Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Professionalism Reconsidered

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Classic

Professionalism Reconsidered

A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – In their 1968 editorial for *College & Research Libraries*, Mary Lee Bundy and Paul Wasserman interrogated the nature of librarianship as a profession. They describe what they see as the limits of contemporary practice and offer ways forward for those concerned with the status of librarians.

Design – The article offers an analysis of the question, making use of selected contemporary literature on American librarianship, rather than empirical research or a literature review.

Setting – Bundy and Wasserman locate their critique in the daily work of academic librarians. Their descriptions are based on their own observations.

Subjects – The authors focus on "the real world in which librarians practice" rather than "abstract academic terms" (p. 7). Their subjects are library workers who, by virtue of the MLS, are identified as professionals in the library workplace. Bundy and Wasserman note that these library workers "often spend considerable time being concerned about whether or not they are truly professional" and go on to take up these concerns themselves (p. 5).

Methods – Bundy and Wasserman compare librarianship to "what is customarily considered to constitute professional behavior"

(p. 7). Their comparison is structured through an analysis of three categories of professional relationships: librarian to client, librarian to institution, and librarian to professional association. This taxonomy of relationships is their own; the authors do not refer to analyses of professionalism in other disciplines such as nursing, social work, or education, fields where similar questions have arisen. The authors describe each of these professional relationships in turn through their own observations as a professor and Dean of the library program at the University of Maryland.

Main Results – Bundy and Wasserman argue that librarianship does not meet the threshold for professional behaviour in any of these three categories of practice. The relationship between the client and the professional requires expertise: "the professional *knows*" (p. 8). According to the authors, most reference transactions involve questions that "would not overtax the capacity of any reasonably intelligent college graduate after a minimum period of on-the-job training" while an "essential timidity" prevents them from clearly stating what they do know (p. 8). Given this, the relationship with the client can never be professional: the client knows as much as or more than the librarian. Bundy and Wasserman make an exception for children's librarians, arguing that their clientele benefits from the "close control of the content of collections to reflect excellence" (p. 9). Otherwise, librarians are "in awe" of both the expanding bibliographic universe and the "growing sophistication of middle-class readers" (p. 9). Unless librarians understand themselves to be experts, and engage as experts with their clients, they cannot be professionals.

Professionals also see themselves as superior to their institution, struggling against "institutional authority which attempts to influence [their] behavior and performance norms" (p. 14). The professional resists disciplinary mechanisms that force workers to conform to institutional norms, maintaining authority over their own work. In Bundy and Wasserman's view, librarians instead display "rigid adherence to bureaucratic ritual" where "the intellectual and professional design is sacrificed upon the altar of economic and efficient work procedures" (p. 15). Librarians focus on the efficient completion of narrowly defined tasks that enable compliance with institutional demands instead of placing their relationships with clients at the center of their professional life. Library administrators encourage this restriction on the status of their employees. The authors argue that the librarian who attempts to maintain a professional relationship "is seen as a prima donna, impatient with necessary work routines, unwilling to help out in emergencies, a waster of time spent in idle conversation with his clientele about their work--renegade and spoiled" (p. 16). Acting "like a professional" is incompatible with the ways librarians normally relate within the larger institution.

Finally, professional status requires professional associations. These associations should ensure the quality of education in professional programs while facilitating the growth of connections between professional librarians. Again, librarianship fails: its professional association is guilty of "accrediting and re-accrediting programs of doubtful merit thereby giving its imprimatur to schools very distant from any ideal or even advanced attainment" (p. 21). When it gathers librarians together at annual meetings, those committees "consist of members explaining why they have failed to complete assignments or committees which deliberate weightily the means for perpetuating themselves instead of considering the purpose or program, or still others which consume hour after hour preoccupied with minutiae" in organizations that are reduced to "the associational excesses of the ritual, the routine, and the social" (p. 23).

Conclusion – For Bundy and Wasserman, librarianship fails to qualify as a profession because the field cannot lay claim to a particular area of expertise, slavishly follows the rules of the institutions in which it is embedded, and is governed by professional associations that fail to ensure the rigor of professional education while reducing relationship-building to the reproduction of

the association itself. Unless the field works to become more thoroughly professional, they argue, librarianship cannot advance or innovate, doomed to "not only decline rapidly, but ultimately face obsolescence" (p. 25).

Commentary

Bundy and Wasserman, American professors of librarianship writing in a distinctly American context, published their editorial at the same time that the United States saw both an increase in the social wage and the intensification of struggles over control of it. In colleges and universities, Lyndon Johnson's Higher Education Act of 1965 had authorized increased federal funding for colleges and universities in the form of direct aid to institutions and student financial aid programs like Federal Work-Study and subsidized loans for students and their families (Hegji, 2018). This infusion of cash led to a boom in enrollment as the number of students in higher education institutions rose over the course of the following decades (Snyder, 1993). Academic libraries were serving more students with larger budgets than ever before.

At the same time, higher education proved fertile ground for the growth and expansion of social movements. The Black Panther Party was founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in 1966; the two met as students at Merritt College in Oakland, California. The Weather Underground emerged in the same decade at the University of Michigan while the University of California, Berkeley was host to the Free Speech Movement that would spread to campuses nationwide. Just as resources infused the system, struggles for the more equitable distribution of political and social power intensified. Librarianship was not exempt from these forces.

Librarianship was caught in a familiar tension: should librarians focus on elevating the status of the field by professionalizing like our colleagues in medicine and the law, or should the role we can play in fights for social justice take precedence? During this same decade, the latter impulse made significant headway in the field. The Office for Intellectual Freedom was founded in 1967 and the Freedom to Read Foundation followed in 1969. Within the American Library Association, progressive movements took root as organized entities, including the Social Responsibility Round Table (1969), the Task Force on Gay Liberation (1971), and the Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (1976). Ethnic affiliates began to be established at the start of the 1970s and included the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (1970), the National Association of Spanish Speaking Librarians in the United States (1971, now REFORMA), the Chinese American Librarians Association (1973), the American Indian Library Association (1979), and the Asian/Pacific Librarians Association (1980). The late 1960s and 1970s were a golden time for progressive political movements in librarianship.

Bundy and Wasserman staked their claim in this debate squarely on the side of professionalism as a bid for primacy and position in broader social contexts, including higher education. Rather than place efforts into "a wide range of national, international, research, and societal responsibilities for which it is less than ideally equipped" (p. 25), the field ought instead to focus on the substance of librarianship itself. The work of the field should not be about finding ways to participate in or find common cause with broader social movements. Instead, the field should focus on boosting professional status in order to be "in the vanguard of new or imaginative directions for librarianship" (p. 25). Librarians needed to act more like doctors and lawyers and less like activists or functionaries in order to survive.

Writing in 1968, Bundy and Wasserman's push for a more robustly professional librarianship can be seen as a gambit for a larger slice of the expanding institutional pie. As budgets and student bodies grew, more resources were up for grabs, and librarians competed with other campus entities for their share. Indeed, Bundy and Wasserman saw professionalization as essential if librarians were to continue to dominate their field: "In order to fulfill their original mandate of serving as guardian of

society's information needs and in order to influence positively the forward motion of progressive information development in a time of competition with other emergent information-oriented disciplines" (p. 6). Unless librarians made a strong case for themselves as the true guardians of human knowledge, they were at risk of being replaced by other academic entities on campus. We hear echoes of this in today's anxieties around the replacement of our reference desks by Google, a tool that has essentially replaced the ready reference collections of Bundy and Wasserman's day.

Bundy and Wasserman point to library training programs as a root cause of a library field they saw as essentially clerical. Transforming the degree program could also be a solution. Instead of focusing library training on "memorizing names of famous modern librarians, committing to memory large sections of classification schedules, cluttering their minds with details of whether certain books have an index and table of contents or not," library education should engage broader questions, "studying the reasons for contemporary trends in societal information developments, the logic of comparative systems of classification, the structure of bibliography and information agencies as resources for problem solving, or the personal, organizational, and social group determinants of information need" (p. 20). Their argument anticipates the contemporary focus in LIS programs on information behavior and social information practices, as well as pointing to critical librarianship as an emerging discourse. Debates about what constitutes the best curriculum in LIS programs continue along lines similar to those outlined by the authors in 1968 as librarians demand a more rigorous intellectual engagement with information and society, considered essential if librarians are to be more than simply enforcers of narrowly defined bureaucratic norms.

In a short but provocative paragraph, the authors ask whether collective bargaining might offer a straighter route to professional status for American librarians, a group for whom unionization and professionalization might be seen as in conflict. Such a suggestion runs counter to many contemporary libraries where union/non-union traces precisely the border of the paraprofessional/professional divide. Collective bargaining, Bundy and Wasserman suggest, is a superior method of producing the "militant group solidarity" they see as necessary for professionalization (p. 23). Indeed, as they say in the union movement, management is the best organizer: pulling together as workers around shared grievances and enemies in order to struggle for better wages and working conditions can cohere a group of individuals like little else. The authors stop short of advocating for unions for librarians. Like other institutions, they claim, union bureaucracy can be stultifying, "a reinforcement of the very rigid authority structure of libraries which serves now as an impediment to innovation and furtherance of service commitments" (p. 24). In many cases, professional librarians still see unions this way: mechanisms for the production of staff and the rules that govern them that hobble the innovations a more "entrepreneurial" workforce would otherwise produce.

Concerns about whether or not librarianship is a profession continue to animate the field, discussed "endlessly" (p. 5) just as Bundy and Wasserman complained fifty years ago. Worry that librarians are too servile, too docile, and too narrow to survive a changing technological and economic landscape continue in the guise of "future-proofing" and appeals to entrepreneurial and other business values. The authors' complaint that "innovation remains on trial when it should be encouraged" reads as fresh as if it were written today (p. 25). As investment in higher education shrinks, librarians turn to learning analytics and efforts to quantify library value as strategies to ensure their continued existence. Associations and institutions steer clear of political conflict by hewing closely to what are described as professional values around free speech and academic freedom.

Read in the context of the present, Bundy and Wasserman's editorial serves as a warning against too narrow a focus on professional

status as the means to the end of a robust and well-resourced academic librarianship. In 1968, just as today, the call to professionalize or face replacement or obsolescence puts the emphasis on the wrong analytic frame. Attacks on librarianship must be met on a different terrain. We might instead conceive of disinvestment in higher education and the demands of capital that all units on campus generate profit as the problem. In this case, the solution to our always already impending demise lies not in transforming ourselves, but in transforming the social and economic formations that directly attack librarianship and so many other necessary social goods.

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