

Familiar themes face US Library Task Force



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As some readers will recall, late last year I was invited to become a member of the American Library Association Pay Equity Task Force (ALAPETF). Since then I have been taking an active part in its efforts to mount a strong campaign in support of better wages for librarians in the USA. Task Force members have been most interested in a large body of material I have provided on steps taken by ALIA, and others, to seek pay equity for their Australian counterparts.

It is already very clear to me that librarians in the United States face at least as many challenges as ALIA members on the pay front. ALAPETF has already collected a sizeable body of material on pay equity as a resource for its campaign. Much of it has relevance for Australian librarians. As well, the task force has drawn together what it sees as important, and for Australians familiar, factors in the disadvantage experienced by American librarians.

In the United States, libraries are widely seen as a social good and as valuable community assets. But, says ALAPETF, there is scant understanding of the librarian's role in delivering these well-regarded services. Moreover, customers rarely differentiate between the types of staff in libraries: thus, the person at the circulation desk, her colleague in the reference section and the library manager in the corner office are all seen as the same. The ALA analysis contrasts this with other sectors, such as health or law, where distinctions between support, para-professional and professional staff are sharply drawn. Customer and organisational difficulty in perceiving these differences in the library and information workforce are seen as an important factor in pay disadvantage.

In America there is a strong perception that better pay is achieved by librarians who move into the corporate world in jobs calling for the same skills, but with different titles. 'Information specialist', 'knowledge manager' and 'information officer' are mentioned as higher-status and better-rewarded positions. Americans suffer too from their country's lack of any statutory basis for pay levels. Whereas in Australia pay cases can be mounted with certainty that outcomes will have the full force of law, in the United States pay rates are merely recommended by various regional and state associations. These standards have been implemented in only a minority of areas.

A concern expressed by the task force is the connection between low pay and no-cost services. Are there any professions, they ask, which enjoy high pay and status in America when their product or services are provided free of charge to users? Access to information irrespective of ability to pay is a core value, but the task force is keen to address this reflex downward pressure on librarian salaries. Members believe it is increased by lack of formal, recognised continuing professional development (CPD) certification. It is felt that librarians are disadvantaged by comparison with the many professions in which formal evidence and certification of CPD is mandatory for continued practice and advancement.

The absence of measures showing librarians' personal impact on service provision is identified as a further source of difficulty. The contribution of professional librarians to the economic and social benefits flowing from the existence of library services is badly underrated. In turn, because there is limited public perception of the real role of librarians, appointment of unqualified staff is an all too frequent occurrence.

Further status problems result from the location of library services in organisational structures. The American experience shows that where the function is placed and to whom it reports are direct determinants of status and salary levels. If in academic settings, for example, the library has faculty status and reports to a senior academic, staff status and rewards are always superior to those applying where the function is part of an administrative group, reporting to an administrative officer. If the function is part of a broad information structure, internal relativities will usually be set via comparison with information professionals, especially computing specialists, with favourable results.

Many of the problems identified by the American Task Force will be very familiar to ALIA members. In both countries there is clearly much to be done before librarians receive rewards more in keeping with their qualifications and contribution. Nevertheless, it is rewarding to hear American Library Association president Mitch Freedman's view that, on pay equity, ALIA and Australia are 'way ahead of the place America is at currently'. ■

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