

# Paraprofessionals: *Surpassing the Grade*

by Stephen G. Margeton

## AALL Paraprofessional Forum Agenda

Monday, July 19, 1999

### **Communication: The Key to Success**

Communications theory focusing on key practical aspects of successful communications in a library setting

### **Job v. Career:**

#### **What's the Commitment?**

Difference between a job and a career and what that means in the workplace

### **Customer Service: Satisfied Patrons/Satisfied You**

Understanding customer service and the tools and commitment it requires

### **Time Management**

The basics and how to apply them to a library setting

### **Opening Luncheon and Dessert in the Exhibit Hall**

### **No Avoiding It ... Technology and Its Impact on You**

New technologies and opportunities and coping with technological change

### **The Internet in the Library World**

Applications and sites and their use by paraprofessionals

### **Successful Dealings with Managers/Up the Hierarchy**

Organizational structure and how to make it work for you

### **Managing Others**

Applying management skills to others in the library setting

### **Dutch Treat Dinner**

### **West Group Party**

A strong paraprofessional team has always been a hallmark of good library organizations. Administrators know that libraries cannot run smoothly without efficient, reliable staff members behind the scenes. These employees are the backbone of the technical services department. They keep our circulation systems humming. Some provide reference service to library patrons. Paraprofessionals are enthusiastic, innovative, proficient at their tasks, and always ready to please. Although their work is often not glamorous, they rarely complain.

The growth of the paraprofessional workforce has exploded over the past two decades. Where a small cadre of paraprofessional workers could keep early law libraries operating smoothly, today the size of the workforce is substantially larger. One reason is the growth in the number of academic, government, and private law libraries that have been established since the 1980s. At one point, academic and government libraries accounted for most paraprofessional employment. Today, the private sector also employs a large number of paraprofessionals. As law firms grew, attorneys demanded additional library services more quickly. This, in turn, led to the creation of larger firm libraries with more paraprofessionals.

Other reasons for growth in the numbers of paraprofessionals in law libraries are expansion in the legal publishing industry, changes in publishing formats, and advances in technology in law libraries. The '80s and '90s saw a tremendous growth in legal publishing with voluminous legal titles quickly filling law library shelves. Just acquiring legal materials, keeping them current and routed to patrons creates the need for many new positions.

With the increased use of technology in libraries, paraprofessionals have new and increased opportunities. Computers offer paraprofessionals an even more important role to play in managing

library workflow and putting materials into the hands of library users. During the past decade, law libraries were quick to introduce sophisticated new automated systems to enhance library services, and paraprofessionals readily embraced this change. Paraprofessionals learned the new systems, are performing more challenging tasks, and have significantly improved their skills. Many labor-intensive operations that paraprofessionals previously performed by hand have been computerized. This development offers paraprofessionals relief from some of the daily repetitive routines, but also provides an opportunity to polish employment skills. Because technology offers new challenges for employees, it enriches their work experience and offers greater job satisfaction. Similarly, proficiency with automation demonstrates to library managers the valuable contributions paraprofessionals provide to the institution. Often paraprofessionals exceed employer expectations by quickly mastering library technology.

Additionally, although paraprofessionals do not receive the same remuneration or praise as professional librarians, they face some of the very same problems: heavy workloads, burnout, isolation, and, in some instances, a lack of esprit de corps. The lack of an opportunity for formal training further exacerbates the situation. Add these factors together and it is easy to understand why paraprofessionals feel like the unsung heroes of the law library staff. Many paraprofessionals cope by drawing upon their own inner resources when special training is not available. These resources include interpersonal skills, independent decision-making, and an intimate knowledge of library procedures and applications. Interpersonal skills are reflected in how well paraprofessionals deal with colleagues and patrons. Their willingness to exercise independent decision-making benefits the library when supervisors are unavailable. Their knowledge of library procedures keeps library services running on track even when crises abound.

Fortunately for all concerned, library administrators have become more sensitive to these issues. Overwork and burnout syndromes cross all levels of employment, but probably hit paraprofessionals harder because of the regularity of their daily

routines and the nature of their job responsibilities. Feelings of isolation in the library organizational chart may result from several factors: rigid job descriptions, inflexible work schedules, remote work sites, and individual personalities.

One way for administrators to help employees overcome these problems is to offer job restructuring or position trades. Another way to help paraprofessionals is to offer further professional training.

Paraprofessionals, just like other library employees, need these opportunities for training and development.

The **Paraprofessional Forum**, a full-day session scheduled for Monday, July 19, 1999, in conjunction with AALL's 92nd Annual Meeting, is one of these opportunities. AALL recognizes that while paraprofessionals are among the most valued employees of law libraries, they

frequently do not have an opportunity for further training and career guidance. The planners for the 92nd AALL Annual Meeting thought that the 1999 conference would be a great opportunity to provide practical workplace tips while at the same

time offer some of the flavor of attending AALL's national conference. A superb faculty from a wide selection of law libraries will conduct eight sessions. Session topics will range from communication and career planning to time management and technology. Also, attendees will have opportunities

to network with their colleagues, both professional and paraprofessional, at the AALL conference opening luncheon, while enjoying dessert at the AALL exhibit hall, and during session breaks. My co-director for the Paraprofessional Forum, Carolyn

The 1999 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries, "At the Crossroads: Information Management, Technology, and Policy," will salute the contributions of law library paraprofessionals with a full-day, concurrent forum focused on paraprofessional development and career decision-making for paraprofessionals from all types of law libraries: academic, private, court, and government.

Ahearn of Wiley Rein & Fielding, and I encourage employers to use the Paraprofessional Forum to provide the paraprofessionals in your libraries with an excellent educational opportunity (see sidebar for subjects covered), and we encourage paraprofessionals to join your colleagues for this first-ever event.

### **Stephen G. Margeton**

*(margeton@cua.edu) is Director of the Law Library, Catholic University of America, Judge Kathryn J. DuFour Law Library, Washington, D.C.*

### **Paraprofessional Forum**

AALL Annual Meeting, Washington Convention Center, Washington, D.C., Monday July 19, 1999, 8:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.

Registration fees: Paraprofessional Forum, Opening Reception and Association Luncheon: \$75.00; Paraprofessional Forum programs and Program Registration: \$250.00; Paraprofessional Forum programs and Full Registration: \$325.00.

For a registration form and more information, see the Annual Meeting Preliminary Program or check AALL's award-winning Web site AALLNET (<http://www.aallnet.org/events/>).