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“Is the Degree Worth It? A Librarian’s Perspective”

Library Mosaics (March/April 2004)

This commentary began as a letter to the editor. The editor of the journal enjoyed my letter so much that he contacted me and asked me to expand on the ideas I presented for a full-page article. This journal is no longer in print. It was a publication of COLT (Council on Library/Media Technicians), a journal focused on the concerns of library paraprofessionals.

... The argument regarding the worth of a professional degree is not a new one—to this profession or any other. There are as many stories of “educated idiots” running an organization based upon their degree qualifications as there are of workers with twenty years of experience ensconced in a position due to their longevity, not to their skill. By the same token, there are as many stories of supportive librarians who give credit to paraprofessionals for their work and experienced paraprofessionals who could give top library directors a few lessons in leadership. It is to these experienced paraprofessionals that I ask, “What are you waiting for?” Why not take the next step in your professional commitment?

The heart of argument comes to this—an individual degree is worth only the work and the effort that the individual has put into it. Ensuring that the degree is worth the status is not an organizational issue—it is a personnel/management issue and cannot be addressed by structure. Can a degree guarantee that a librarian is more qualified and better able to assist a patron than a paraprofessional? No, it cannot. However, what a degree does is indicate a higher level of commitment to the profession as a whole. Attaining the degree indicates a willingness to go above and beyond the everyday and focus on a vision of one’s personal future.

Does this mean that paraprofessionals lack this focus, this vision, or commitment? Of course not. Does their work contribute to the profession as a whole? Most certainly. The profession of librarianship is made up not only of librarians but also of support staff—one does not exist without the other. However, I find it strange that the question has become “Is the degree worth it?” My question is “How can we ensure more paraprofessionals achieve this level of commitment?” While the organizational structure cannot guarantee that an individual’s degree is worth its status, structure can foster a sense of mentorship and support conducive to ensuring that these worthy individuals get the respect and sense of achievement that they deserve.

Our profession is in the midst of not only a struggle for respectful compensation but for professional respect and jurisdiction as well. In order for the profession as a whole to prevail in this debate, structural changes would need to take place in individual organizations to help usher our fine paraprofessional staff into professional roles. We should not hamper our profession or ourselves by disregarding the importance of a professional education.