

Empty Presence: Library Labor, Prestige, and the MLS

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Abstract

In this essay, we explore the relationship between the MLS and professionalization within librarianship broadly and then looks more specifically at academic librarianship, which increasingly turns to other means of professionalization, such as more prestigious forms of credentialing, due to its precarious existence within higher education. The emphasis on professionalization through credentialing invisibilizes library labor, which is already feminized and devalued. Academic librarianship instead seeks to gain prestige and power by associating itself with whiteness and masculinity, rendering its specialized work and knowledge domain unimportant. Removing the MLS requirement from professional library positions will not address these broader issues, and as hiring trends demonstrate, might already be a moot point. Prestige, professionalization, and credentialing within academic librarianship have been debated since the inception of the profession; the interaction of these with gender ideologies and a predominantly female workforce have received attention since the 1970s. Librarianship's constant state of crisis and search for external markers of prestige can only exist comfortably outside of historical memory and critical analysis, however. This essay problematizes individual solutions such as credentialing that paper over systemic sociopolitical issues; specific solutions are beyond the scope of this paper, but we do suggest that solutions need to account for broader context, such as current and historical gender ideologies.

Introduction

In 2017, at the American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting, following the retirement of Keith Michael Fiels, the previous executive director, the Executive Board proposed a resolution that would have made "an ALA-accredited Master's Degree or a CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) accredited Master's Degree with a specialty in school library media" preferred rather than required for candidates for the executive director position (Kempf 2017; Kenney 2018). The resolution was defeated by ALA Council, but later in 2017, after failing to find suitable candidates, the resolution was reintroduced and passed by ALA Council (Kenney 2018). Members of ALA then petitioned to have the question put on the 2018 ALA ballot, and while a majority voted to require the MLS, the total number of voters did not meet the threshold required to move the amendment forward (Albanese and Coreno 2018). Currently, there is a degreed interim director who will remain in the role until 2020, and the search for a permanent executive director resumed in 2019. Some of the debate around requiring the MLS pointed to the devaluation of the degree and deprofessionalization of the field; those who favored making the degree preferred often pointed to the actual work performed by the executive director, which has more in common with organizational management than librarianship. Others noted that libraries have always employed workers

without library degrees, and that requiring an advanced degree works against diversity and inclusion: 87 percent of those who hold a MLS degree are white (Kenney 2018).

We begin with these recent events as they surface several key issues in this essay: the value of the MLS degree; the staffing of libraries; diversity, equity, and inclusion within librarianship; and the question of who exactly can call themselves a professional librarian. Our focus, however, is on academic libraries, whose position within the hierarchies of higher education makes these topics perhaps even more fraught (Crowley 1996). These debates are not new; Jones (1998) describes the fluid nature of library education in the first half of the twentieth century. It was only in 1959 that the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) recommended graduate education generally for librarians, and only in 1975 that the MLS became the terminal degree for librarians, which was not without controversy at the time (Jones 1998). Despite these actions by professional organizations, the MLS degree as the sole credential for librarians has been contested almost since it was institutionalized as such (see, for example, Bulger 1978; Shields 1982; Hildenbrand 1985). In 1985, only ten years after ACRL's action, a program entitled "The MLS—For the Public Good or For Our Good" was held at the ALA Annual Conference (Neal 2006).

In this essay, we explore the relationship between the MLS and professionalization within librarianship broadly and then examine more specifically academic librarianship, which increasingly turns to other means of professionalization, such as more prestigious forms of credentialing, due to its precarious existence within higher education. The emphasis on professionalization through credentialing invisibilizes library labor, which is already feminized and devalued. Academic librarianship instead seeks to gain prestige and power by associating itself with whiteness and masculinity, rendering its specialized work and knowledge domain unimportant. Removing the MLS requirement from professional library positions will not address these broader issues, and as hiring trends demonstrate, might already be a moot point. Prestige, professionalization, and credentialing within academic librarianship have been debated since the inception of the profession; the interaction of these with gender ideologies and a predominantly female workforce have received attention since the 1970s. Librarianship's constant state of crisis and search for external markers of prestige can only exist comfortably outside of historical memory and critical analysis, however. This essay problematizes individual solutions such as credentialing that paper over systemic sociopolitical issues; specific solutions are beyond the scope of this paper, but we do suggest that solutions need to account for broader context, such as current and historical gender ideologies.

The MLS and Professionalization

In *The MLS Project: An Assessment After Sixty Years*, Boyd Keith Swigger (2010) reviews the history of the MLS, which, surprisingly, has existed for just over sixty-five years. The American Library Association Council approved new standards for accrediting library education programs in 1951 (Swigger 2010). Before this, there had been no real consensus on

the ideal education for librarians; library education existed at the undergraduate level at the same time as calls for librarians to have academic doctorates (Jones 1998). The 1951 standards applied accreditation to the master's degree, which made it the credential for entering librarianship. In 1959, the ACRL *Standards for College Libraries* recommended graduate education for academic librarians, but did not specify degree programs (Jones 1998). In 1970, ALA adopted the policy statement, "Library Education and Manpower," which distinguished between professional work performed by master's degree–holding librarians from the nonprofessional work done by other library workers (Swigger 2010).¹ By 1975, 95 percent of academic libraries required a master's degree for new librarians. That year, ACRL designated the MLS as the terminal degree in librarianship and thus the degree academic librarians must have in order to be considered faculty (Swigger 2010). The MLS is, somewhat oddly, both the entry-level credential for librarians and the terminal degree. In 2018, ACRL reaffirmed this policy (ACRL 2018).

In regards to ACRL's 1975 statement, Swigger notes that "librarians at the time believed this change would transform the practice of librarianship, the nature of library education, and the social standing of librarianship as an occupation" (2010, 1). The establishment of the MLS as the terminal degree attempts to achieve professionalization in librarianship through the acquisition of a credential rather than through other means (Swigger 2010). As Andrew Abbott (1998) has suggested, professionalization is often sought through the development of a bounded and autonomous domain of expertise, a formalized system of education and credentialing, and profession-wide ethics, and is generally presumed to result in future higher status. Professionalization and the higher status presumed to accompany it, however, is also gendered, and occupations that are low status due to their feminized nature, such as librarianship, often seek professionalization (Abbott 1998; Neigel 2015).

Professionalization assumes that occupations are static and unchanging, rather than produced, contingent, and contested within broader contexts. Professions reflect the structure of the occupation, rather than the work it performs within changing contexts. To Abbott (1998), these contexts are broader society, other professions with overlapping or similar knowledge domains, and other organizations with similar forms of expertise. "The system of professions," Abbott suggests, "is thus a world of pushing and shoving, of contests won and lost" (1998, 433). The institutionalization of the MLS, then, represents an attempt to claim professional space and consequently higher status within a context in which neither are stable and both have to continually be fought for. As Emily Drabinski points out, this has become increasingly fraught within higher education during the past forty years, as public financial support has dwindled or disappeared: "In political economies of crisis and austerity, claims to status become more urgent as fields attempt to secure to themselves access to diminishing

¹Jones and Stiver (2004) offer a thoughtful critique of binary understandings of library work, although they continue to distinguish between library workers who do and do not have an advanced degree. We note that we find the distinction between professional and nonprofessional problematic for myriad reasons, many of which are addressed in this essay, and use this terminology primarily for clarity.

capital, both social and material” (2016, 607). For librarianship, professional status is therefore invested in “the production of hierarchies infused with power and privilege” and consistently in crisis in “an always exigent present” (2016, 605, 609). To Drabinski, professionalism within librarianship is a closed circle; it requires “professionally qualified personnel who have received professional educations” who go on to do work that validates and sustains the need for professionalization as well as reproduces the structures of professionalization (2016, 606). The work performed is, as Abbott (1998) describes, less important than the structure of the occupation, which in the case of librarianship is represented by the credentialing function of the MLS degree. That is to say, the value and the meaning of the work are directly connected to whether those who perform it have the correct credentials, as determined by the ALA and ACRL. Although library workers might receive training or learn by doing the job, they and the work that they do not cannot be professional unless they possess the MLS (Applegate 2010; Drabinski 2016).

Alternative Forms of Professionalization

Despite ACRL’s efforts to professionalize librarianship through the MLS, academic librarians are situated within institutions of higher education, which are organizations with similar forms of expertise (Abbott 1998). Within higher education institutions, the MLS degree is one among many advanced degrees that signify similar or overlapping knowledge domains, such as information technology and administration (Cox and Corral 2013; Abbott 1998). In response, academic libraries have sought to professionalize through other structures and occupations outside of librarianship. Although James Neal’s description (2006) of the “feral librarian,” which we will discuss below, is a recent manifestation of this thinking, it is also not new. In 1976, Cottam noted “an appreciable trend has developed in recent years to recruit specialists to fulfill roles other than those in the traditional librarianship areas” (1976, 1972, quoted in Gremmels 2013, 238). Writing about academic librarianship within the competitive context of higher education, Leigh Estabrook argues, “To continue to grow as a profession necessitates continued, and probably increased, involvement in competition for status and territory. If librarians do not compete, other groups will look for ways they can increase their own status and territory through involvement in library and information services” (1989, 295). Two ways of doing this, according to Estabrook (1989) are through the hiring of professional staff who are not librarians and by bringing educational administration into library education. Bill Crowley echoes Estabrook in his appeal to librarians to reconsider the doctorate within librarianship: “Without a recognized claim to peer status and comparable treatment when resources are allocated, librarians will increasingly find life on the academic periphery to be no life at all as the hard decisions on funding and personnel are made” (1996, 119). In 1995, the Association of Research Libraries published *Non-Librarian Professionals: SPEC Kit 212*, which suggests that academic libraries have always recognized the need to hire professionals who did not have an MLS and, based on a survey of academic librarians, found that 59 percent of academic libraries were willing to do so. The document also notes, almost as an aside, “As librarianship continues to debate the scope and content of its knowledge base and attendant educational requirements, librarians are left to promote, if not

protect, their profession with a less than clearly articulated sense of what constitutes librarianship as a distinct profession. Because the core of the profession is not adequately defined, its boundaries are continually subject to adjustments based on the developments occurring in related, cognate fields,” including higher education more broadly (Westbrook, Dorrian, and Zenelis 1995, flyer). In 1999, ARL redid the survey and found the majority of ARL libraries preferred “MLS or equivalent” in professional job requirements (Blixrud 2000).

Neal’s “Raised By Wolves: Integrating the New Generation of Feral Professionals into the Academic Library” appeared only six years later, but has seemingly forgotten these discussions in its casting of non-MLS holders in academic libraries as unprecedented: “The new professional groups have been ‘raised’ in other environments and bring to the academic library a ‘feral’ set of values, outlooks, styles, and expectations” (2006, 42). Neal describes librarianship as ambiguously professional, in its search for “cultural authority” that the MLS may or may not confer (43). Non-MLS holders are different: “They may fit effectively or be creatively disruptive in the transformed libraries we are seeking to create. Either way, they are needed for their important contributions to academic library innovation and mutability” (2006, 44). Neal’s language is highly gendered. “Innovation” and “disruption,” both of which are connected to information technology, are frequently associated with men (Neal 2006, 44; Lamont 2009; Pawley 2005; Neigel 2015). Non-MLS professionals are hungry, ferocious, and savage, in contrast to traditional librarians, who are rather bovine: “These necessary developments in the preparation of librarians, in the hiring and organization of staff, and in the definition of professional roles in academic libraries suggest the metaphor of “untamed” vs. ‘domesticated’ professionals” (Neal 2006, 44). Neal (2006) associates the MLS and traditional librarians with the domestic, gendering as female an already feminized group, while using the language of excitement, change, and freedom to describe non-MLS professionals, whom he also connects to prestige. This has remained the dominant paradigm for describing the MLS in relation to other advanced degrees, and for describing academic librarians in relation to other professional workers in academic libraries, and as such, has become a key method in academic librarianship’s quest for professionalization, prestige, and status (Marcum 2012; Ridley 2018).

Stanley Wilder’s 2017 report, *Hiring and Staffing in ARL Libraries*² (later collected with additional analysis in *Research Library Issues*, no. 295) demonstrates this materially. Wilder describes how there has been “explosive growth” in nonlibrarian professional roles in academic libraries (5). These “nontraditional jobs” require different forms of expertise such as computing, financial, and legal (5). Unsurprisingly, given that librarianship is 79 percent female (AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees 2018), nontraditionals are “more male than traditionals (41% of nontraditional new hires were male vs. 28% of traditional new hires) and they’re more likely to have no library degree (40% of nontraditional new hires do not have library degrees vs. only 8% of traditional new hires)” (Wilder 2017, 6). Despite the

² We acknowledge that not all academic libraries are ARL libraries, and that discussions about academic librarianship too often focus exclusively on ARL libraries.

influx of nontraditionals Wilder describes (or perhaps due to the historical continuity in the hiring of nonlibrarian professionals we describe above), ARL libraries have continued to be about 63% female since 1986 (Wilder 2017). Although Wilder does not make this connection, salary is tied to both the type of the position and the gender of its holder: “59% of those with no library degree were hired for salaries of \$60,000 or higher, compared with 51% of those with a library credential” (Wilder 2017, 9-10). Wilder (2017) argues that these shifts in the ARL workforce have broader implications for credentialing through the MLS, as the percentage of ARL professionals with a library degree has declined from 92% in 1986 to 83% in 2015, and as Wilder maintains, will likely decline further. However, professionals of any sort only account for 39% of ARL library workers; the remainder are nonprofessional workers.

ARL libraries represent a small percentage of academic libraries, but others have found similar or complementary results across academic libraries. Grimes and Grimes (2008) analyzed job ads from 1975 to 2005 and found that jobs requiring an MLS peaked in the early 1990s and there was a significant drop in such positions after 2000. Stewart (2010) found that staffing in nonlibrarian professional roles at research libraries rose significantly between 2000 and 2008, despite declining staffing overall; Regazzi’s (2012) study found similar results across all institution types between 1998 and 2008, although most heavily at research institutions. Both note that such growth likely has come at the cost of librarian and nonprofessional positions. Simpson (2013) found that 13% of academic library directors said the MLS is not required for professional positions, while another 10% said they expect this in the future. Triumph and Beile (2015) found that about 90% of job ads from 2011 required the MLS but suggest that there is trend toward removing this requirement. Oliver and Prosser (2018) found that non-MLS professionals tended to be either hired into functional roles that do not require the MLS or are paraprofessionals performing professional work; the majority of both categories do not intend to obtain an MLS. Gremmels (2013) alone identifies the continuity in academic libraries hiring non-MLS professionals since the 1970s.

Invisible Labor, Feminized Labor

Because academic librarianship professionalization efforts emphasize credentialing, either within librarianship through the MLS or within higher education through other advanced degrees, the actual work involved in academic librarianship is frequently invisibilized. This invisibility is only emphasized by the fact that much of that work entails emotional labor or maintenance. These forms of work are more likely to be performed by white women and BIPOC and so are devalued even as they are erased (Bright 2018; Mirza and Seale 2017). What frequently appears in its place is information technology and leadership, discursively and materially the domain of white men (Harris 1992; Neal 2006; Lamont 2009; Dean 2015; Neigel 2015; Mirza and Seale 2017; Wilder 2017). Academic librarianship’s erasure of feminized forms of labor and the field’s “inherent femaleness” is inextricable from its search for markers of professionalization outside of librarianship, in the form of non-MLS degrees, more appealing domains of knowledge, and nonfeminized types of labor (Neigel 2015, 524).

For librarianship, professionalization is embedded in gender relations and ideologies. In 1992, prior to mass diffusion of information technologies, Harris argued that “the professionalization movement in librarianship represents an attempt to escape its female identity” because the devaluation of women’s work renders it low status. Changing terminology from library science to information science functions similarly (1992, 1). Drawing on Harris, Drabinski (2016) notes that librarianship continues to take on traditionally masculine labor and roles to professionalize. Dilevko and Gottlieb (2004) similarly argue that librarianship has focused on a “male model of professionalism” that emphasizes “managerial prowess and ever-faster, ever-bigger information technology systems” (176). Stauffer (2016) echoes these points, arguing that librarianship is “a female-intensive profession that attempts to construct itself as masculine” (320). By attempting to gain power and prestige in an environment of austerity and uncertainty through the adoption of masculinity, academic librarianship erases much of the labor that keeps libraries running and, indeed, much of the work and values that distinguishes both academic libraries from other organizations and academic librarianship from other knowledge domains. Attempting to appropriate nonfeminized forms of labor from fields like information technology places academic librarianship in direct competition with those fields, and librarianship is likely to lose (Abbott 1998; Harris 1993).

As a result, academic librarianship often functions, as Chris Bourq has noted, as an “empty signifier,” despite the many “fawning love letters written about ‘the library’” (@mchris4duke, January 23, 2019). Building on Fobazi Ettarh’s (2018) concept of “vocational awe,” which speaks to how library workers perceive ourselves, our work, and our imbrication in larger systems of oppression, we suggest that those outside of academic libraries approach them through an “empty awe” that cannot see the labor that goes into creating and maintaining them, largely because that labor is continually erased in academic librarianship’s quest for (masculinized) professionalization. Similarly, Erin Rhodes, Leah Richardson, and Rachel Trent describe the invisibilized labor of archivists and librarians to suggest both function as “modality without a presence” (2018). Academic librarians and archivists are “meaningless to the materiality of the spaces that we create and sustain” because that labor is repeatedly, insistently erased (2018).

The erasure of academic library labor occurs not just within librarianship but circulates more broadly within higher education, particularly since, as Neigel suggests, librarianship is “frequently challenged by external professions for control” (2015, 524). In 2018, the University of Virginia library encountered faculty complaints over the proposed renovation of the main library (Gold 2018; Zahneis 2018), prompting Dean John Unsworth to remark, “There’s not enough respect for a mostly female profession devoted to serving the information needs of others” (@unsworth, June 7, 2018). Cook (2011) and Caswell (2016) have both critiqued the use of “the archive” and the erasure of archival labor by humanities scholars. Leon (2016) describes how women’s labor, particularly that of librarians and archivists, has been erased from foundational narratives of digital history. Academic librarianship and other forms of information work, exemplified by the Council on Library and Information Resources postdoctoral fellowships, are central to discussions of alt-ac positions

for PhDs (Posner 2013; Carter 2017). Academic library instruction data is frequently not included in institution-level instruction data (Geraci 2016). These are just a few examples of the ways in which academic librarian labor is invisible within higher education, due to its feminized nature, orientation toward service, and the fact that while some academic librarians do have faculty status, many do not possess this marker of prestige.

The “empty signifier” of academic librarianship is inherently feminized. Academic librarianship, like reproductive labor or mothering, is vehemently and publicly valued (as in Bourgeois’s fawning love letters) at the same moment that it is obfuscated. Librarians, like mothers, are caring and self-sacrificing, as they selflessly labor (Ettarh 2018; Emmelhainz, Pappas, and Seale 2017). Library work is a form of “marketized domesticity,” as the library worker takes on the aspect of the mother or wife as “the emotional style of offering the service becomes part of the service itself” (Hochschild 2003, 205). Service is not necessarily gendered, but within librarianship, “an attitude of service has become, in effect, a distinguishing feature of library services. Service has gendered services” (Dean 2015). Men are information professionals, who invest technologies with cultural relevance, and serve the technocratic elite, but those who provide public access and use, manage, and maintain those technologies are women (Harris 1992, 1999; Neigel 2015; Dean 2015). The “reproductive and affective labor in the knowledge production of academe” performed by academic librarians is, like the services they provide, vital to the ongoing production and reproduction of academia despite its invisibilization and devaluing (Sloniowski 2016, 661; Shirazi 2014). Male “nontraditionals,” in Wilder’s terms, or Neal’s “untamed” librarians might work at libraries, but they are not of the library in that way that “traditionals” and the “domesticated” are (Wilder 2017; Neal 2006). They are not understood in terms of vocational awe or mothering, or expected to selflessly provide service that reproduces the academy; their work is not naturalized as feminine and therefore not valued as actual labor.

Despite Wilder’s contention that research library staffing is “squarely in the mainstream of global labor force trends, wherein lower-skill, repetitive, piecework oriented tasks are disappearing, replaced by networks and technologies” (2017, 3), these feminized forms of labor—emotional, maintenance, reproductive—are at the heart of academic librarianship work, despite active attempts to erase them in order to seem more masculine, more prestigious, more professional. Traditional librarian and nonprofessional staff positions may well be disappearing in favor of nonlibrarian professional roles, as Stewart (2010) and Regazzi (2012) both observe, but that does not mean that that work, or the need for that work, has disappeared. Wilder (2017) may refer to this work as low skill, but this is also not necessarily accurate; what is true is that the work must be depicted that way in order to justify its devaluation and replacement.

Wilder’s (2017) reference to “networks and technologies” as the domain of nontraditionals and Neal’s (2006) connection of innovation and disruption to “untamed” and “feral” librarians both uncritically invoke the idea of the “information society” (May 2002). But “innovation” and “disruption” are also connected to the political economic policies of neoliberalism, namely, austerity and the concomitant abandonment of care, as every

individual is a self-sufficient monad. For example, Kendrick's (2017) academic librarian survey respondents described the uncollegial, low-morale atmosphere that can result from "innovative" budget cuts. Neoliberal management practices that emphasize efficiencies, measurement, and accountability suppress other ways of thinking about library work that focus on service as inclusion, care, support, and empowerment and negatively affect worker autonomy (Neigel 2015). The contempt that occasionally surfaces in Wilder's (2017) and Neal's (2006) language around "domesticated" "traditionals" (that is, MLS-holding librarians) or nonprofessional staff who engage in "lower-skill" and "repetitive" work likewise signals a lack of care for the organizational community of the academic library.³

Prestige, Power, and Whiteness

Academic librarianship understands itself to be in a continual state of crisis, and in such an environment, widely legible markers of prestige and power are attractive (Buschman 2003).⁴ As the labor that sustains academic libraries is invisibilized, professionalization hinges solely on credentials. The MLS is inescapably associated with librarianship, and with feminized labor, and as such, is not prestigious. Although Wilder (2017) does not describe the educational attainment of "nontraditionals," we predict that, given their higher salaries, they possess more prestigious credentials such as the PhD, MBA, and JD. Lindquist and Gilman's (2008) work supports this hypothesis: male academic librarians are more likely to have PhDs. As academic libraries seek prestige and power through professionalization, they attempt to "adopt the values and definitions of the higher prestige male professions in order to advance their own status" (Harris 1992, 17). Removing the MLS requirement from academic librarianship would not, in and of itself, increase diversity and inclusion with the profession, because academic libraries would continue to seek prestige by associating themselves with whiteness and masculinity through these other forms of credentialing, which are more time-intensive and costly than the short, available online MLS. This search for prestige entails a concurrent "deemphasis or denigration of those aspects of the female-intensive occupations that involve service and personal contact" (Harris 1992, 30). This is the work performed by white women, BIPOC, and nonprofessional staff. Given the closed prestige economy within the United States and higher education, whiteness is prestige and prestige is whiteness.⁵ As computing work, which had been seen as unskilled and was frequently performed by women, was taken over by white men, it became prestigious (Hicks 2017). Or, as Shirazi (2014) states, "That is, *who* is doing the work determines *what* is valued as work." As it has sought professionalization and subsequently higher status through associating itself with whiteness

³ We have noticed other versions of this contempt in discussion around print collections and "legacy" services and positions. It also seems to seep into discussions of the MLS as a "union card," which we also encountered in researching this paper. This metaphor is interesting, but exploring it more thoroughly is outside the scope of this essay.

⁴ Most of the discourse around crisis ignores the real material crises brought about by neoliberalism.

⁵ We are drawing on Galvan's (2015) conceptualization of whiteness as "white, heterosexual, capitalist, and middle class."

as a marker of prestige, academic librarianship has become “paralyzed by whiteness” (Galvan 2015).

Discussions of the MLS must acknowledge this broader context in order to avoid reproducing it. Stavick’s (2018) essay on the exclusionary effects of the MLS fails to do so, and instead, in its vision of replacing the MLS with code school, turns to technocratic solutionism, whiteness (computer science is not exactly diverse), and individualism. Systemic change is nowhere, nor are the complexities that differentiate computer science labor (visas, outsourcing) from academic library labor (feminization). While professionalization in the name of higher status is not unequivocally good,⁶ discussions of the MLS must also pay attention to ongoing deprofessionalization and loss of autonomy within academic libraries; as Litwin (2009) suggests, deprofessionalization can “serve as an opportunity for library administrators to take a greater share of control over library practice and to advance a business framework of metrical efficiency to the fore” (44). Other criticisms, such as Farkas’s (2018), more thoughtfully center on the experiences of BIPOC and nonprofessional staff (who are more likely to be BIPOC) (AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees 2018). Kelley (2013), who focuses on the experiences of nonprofessional staff of color, calls for moving committed, nonprofessional library staff into librarian positions, with additional training but without the MLS. As he notes, “There is a tension between the desire to accredit the profession and the wish to diversify it” (8).

Conclusion: Feminization, Interdependence, and Care

In 1992, Roma Harris argued that “we must abandon any notions of professionalism that encourage political neutrality. Instead, it is time to realize that both the clients of the female-intensive professions and the workers in these fields have much to gain if their leaders recognize a common feminist agenda—that of acknowledging and rewarding work that has been traditionally done by women and fighting to preserve the values that are the underpinnings of this work” (163). We bring intersectionality and an understanding that “major systems of oppression are interlocking” to Harris’s argument and propose that the way forward begins with acknowledging, naming, and valuing the feminized labor that is at the core of academic librarianship (Combahee River Collective [1986] 2000). To Harris (1992), a feminized and feminist understanding of service is crucial, as is a rejection of librarianship’s seemingly eternal “mindless pursuit of status” (1993, 876).

⁶ In some cases, credentialing can provide social capital to individuals in marginalized positions, although this does not affect the norms of the profession (Hathcock 2015; Vinopal 2016). Professionalization also provides “an excuse to gather, an affirmation that the concerns one has are legitimate, and the production of a shared intellectual space within which to address these questions. The value of professional status is real for those who achieve it, not only in terms of higher wages, but in the pleasures that a professional community can bring: a group of people engaged in similar work who want to talk to one another about what they do” (Drabinski 605-6).

In her essay “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” Shana Higgins (2017) argues that “care seems to hold possibilities as a means toward equitable, inclusive, anti-neoliberal futures” (73). Higgins’s (2017) model of librarianship leans into the feminized aspects of librarianship to emphasize interdependence, which is “recognizing difference within common cause” (84). Interdependence promotes care and can help “make visible our affective, ‘reproductive,’ and maintenance work; increase and strengthen collaborative work with our communities, patrons, and users in all areas of library work; and enable us to move away from return-on-investment talk toward valuing ‘our inevitable need for each other’ within the institution” (84). An interdependent academic library recognizes that all of the labor performed in the library is valuable, because it contributes to the continued functioning of the whole (Jackson 2014). Interestingly, this emphasis on interdependence echoes Abbott’s description of librarianship as a federated profession, in which there is “a loose aggregation of groups doing relatively different kinds of work but sharing a common orientation” (1998, 14). Actively valuing the myriad forms of work that constitute the academic library makes it legible to the library, the higher education institution, and beyond. This would require moving beyond masculinized visions of library leadership (Neigel 2015). Pursuing professionalization through credentialing, either through the MLS or through other advanced degrees prioritizes the individual worker with the individual credential. An interdependent approach might, in contrast, consider library staffing within the context of their local communities, think about paths into librarianship that account for systemic bias, such as the whiteness of professional norms, and develop ways in that de-emphasize individual solutions such as scholarships, residencies, and apprenticeships (Vinopal 2016; Hathcock 2015). Focusing on interdependence can work to make visible how academic librarianship sustains the scholarly communication infrastructures that undergird research and teaching and the emotional and physical infrastructures that support student life. Fully formed solutions are beyond the scope of this essay; we have instead sought to introduce complexity and a sense of possibility to discussions of the MLS.

We began this essay with recent debates over whether the executive director of the ALA should be required to possess an MLS, and will end by suggesting that focusing on whether individual library workers do or do not have this specific credential is an individualized response to systemic problems. The MLS requirement is connected to librarianship’s ongoing efforts to attain some sort of static professional status. Academic librarianship experiences additional precarity due to its close relationship to related fields and organizations and so turns to other means of professionalization, such as more prestigious credentials. Because of academic librarianship’s investment in credentialing, the actual labor, feminized and therefore devalued, performed in academic libraries is erased. In order to gain prestige and power, academic librarianship tries to associate itself with whiteness and masculinity and in so doing, denies the importance of the work it does and the value of its specialized knowledge. Removing the MLS requirement in and of itself does not speak to these broader issues around how, and whose, labor is valued. Instead, we suggest thinking about how feminized work and feminist ideas such as interdependence and care might lead to an academic librarianship that does not rely on credentialism or professionalization to demonstrate its worth.

Notes

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