decision-makers seeking talented candidates for leadership positions in libraries. When coupled with reasonably good association salaries, sometimes hard to surpass except at administrative levels, this lack of understanding (and therefore of opportunity) results in longer association tenure than might be ideal.

When asked what might be a good length of service for the normal staff member, interviewees were understandably hesitant to generalize, but more often than not offered an answer of from seven to ten years. Beyond that, they suggested, it is difficult to remain dynamic and creative and to retain perspective. Terms of from three to five years, with the possibility of renewal up to an overall tenure of ten years, was advised. Other methods mentioned to assure revitalization of staff included sabbaticals and other programs which encourage regular movement between positions in libraries and association work. The profession has not given sufficient attention to the career paths of association personnel, a former ALA staffer and officer observed, and this has led to dead-end jobs and sometimes unhappy and unproductive employees.

#### COOPERATION AND CONFLICT

With long staff tenure being problematic for necessary change and excessive staff turnover unhealthy for continuity and strength of an association, achievement of some reasonable balance in length of service is essential. Otherwise the conflict inherent in any organization made up of member volunteers and paid staff will be counterproductive. Thomas (1997) reported that "problems with the association's staff or executive director" were among the most frequently cited difficulties of state association presidents. When asked about reasons for conflict, more than one person characterized the tensions which arise between members and staff as differences of opinion and diverging points of view over policy issues and program direction. Most people—association officers and employees alike—have the good of the organization at heart, it was said, but at times they simply see things in different ways. That is not to say real, even damaging, clashes do not occur. Various reasons were provided for why disruptive conflict takes place. The aforementioned comfort resulting from long tenure is one, the perceived inadequate performance of staff another. Personality differences, conservative versus liberal perspectives, and a misunderstanding of respective roles all were raised as other sources of disagreement. Stevenson (1967) quotes Corrine Gilb's assertion that "staff members often wield considerable, though sometimes inconspicuous, power" (p. 276). When they use that power too openly,

conflict develops because "most library associations are too fiercely democratic to permit staff to wield an undue amount of power" (p. 277).

Board members micromanaging the association, interfering in issues which should be the prerogative only of the chief executive (such as the setting of individual staff salaries), was cited as an area of difficulty. Committee appointees, even officers, sometimes do not do their jobs, and it is left to staff to step in and provide remedies. Some conflict appears to arise due to the lack of clearly defined policies and procedures for performance appraisal. Elected leaders' dissatisfaction with staff may not be channeled into appropriate areas for action before their terms end; problems, therefore, may not be resolved in a timely fashion. While staff performance is constantly being assessed by members with whom they come in contact, the opposite is not true. Staff do not evaluate members and, because members will not openly censure one another for poor or nonperformance, difficulties develop. The only remedies available to staff who encounter inadequate or incompetent appointees or officers is to wait out their time in office and to work behind the scenes to see that poor performers do not move into other positions. Whatever the reason, conflict is a fact of life in association work. Tensions, said one former president of a large association, come to the fore every year. It is all the more essential, therefore, that staff have skills at negotiation and conflict resolution as part of their repertoire.

### SKILLS AND ABILITIES

Attracting good staff to association work and retaining them in their positions long enough that they can make substantive contributions is critical to the viability of these organizations. In some ways the activities of staff members employed by library associations are considerably different from those of librarians. While many of the same abilities and skills are necessary, the context in which they are applied differ, and talented individuals who come into the profession to work as librarians may not be interested in, nor suited for, association work. Identifying capable individuals and assessing their suitability for staff employment are among the most important responsibilities of an executive director and of the board employing that person.

The question of qualities sought in staff elicited a predictable array of characteristics, most no different from those sought in library staff: intelligence, curiosity, good communication skills (particularly writing ability), a positive approach to people and problems, organizational ability, team orientation, adaptability, ability to set priorities and meet deadlines, flexibility, energy, and vision. Respondents also said that library association staff members must be task oriented; be able to negotiate skillfully in a host of areas; know the individuals, institutions, and issues of the profession; and demonstrate a desire to make a difference. One former

executive director indicated that among his greatest challenges was helping staff understand how their day-to-day activities fit into the larger mission and overall purposes of the organization. Too often staff see what they do as just a job, not understanding the importance of their work to the well-being and advancement of the association and the profession. Staff was sought, he said, who exhibited the potential of seeing the bigger picture. Willingness to change came up again and again as a desirable attribute, understandable in an environment where elected leadership turns over so frequently and where technological developments impact so strongly. Different skill sets were seen as necessary for the differing role of the executive director. Working with a board, an executive director said, was unlike managing staff.

Visibility of staff on the association scene was also an issue. For the most part, elected officers prefer that their association's paid employees operate in the background, deferring to members, providing necessary support, but not assuming prominent leadership. Reacting to the strong reputations and central roles of certain programmatic staff at ALA, a former president candidly observed, "we don't like staff having such visibility." Commenting on this issue, an executive director said it is his job to "make the president look good" during his or her year in office and that keeping a relatively low profile while doing so is good practice. Or as a handbook of good association practice put it, the successful staff member "must be a strong leader who practices self effacement [and whose] own accomplishments must never grab the spotlight from those of the association members" (American Society of Association Executives and Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 1975, p. 18). More than one person—officer and staffer alike—suggested that staff had to have little ego involvement in the job, or at least little demonstration of such. They frequently have to take criticism and yet not take credit. They must realize satisfaction in other ways, assisting in the building of an important program, influencing the direction of an essential policy, or turning back some major threat.

## COMPENSATION

Unquestionably, adequate compensation is central to retention of superior staff. Everyone interviewed advocated provision of strong salaries and benefits for association employees. Few thought that today's association salaries are inflated, even that of the ALA executive director. Most acknowledged that paying staff salaries equal to, or even greater than, those they might command in libraries is an important statement about the way contributions of colleagues are valued. How we treat our own, indicated one state library association executive, says a lot about the profession of librarianship. More than one staff executive argued that association work is different from library work, that managing an associa-

tion is more akin to running a small business, and compensation should reflect this reality. Different skills and experiences are required. It is more appropriate, they said, to equate compensation of library association staff with that of staff at other professional associations rather than those in libraries.

One state library association staff member provided an interesting comment on the impact the economy has on the salaries of staff. There is a lag, she said, between a change in economic conditions and the financial performance of associations. Whereas an economic downturn is felt immediately by libraries and by their employees (who are the associations' members), library associations are not impacted for months or even more than a year later. And so, she said, while an association might be in a good position to compensate its staff more generously even though the economy is bad, there is reluctance to do so because of the comparison made with the plight of library employees. But then, when subsequent recovery in the general economy and in libraries runs ahead of the condition of the association now feeling the effects of membership decline and other revenue loss, officers are unwilling to adjust salaries upward because of perceived poor performance, inability to find resources, or a cautionary approach in seemingly hard times. Consistency in handling of the salary issue is very important but sometimes difficult to achieve with changing leadership.

A former national association president indicated that salaries should be based upon the "living requirements of the city in which the association is housed," be attractive enough to allow recruitment "from a national base," and represent the best salaries available in libraries. "You cannot build a top-notch productive staff unless you . . . pay for it," she offered or, in the words of a fellow past president, "pay your good people well."

#### STRENGTHENING STAFF, RESOLVING DIFFERENCES

If the profession is to sustain and advance its collaborative organizations, association staff must be effective and productive. They and the member volunteers with whom they work must understand better their respective roles and responsibilities. They need opportunities to become refreshed and reacquainted with libraries and the problems they face. Both employees and officers need regular training to understand how to manage relationships essential to association progress. And thoughtful planning which recognizes the centrality of staff to the association enterprise must take place.

Renewable appointments with term limits on maximum service—subject to exceptions—might be considered for senior level staff. Sabbaticals could be offered to longer term employees whose tenure is crucial to the organization. Internship positions would allow promising pro-

professionals to do significant association work without becoming entrenched in the organization. The visiting program officer approach of the Association of Research Libraries is a model for encouraging talented librarians to move between libraries and associations. Other programs designed for periodic exchange of library and association personnel might be explored. Career ladders for association staff might bring job movement within larger associations or permit transfer to other associations for advancement. Assistance for those wishing to return to library positions should be provided. These approaches to building and enhancing staff would do much to contribute to the creation of dynamic organizations and provide wider opportunities for participation in association management.

To avoid some of the tension that develops between new officers and staff, orientation and training directed at issues which engender conflict could be offered. Potential candidates for office should be acquainted with the demands that will be placed upon them and the extent to which they can realistically call upon staff for help. Regular training should be provided so that staff and member volunteers with whom they work understand their respective roles and responsibilities. Training programs, such as those offered by the American Society of Association Executives, and others specifically designed by organizations for their newly elected officers, board members, and staff can help with role clarification. A number of library associations schedule participation of their presidents-elect in such workshops annually. Different duties of staff and members should be thoroughly enumerated, planning documents discussed, and policies and procedures elaborated. While none of these efforts will assure absence of conflict, they can do much to minimize it.

Associations should determine direction through planning processes that involve key staff as well as leaders and members, and the planning should be ongoing and thorough. Consideration of not just the near-term but of "members' needs in five or ten years" is the responsibility of everyone but most especially senior staff leadership (American Society of Association Executives and Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 1975, p. 22). Potential presidential candidates might be assessed by nominating committees based upon knowledge of, and support for, issues identified and refined through the planning effort, thereby allowing staff and financial resources to be better focused.

## CONCLUSION

With staff so central to the success of library association activity, continued attention to the staff-related issues raised here would be of value. Analysis of how different types of library associations work with their staff personnel might provide useful information. Consideration of staff similarities and differences in traditional library associations and in those

library organizations such as OCLC, or regional and local networks of libraries that are product oriented, could be revealing. How do staff issues in the library association setting compare to those in other educational, professional, or trade organizations? What methods are used by others to train staff and to further relationships? An investigation of the recruitment, hiring, development, and compensation of staff in the larger library membership organizations, done comparatively or focused specifically on one association, would be of interest. Staff salaries might be looked at in the context of those paid at libraries in the headquarters city, in the profession at large, or within similar associations. As the profession's largest association, ALA's history of executive board/executive director relations over the past quarter century would make an interesting study as would a review of its major programs and the influence exerted upon them by staff. Such research could contribute to better understanding of roles and responsibilities and to reconciling and enhancing relationships between association staff and the members for whom they work.

Assuredly librarianship is becoming more complex. As traditional information storage, access, and service combine with technological approaches, possibilities, and opportunities, library associations become ever more critical to meaningful collaboration and progress. They are an essential means through which librarians and libraries collectively influence society. Indispensable to these associations are the individuals who labor to bring librarians and libraries together, who see to the publication of the professional literature, and who maintain the organizations that support the continued exchange of ideas. While volunteers comprise the majority of the association work force, it is association staff on state, regional, and national levels who coordinate their efforts, look beyond the near term, and provide guidance into the future. Staff make it possible for volunteers to be productive. Competent and dedicated staff skilled in communication, cognizant of member needs and situations, and capable of resolving the inevitable conflict that arises in any period of constant change will remain a library association's strength and its promise.

## APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What do you see as the appropriate role for library association staff members? Do you see this role differing at all for the executive director? Has the role changed over the years? Does the role change as a staff member spends a longer period of time in a job? What is the appropriate role for staff in strategic planning for the association?
- What responsibility do staff have for the long-term stability and health of an organization?
- In your opinion and experience, have library association staff ever interfered with needed change in the organization?
- Do you think staff in the library associations with which you have had experience have stayed in their positions too long? Have turned over too rapidly?
- Can you generalize about how long an executive director should stay in that position? What about other staff, especially those in influential, policy-making roles?
- With most presidents of library associations serving but a single year, how important is it that the executive director and staff seek to limit the number and extent of new programs and initiatives by new presidents?
- How well should association staff be paid? As well as their counterparts in the profession? A little better? A lot better?
- Have you encountered conflict between officers or committee members and staff? To what do you attribute such conflict?
- What are the most important attributes and skills an effective association staff member possesses?

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