

## Professional Development for Library Workers: Exposing the Complicated Problems of Equity and Access

Christina Neigel  
Associate Professor  
Department of Library and Information Technology  
University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford BC  
[christina.neigel@ufv.ca](mailto:christina.neigel@ufv.ca)

### **Abstract**

Despite the constant, if not escalating, need for professional development within the library workforce, the discourse of professional development lacks critical and evidence-based considerations. This paper discusses major factors that complicate the notion of professional development including the commodification of education, the rise of contingent labour, and a heightened emphasis on individualism. These difficulties point to a desperate need for a broader discussion and research focus on professional development so that library workers and library leaders can make informed and strategic decisions about the skills and knowledge required for the 21st century.

### **Keywords**

Professional development; library workers; library technicians; library assistants; library leadership; continuing education; labour

### **Introduction**

Not unlike many other fields that are numerically dominated by women (e.g. nursing, social work, education), librarianship struggled for status recognition throughout the 20th century. Keith Swigger's (2010) study of the development of North American master's programs in library science/studies unearths the field's conscious (and failed) efforts to legitimize and even elevate the field through formal education. Such education is understood to be a mechanism that establishes a kind of elite knowledge intended to control access to a "profession," thus heightening that field's exclusivity. While there are numerous reasons why attempts to improve the status of librarians through such processes were not successful, including assumptions about the value of work performed by women, the use of education to establish library work as legitimate and professional, persists. Furthermore, it is *expanding*. This expansion comes, in part, through a growth in professional development "opportunities."

I emphasize the word opportunities because the process of maintaining relevance in one's profession is profoundly dependent on one's social, political, and economic situation. As an educator, I firmly believe that education has the potential to elevate people's material circumstances. However, access to education is becoming increasingly difficult and problematic.

### ***The Problem***

While it can be argued that the Internet has allowed for greater access to resources, including free online webinars, MOOCs, reading materials, workshops, and more, I believe that there are other forces that actually constrain people's access to knowledge and skill development, ones that are less visible but more powerful. Some of these forces include the commodification of education, changes in labour that have led to the growth of precarious employment, and an increasing emphasis on individualism.

Like other Western nations, post-secondary education has shifted from an emancipatory goal (aiding people to self-actualize and become engaged members of a democratic society) to one focused on employability and job readiness, a goal some scholars critique as ultimately oppressive (Ingleby, 2015). Education has become part of the "marketplace" and is often described in terms of a product where students are emphasized as clients or customers. The difficulty in this paradigm is that the space for students to develop as citizens and acknowledge their lives as political and social agents is constrained by demands that they become something that can be marketed.

Further, education programs are subject to intense institutional and government pressures to "produce" students and graduates. This has incredible implications for schools marketing their programs, whether it is a master's in library science, an undergraduate library technician diploma, or continuing education courses for librarians and library technicians. These programs become part of an expensive credentialing system that not everyone can afford and, therefore, access.

In a world where individuals are increasingly held responsible for their own social mobility, this actually ensures that some library workers, particularly those in precarious working conditions, will be perpetually disadvantaged. Further, this actually reinforces the hierarchical order we see in libraries including the ways in which different levels of education are rewarded with different kinds of privileges, including access to professional development funds and time.

Interrogating the pursuit of professionalism and its articulation in American Library Association's (ALA) [Core Values of Librarianship](#), Emily Drabinski (2016) challenges readers to contemplate the effects of professionalization:

In order for some people to be professionals, other people must be nonprofessionals and excluded from the circle of privilege that professionalization affords. The pleasures of professional discourse might be acquired without these

exclusions and in fact be enhanced by broadening the range of voices and experiences invited to speak. (p. 613)

As Drabinski suggests, there may be other ways to look at how library work is structured and compensated that could build in greater inclusivity, making libraries more resilient and socially progressive organizations. Yet this process is complicated by the ways in which our increasingly commodified education programs function. These programs, both preparatory and continuing, play a fundamental role in our conceptualization of what it means to work in libraries and what it means to be a *professional* in those spaces.

Education is inextricably linked to the broader labour landscape, which is undergoing its own transformations, most notably that of a growing precariousness and a reliance on information and cultural work over that of physical work. Rather than perform work in ways that support an industrialized society, people are moving into realms where their work is their intellectual and cultural output (consider website developers, photographers, writers).

For libraries, the “labouring process” requires a great deal more than being able to check out materials, shelve, and weed. Work is no longer about managing physical collections. Work is about intellectual capacity, emotional engagement, and thought. A quick examination of job postings on the [Partnership Job Board](#) for all ranges of library work reveals a demand for skills that call upon immaterial work including communications, conflict resolution, assignment of work, outreach, and creating and collaborating. These skills often necessitate a kind of education that cannot be delivered through just experience or training because they go beyond a task-orientation.

This increasingly sophisticated work results in a demand for skills and knowledge that is frequently framed as part of lifelong learning and professional development. Amid the numerous formal continuing education programs and courses, there is also a growing number of leadership institutes for library workers that underscore the need to cope with the pressures of change, disruption, and competition.<sup>1</sup> The importance of continuing education is emphasized by the ALA:

Continuous learning is critical to renewing the expertise and skills needed to assist patrons in this information age. Library workers must continually expand their knowledge in order to keep up with the rate of change. (n.d., para. 1)

The difficulty in any call for continuing education for library workers is the extremely uneven access to such education. If “keeping up” is integral to successful libraries and a strong library workforce, the inequities in doing so need to be exposed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some examples include: ALA Leadership Institute, Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians, Pacific Northwest Library Association Leadership Institute, Northern Exposure Leadership Institute, CULC’s Public Library Leaders.

## ***Structural Barriers to Professional Development***

There is very little scholarly research in Canada that examines the comparative wages of library employees as well as their access to resources for professional development. It is difficult to establish a clear picture of who, in libraries, gets precisely what. Anecdotally, I am frequently told by former students how they struggle to find time and money to attend conferences and upgrade skills through formal programs. Many confess that they rely on free webinars, volunteer work, and other self-resourced means to stay relevant. These individuals experience a dilemma where they do not have enough money to pay for services that would give them a market “edge” because they are trapped in precarious work situations.

Access to education for library workers is problematic, and the rising costs of education (which applies to all Canadians) is also a concern for libraries. Even when money is available for courses, the rising costs of tuition stretch limited dollars and further limit opportunities for staff. Professional development funds lag far behind the inflation of tuition and student fees.

Cost is one structural barrier to education and professional development, but others include the rarely discussed class system that exists in library organizations. I have commented on my own [blog](#) about the inequities that exist within libraries, and the irony that many who work to aid the most marginalized are themselves marginalized. The library workplace is gendered and subject to inequities that are based on long-standing assumptions about the value of women’s work (Gaines, 2014; Garrison, 1979; Harris, 1992; Hildenbrand, 1999 and 2000; Ilett; 2003).

As such, the field has practiced a form of isomorphism, trying to mimic other recognized professions like law and medicine by articulating and institutionalizing clarity in worker objectives and expectations that has resulted in the establishment of workplace hierarchies that rely on systems with subordinates (Harris, 1992). Those at the lower end of the bureaucracy may not only be paid less and offered less in terms of access to education for advancement but they are also, most notably, women (DeLong, 2013; Harris, 1992; Lynch, 1999). This development limits the possibilities for a more inclusive, diverse, and participatory workforce. It is difficult for those in supportive roles to exercise agency and autonomy over their educational choices for the purposes of advancement because they are part of the most precarious level of the workforce.

Communications scholar Greigory de Peuter (2010) explains that the casualization of work is pervasive:

The vast majority in the capitalist world is faced with the social necessity to sell its ability to work in a capricious labour market in order to survive—a sale that is never guaranteed, to say nothing of its terms and conditions. (p. 25)

In other words, current economic conditions require people to sell their skills in a marketplace that is uncertain, if not fickle. These conditions result in situations where

employees have less of a voice in organizational decision-making, in addition to reduced access to benefits and job security.

The rise of precarious positions is risky to organizations like libraries because it impacts the degree to which people are willing to engage. Scholarship that considers precarity and workforce inequality in libraries is thin, making it extremely difficult to assess the pervasiveness of these issues. Many Canadian library workers are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). In 2014, CUPE published results from an equality survey that provides powerful evidence that the casualization of labour, including library labour, is on the rise.

Further, this rise significantly impacts women. In a study of women in various occupations in the Toronto area, women respondents describe being “squeezed” and frustrated with constant short-cycle and temporary work (Khosla, 2014). Yet these conditions are poorly examined in library literature and this poses a significant challenge, if not risk, for the profession as it negotiates the future. In response to the paucity of research investigating the material work of public librarians, Siohban Stevenson (2016) advocates:

We need to get past the anecdotes to find out exactly how professional librarians are spending their working hours. Only then can we make choices not only about educational requirements but also policy interventions that safeguard the skills, knowledge and service orientation that makes public librarianship a unique and relevant professional occupation. (p. 197)

Further fuelling the fires of economic and social uncertainty is the rise of individualism. Increasingly, people are “responsibilized” for their own well-being. When considering professional development, for example, the individual is increasingly held to account for their own professional growth, in the form of making their own time for conferences and courses, sometimes financing opportunities themselves. However, as illustrated above, there are numerous obstacles, both in the workplace and beyond, that conspire against employees in ways that may prevent them from ever aspiring for improvements in their material conditions. Further, an emphasis on the individual can directly conflict with the notion of the “public good,” a value that is codified in [the ALA Core Values of Librarianship](#).

While skill and knowledge development is assumed, by most employers, to be an important facet of library and information work, they are tightly tied to wages and productivity. Examining job satisfaction and skills requirements, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2016) recently reported that “workers who make fuller use of their information-processing skills at work tend to have higher wages” (p. 14) and that these workers enjoy more job satisfaction and a greater sense of well-being. Interestingly, and affirming for many who belong to unions, the presence of collective bargaining units contribute to better use of employee skills by creating a “positive effect of workers’ participation and co-determination” (p. 98) for high performance work practices. The OECD report actually *underscores* the importance of

organized labour (i.e. unions) and government action in ensuring that workers utilize their skills in ways that matches their knowledge and education. This is an incredibly powerful assertion in a time when there is both apathy and animosity even towards unions. Unions may actually go beyond ensuring workers have liveable wages to ensure that workers are also satisfied and *productive*— an important consideration for library employers navigating a challenging future.

## **Conclusion**

As someone who is keenly interested in library education and its outcomes, I cannot help but wonder how well library leaders are informed about societal labour trends and their relationship to library organizational culture and employment. The paucity of research suggests that it must be incredibly difficult for library employers to make evidence-based decisions. However, there is substantial work undertaken by other sectors that can be helpful. Such information is also important to *everyone* who works in libraries and I think it is absolutely critical that discussions about library labour and education are widely held.

In response to the growing marketization of education, the expanding precariousness of work, and heightening pressures on the individual, emphasis on professional development for library workers must be considered within the context of complex changes to our social and economic world. To assist and empower library workers at all levels to make informed choices about their education and training, there is an incredible need for broader discussions about labour, education, and social change. Libraries, after all, embody initiatives and goals to elevate the quality of life for the people they serve. This can only be successful if the people who work in libraries are able to enjoy the same opportunities.

## **References**

- American Library Association. (n.d.). [Furthering your career...](#)
- CUPE. (2014). [CUPE membership survey results for equality](#).
- Delong, K. (2013). Career advancement and writing about women librarians: A literature review. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 8(1), 59-75.
- Drabinski, E. (2016). Valuing professionalism: Discourse as professional practice. *Library Trends* 64(3), 604-614.
- de Peuter, G. (2010). [The contested convergence of precarity and immaterial labour](#) [Dissertation].
- Gaines, A. (2014). That's women's work: Pink collar professions, gender, and the librarian stereotype. In N. Pagowsky & M. Rigby (Eds.), *The librarian stereotype:*

*Deconstructing perceptions and presentations of information work* (pp. 85-130). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, American Library Association.

- Garrison, D. (1979). The tender technicians: The feminization of public librarianship, 1876-1905. In K. Weibel, K. Heim, & D. Ellsworth (Eds.), *The role of women in librarianship 1876-1976: The entry, advancement, and struggle for equalization in one profession* (pp. 201-221). Phoenix, AZ: Orynx Press.
- Harris, R. (1992). *Librarianship: the erosion of a woman's profession*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Hildenbrand, S. (1999). The information age vs. gender equity. *Library Journal* 124(7), 44-47.
- Hildenbrand, S. (2000). Library feminism and library women's history: Activism and scholarship, equity and culture. *Libraries and Culture* 35(1), 52-65.
- Ilett, R. (2003). *Outstanding issues: Gender, feminisms and librarianship*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Glasgow).
- Ingleby, E. (2015). [The house that Jack built: Neoliberalism, teaching in higher education and the moral objections](#). *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(5), 518-529.
- Khosla, P. (2014). [Women working, working poor](#). Women and Work Research Group.
- Lynch, M. (1999). *Library directors: Gender and salary*. ALA Office for Research.
- OECD. (2016). [Skills use at work: Why does it matter and what influences it?](#) *OECD Employment Outlook 2016*.
- Stevenson, S. A. (2016). [Immaterial labour, public librarians, and third-generation public libraries](#). *New Library World* 117(3/4), 186-200.
- Swigger, K. (2010). *The MLS Project: An Assessment after Sixty Years*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.