Access Services:
Not Waving, but Drowning

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Introduction

Efforts to elevate the status of the library within the academy have resulted in a stratification of labor and a devaluing of certain kinds of work within libraries. Academic libraries are being re-envisioned as centers for innovation and collaboration, rather than providers of services. We believe that the relationship between Access Services and Public Services is illustrative of an ideology that diminishes the complexity of Access Services work and positions library workers as part of a zero-sum game. Through the lens of Access Services, this chapter will explore the effects of siloing and hierarchies in library staffing, and the divisions of labor that often exist in libraries as a result of those trends.

The desire to write this chapter was born out of frustration. It is the culmination of hours of conversations during the 9 years we spent as colleagues in an academic library, and it is representative of our broader experiences working in libraries, primarily in support staff roles, and primarily in academic libraries. Writing this chapter has been an ongoing process of wrangling our continuing conversation and trying to impose a bit of structure on it. One of us has a significant amount of public library experience, which does influence her perspective, but for this chapter, we have chosen to focus on the organization of labor in academic libraries. Our identity as support staff informs our perceptions and our narratives; using autoethnography as our primary means of reflection with additional support from

the literature, our hope is that our story is familiar to some (you aren't alone), new to others, and may spark meaningful conversation.

"Paraprofessional is a loaded term"[1]*: Naming Workers*

Within Library and Information Science (LIS) the language used to distinguish between the varying categories of library workers is fluid and contested.[2] Though we will not be using it in this chapter, the term paraprofessional persists in the literature[3] and in practice to refer to library workers who hold positions that do not require an MLS. The challenge in naming library workers is caused by a desire or persistent need to distinguish between positions that do and do not require a Master's degree in Library or Information Science.[4] Throughout our careers, the most common term we've encountered to describe our positions in roles that do not require an MLS is "paraprofessional". By its very definition, the term paraprofessional announces our station—we assist professionals. From our vantage point, naming conventions that reify well established hierarchies, yet do little in the way of describing our actual work, foster friction rather than efficiency, and individual self-interest rather than a shared common goal.

Throughout this chapter we will use the term staff or support staff to refer to library workers who work in positions that do not require an MLS. We will use the term librarian to refer to library workers who work in positions that require an MLS. When we discuss library staffing without examining hierarchies, we will use the term library worker to refer to everyone who works in the library, regardless of their position, or degree status.

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1   Kendra Levine (@tranlib), "Paraprofessional is a loaded term in libraries. Do you have any suggestions for a better term that recognizes the work of library workers who are staff (not librarians) that isn't so charged?" Twitter, April 18, 2019, 10:32 a.m., https://twitter.com/tranlib/status/1118930252401483776

2   Emily Vardell (@evardell), "Hannah Schilperoort and colleagues at @USCLibraries surveyed non-librarian library staff on terminology preferences," Twitter, May 7, 2019, 3:45 p.m., https://twitter.com/evardell/status/1125894450641874944

3   Performing a keyword search in LISA (Library and Information Science Abstracts, ProQuest) and LISS (Library and Information Science Source, EBSCO) yields over 40 results in the past year in each database, as of June 2019.

4   (MLS, MLIS, or MIS are used interchangeably, but we will use the abbreviation MLS throughout this chapter).

What is Access Services?

Access Services exists as a reenvisioning of traditional Circulation Departments in response to a number of gradual transformations within LIS: the proliferation of automated library systems; the emergence and broad adoption of electronic resources; an emphasis on user-centered service; and a push for access to, rather than ownership of, content.[5] As early as the mid 1980's, there is evidence that large academic libraries began restructuring their Circulation Departments to reflect a broader set of core responsibilities, and often those newly reorganized departments were referred to as Access Services.[6] While the core responsibilities of Access Services vary, it is common for the following functions to be included: circulation, reserves, interlibrary loan (ILL), document delivery, stacks maintenance, and facilities.

There is value in clarifying the scope of Access Services, but what makes Access Services work unique, especially in contrast to other public service departments within the library, is the labor that is often unmentioned and difficult to define. We recognize that every department performs some kind of invisible, undervalued labor, but for public service areas that may include reference and instruction, at least some of that labor is adjacent to the kind of work that bears resemblance to research and scholarship—areas that we tend to privilege within academic settings. Facilities issues, though, do not enjoy the same halo effect; opening the building does not look like scholarship.

Personal Reflection, Max:

I love staffing a service point at the start of a new academic year. It's a great opportunity to welcome incoming students and faculty—there are lots of questions, and I've found that the connections I make during that time of the year are lasting. During one particularly busy fall semester I was staffing the library's main desk and I welcomed a new member of the teaching faculty to campus. In addition to checking out materials,

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5   Mou Chakraborty, Michael English, and Sharon Payne, "Restructuring to Promote Collaboration and Exceed User Needs: The Blackwell Library Access Services Experience," *Journal of Access Services* 10, no. 2 (2013): 91.

6   Joyce K. Thornton & Carolyn Warmann,"Access Services," *Journal of Access Services* 1, no. 1 (2002): 25-47, DOI: 10.1300/J204v01n01_03; Deborah Carver, "From Circulation to Access Services," *Collection Management* 17, no. 1–2 (1993): 23–36, DOI:

this faculty member had a lot of questions about how their access to resources compared to their previous university—I answered questions about our collection, sorted out an access issue, provided a detailed explanation and overview of the library's discovery layer, corrected a citation issue that resulted in an ILL request, answered questions about loan periods, and just as the interaction was about to end, the new faculty member said, "what do you actually do here–you mentioned something about ILL, but what's your research area, or specialty?"

The challenge to these types of interactions is that there are competing interests—my desire to express frustration that despite going above and beyond, my work isn't viewed as valid or academic (enough), and my role as a public service professional, which ensures that patrons aren't burdened with the complexity of my emotions. The latter always wins out.

Access Services work is difficult to quantify. Just as counting the number of reference transactions or information literacy sessions taught does not begin to illustrate the breadth of teaching and reference work, neither do the metrics gathered in Access Services (gate counts, circulation counts, holds placed, number of questions asked) reflect the complexity of Access Services labor. There are no categories on statistics reports that cover active listening, empathy, referral to student health services, or similar interactions that take place at public service desks. We don't claim that this work is solely the jurisdiction of Access Services staff. However, as metrics are leveraged to propel a shift in public service staffing models—specifically, merging service points—Access Services becomes isolated and presents fewer opportunities to interact with other library workers performing similar labor. That lack of proximity to colleagues, especially as a result of a restructuring that amplifies hierarchies—removing service desk hours from librarians' obligations—has far reaching consequences. For the desk workers who are left behind, that sense of isolation and lack of agency impacts morale. The opportunity to get a reality check from a colleague, when you're in a stressful situation or experiencing a moment of self-doubt, makes a significant difference in how you feel about your job and yourself.

Another unintended consequence of this shift is that staff lose access to library workers who have more contact with administration and built-in opportunities to impact change through shared governance and campus outreach. Additionally staff have fewer opportunities to learn new skills and strengthen existing skills. Our observation is that many research consultations take place away from the desk, or in a closed environment;

as a result, staff assigned to service desks have no way to observe this work and apply their observations to the reference interview.

Moreover, there are fewer opportunities for all library workers to skill share; public facing Access Services workers have valuable knowledge to pass along to other library workers, and opportunities for that process to work both ways are eliminated. The imbalance created by a unidirectional information flow leads to a workplace environment that doesn't represent the interests of all library workers. Siloing is reinforced, which makes it much more difficult for us to talk about the library in a holistic way.

How We Talk About Access Services

As we began researching literature for this article, we regularly took breaks to check in with one another, and in unison, we'd usually say something like, "that was tough to read." As it turns out, the tone of LIS literature about staffing illustrates some of the very tensions that we, as staff in academic libraries, had been feeling for years. Time and again, we encountered literature about staffing models that were created to benefit librarians[7] or the budget.[8] Benefits to the user were not typically the driving force behind these changes, and the impact of these changes on support staff was addressed as more of an afterthought, which we found troubling. In a case study from 2015 outlining one library's decision to remove librarians from the reference desk, the events were described in this way: "While there was concern that a paraprofessional would not be able to provide adequate service in place of a librarian (this had been the rationale for not using paraprofessionals on the desk previously), eventually the arrangement was accepted by everyone in the department. Librarians were happy to be relieved of an hour or two of desk time during the week, and it became apparent that, given the nature of the questions being asked at the desk, it made sense for a paraprofessional to participate in the schedule."[9]

Several of the articles we read were case studies or "how we did it" articles about implementing a single point of service.[10] These were an ag-

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7   Timothy Peters, "Taking Librarians off the Desk: One Library Changes Its Reference Desk Staffing Model," *Performance Measurement and Metrics* 16, no. 1 (2015): 20.

8   Julie Leuzinger, "Reducing service points in the academic library: How to provide quality customer service in the face of budget cuts," *College & Research Libraries News* 74 (2013): 530–33. doi:10.5860/crln.74.10.9027.

9   Peters, "Taking Librarians off the Desk," 24.

10   See, for example, the cited articles by Crane, Chakraborty, Chauvet, and Kiesling.

gravating mix, often within the same article, of talk about cross-training and teamwork, and patronizing language about support staff. In discussing the difficulty that librarians had in adapting to a "blended desk" staffed by cross-trained support staff and librarians, Magee and Perini state, "It is difficult for a patron or a faculty member to develop a research relationship with an individual who on appearance has the same duties as a student employee with whom you dispute a $1.25 overdue fee."[11] Despite asking support staff to do more, the literature continues to doubt their ability to do so effectively. Janet Crane's 2008 article expressed

> "concern [about] whether circulation staff would be able to handle reference questions asked of them when a librarian wasn't immediately available. While the reference librarians were trained to perform fairly straightforward mechanical tasks relating to checking out material, the circulation staff was being asked to absorb a more nebulous set of basic research skills and knowledge."[12]

Language about freeing up librarians' time was very common in our reading. "Apart from opportunities for technicians and assistants to broaden their skills, collaborate, communicate, and work with librarians, the SPS [single service point] frees up librarians to focus on higher-order duties and liaison work."[13] While liaison work and teaching are vital parts of the library's mission, the importance of less formal user encounters is often minimized by this managerial outlook.[14]

Single Points Of Service (or, don't look back)

Recent articles about reference interactions state that the majority of interactions are basic in nature,[15] and can be handled without the intervention

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11   Christopher Magee and Michael Perini, "The Blended Desk and Its Consequences on Collaboration," *Collaborative Librarianship* 6, no. 3 (2014): 128.

12   Crane, 40.

13   Marianne Chauvet, Vicki Bourbous, and Frances Liston, "Service Matters: Single Service Point as a Collaborative and Professional Learning Initiative for Service Excellence," *Journal of Access Services* 13, no. 2 (2016): 88.

14   The zero-sum game mindset is real!

15   Timothy Peters, "Taking Librarians off the Desk: One Library Changes Its Reference Desk Staffing Model," *Performance Measurement and Metrics* 16, no. 1 (2015): 20.

of a reference librarian.[16] Reference work has traditionally been the territory of librarians, and though there has been a shift in this ideology, much of the literature advocating for staffing reference service points with support staff amounts to "the questions are so easy now, even a paraprofessional can handle them!" If that kind of negative framing is present in the literature, it's present in our libraries—and we feel it.

We argue that this self-perpetuating oversimplification of casual user encounters leads to a devaluing of certain kinds of user interactions, and is often the impetus for restructuring public service points within academic libraries. Recognition of the daily relationship-based work done by Access Services staff isn't happening, which may be linked to the notion that metrics can provide guidance about the complexity of a question. Ostensibly simple questions often lead to more nuanced interactions; all public service library workers can attest to this. Those simple questions are also important building blocks for the relationships we need to develop with our users to support them effectively and empathetically.

These reorganizations, which are usually represented as transitions to Single Points of Service (SPS), can significantly alter the divisions of labor for public service workers. Mergers of public service points often involve bringing together disparate groups of library workers, some of whom may not have an equal voice in planning and strategizing how to meet the needs of users, and may not feel confident in speaking out about their ideas and concerns. Efficiency and cost savings as the primary management objective creates a stratified organization where workers without agency are further disempowered from doing their jobs effectively, and cut off from opportunities to broaden their skills. The librarians developing circulation policy are buffered from how that policy plays out on a daily basis, and the staff assisting walk-in users are deprived of the collegial environment of the traditional reference desk and the opportunity to learn from and teach fellow library workers.

Personal Reflection, Max:

With transitions to a single point of service, the guiding ideology is that most questions can be answered by staff with the exception of higher level queries. This means that desk

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16   Gillian Gremmels, "Staffing Trends in College and University Libraries," *Reference Services Review* 41, no. 2 (2013): 234.

workers ask for assistance when there are questions we aren't sure how to answer, and those questions often result in a consultation that takes place away from the service point. If I receive a question about something I'm unfamiliar with and determine that it needs to be referred, I'd love to know the outcome. Unfortunately, what I've found is that transitions to single points of service aren't structured to include opportunities to follow up, and so instead of learning from those interactions, hierarchies are reinforced, opportunities for improvements to services missed, and opportunities to network with colleagues and learn new skills are absent.

Having to perform triage and refer any higher-level questions, being seen as incapable of answering those questions, does not engender feelings of competence. It seems that the variety of continuing education and training opportunities available to public facing staff on work time is limited when compared to the opportunities available to library workers not assigned to service desks. Professional development opportunities for Access Services staff are often centered on responding to emergencies; that is, what to do if any and ALL manner of unpredictable things happen, from campus emergencies to health crises. Opportunities for training that introduces or enhances the skills that help staff to assist with the labor that became theirs when librarians left the desk—resources, reference interviews, citation managers—seem scarce.

Personal Reflection, Monica:

When I worked in Adult Reference at the public library, there was a strict division of labor and multiple service points, but they were all within the line of sight of the reference desk. The Adult Reference desk was staffed at all times by at least two librarians. We were more aware of what was going on at Circulation, the periodicals counter, and the library card desk, because we were all in close proximity. Despite the division of labor, there was a constant connection. Even though the words for it weren't being used, I think everyone who worked there understood that we were all doing care work in a way that's not so obvious now.

In addition to the changing nature of reference questions, the decline in the number of reference transactions was also a motivation for considering

a new approach to service points.[17] Moreover, the philosophical shift from bibliographic instruction to information literacy education meant that the charge of many reference departments changed dramatically. With increased teaching responsibilities, librarians needed more time away from the desk for planning and outreach.[18] Another consideration for merging public service desks was user-centered; academic libraries often have multiple service desks,[19] with each desk having a completely unique function. This arrangement is non-intuitive and has been the source of needless frustration for library users.[20]

The literature includes many solid reasons to consider implementing a single point of service in libraries. Some implementations have been successful from the point of view of all stakeholders, but many have not. Implementations that focus on cross-training and the importance of an egalitarian desk team made up of support staff and librarians are more likely to result in an improved user-experience and increased job satisfaction for all library workers.[21] Implementations that fail to address the value of cross-training and a responsive network of colleagues isolate Access Services workers in favor of providing more time to librarians and relief to personnel budgets.

Restructuring to implement a SPS, even when it's done with good intentions, does not adequately serve users or library workers if it isolates Access Services staff. The intended goals of a better user experience, increased flexibility for librarians, and responsiveness to declining reference statistics and budget constraints make this isolation easy to dismiss from the point of view of managers.

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17 Janet Crane and Jeanne Pavy, "One-Stop Shopping: Merging Service Points in a University Library," *Public Services Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2008): 30.

18 Linda Frederiksen and Brandon Wilkinson, "Single Service Points in Libraries: A Review," *Journal of Access Services* 13, no. 2 (2016): 136.

19 Bruce Keisling and Claudene Sproles, "Reviewing and Reforming Library Service Points: Lessons in Review and Planning Services, Building Layout, and Organizational Culture," *Library Management* 38, no. 8/9 (2017): 426–36.

20 Crane, "One-Stop Shopping," 35.

21 Crane, 32.

Emotional Labor and Burnout

Within public services, emotional labor and burnout are inextricably linked. In her book, *The Managed Heart,* Arlie Hochschild introduces the concept of emotional labor and defines it in this way:

> This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.[22]

Emotional labor in academic libraries is not the exclusive territory of Access Services, but it's important to note that as many libraries shift to a SPS model, labor that was once distributed among a wide range of library workers has become the work of a few. Library workers providing public services are often susceptible to an "always-on" mindset, and more likely to be put in the position of sorting out their own staffing coverage if they find opportunities to work on projects outside of their daily job duties. As the burden of staffing the library's main service points is shifted to Access Services, there are fewer opportunities for workers across the library to understand and empathize with challenges unique to library public service work.

With increased workloads, diminished recognition, and less proximity to a network of colleagues, Access Service workers are increasingly susceptible to burnout. As defined by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter,

> Burnout is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. The three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.[23]

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22 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 7

23 Christina Maslach, and Michael P. Leiter, "Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry," *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (June 2016): 103.

There is a fairly broad body of literature in LIS scholarship that examines the impact of both burnout and emotional labor from the point of view of librarians, especially those working in public service and instruction roles.[24] While many of these texts have informed our work and guided our conversations, it was in the absences that we found motivation to develop our own voice, however shaky, to write this chapter.

Personal reflection, Monica:

As someone who saw the opportunity to move into technical services as a way of recovering from public services burnout, I think that the unwillingness or inability to do Access Services work, the urge to silo it, also has something to do with the unspoken recognition that customer service work is hard work that requires more emotional labor than many library workers are comfortable with. Having the reference encounter on an appointment-only basis, or through online chat, is a way to filter and distance ourselves from the person who is having a bad day—a bad semester—and finally ends up breaking open a little bit in the library. The tools we use to deal with messy, human situations aren't anything like the tools we use to help researchers with a systematic review. If we wanted to deal with messy, human situations all the time we would have gone into some other line of work. But those humans aren't going away. Making them the primary concern of Access Services is one way of avoiding that uncomfortable emotional labor.

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24   Celia Emmelhainz, Erin Pappas, and Maura Seale, "Behavioral Expectations for the Mommy Librarian: The Successful Reference Transaction as Emotional Labor," in *The Feminist Reference Desk: concepts, critiques, and conversations*, ed. Maria T. Accardi (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 27–45; Kevin Harwell, "Burnout Strategies for Librarians," *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 13, no. 3 (July 10, 2008): 379–90; Julie Kane, "Rising like a Glorious Turkey from the Ashes of Burnout," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 25, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 205–10; Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 57, no. 8 (November 17, 2017): 846–78.

Personal reflection, Max:

After seventeen and a half years working as staff in academic libraries, I accepted a position as a librarian. As a librarian, if I take on more work, there are regular opportunities for me to tell that story; I set goals each year and develop strategies to meet those goals, and that could lead to promotion. I know this is not true of every librarian—some variation of faculty status might not be built into every situation, but it's built into mine at the moment. When I was staff, I took on more and more work, work that had traditionally been done by librarians, but all of that extra work didn't count as a step toward much of anything. There were no financial incentives, and unfortunately I'd come to expect as much, but what I hadn't expected is the sense of isolation I felt as librarians engaged in what I sometimes jokingly refer to as 'librarian flight'—a term I use to describe situations when librarians were relieved of much, if not all, of their service desk hours. I recognized that librarians were relieved to spend time away from public service points, and though I empathized, as a staff person I quickly realized that there were unintended consequences; I didn't have the authority to determine the policies that dictate a lot of the public service work that I was doing, and didn't have much say over training and/or the general readiness of our staff to answer questions. Public service work is exhausting because you are expected to navigate every situation with diplomacy and professionalism, and there's very little recognition for that work. Beyond feeling as though I had no agency, my morale was impacted negatively when I realized that I no longer had the support of some of my colleagues. Even if that support was little more than empathy, or a shared glance after a tough interaction, it was something.

Conclusion

Our hope is that this chapter sparks conversations about the silos and hierarchies that persist in academic libraries. One of the biggest obstacles we encountered in writing this chapter was finding literature to cite that was written from the perspective of Access Services workers; hence the

autoethnography. The library can be a place that respects the needs and values of all its workers, to the benefit of staff and users. The library as a physical place continues to exist—that's a great thing—and meeting our users' needs means doing the work of Access Services. As long as we continue to see that work as discrete from the rest of the library, it will continue to be devalued. That work is valuable. As is creating a space that is equitable. As is supporting your colleagues—all of them—understanding that good ideas come from all kinds of places.

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