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## Support staff professional development: Issues for the coming millennium

Donetta Sheffold  
*Oregon State University*

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# Support Staff Professional Development:

## Issues for the Coming Millennium

by *Donetta Sheffold*

*Valley Library, Oregon State University*

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Many positive changes have taken place for library support staff here in Oregon during the past five to seven years. Support staff have earned their own division in the Oregon Library Association. The Support Staff Division (SSD) sponsors an annual conference and other continuing education opportunities, and also provides scholarships so that support staff may attend the annual SSD conference or other library conferences and training. Often the largest obstacle support staff encounter is the fact that they are not librarians. For many years there was no real presence of support staff in the Oregon Library Association, no feeling that they belonged, or for that matter that they were included. Sometimes the biggest obstacles stem from exclusion rather than inclusion.

When I was asked to write an article for the *OLA Quarterly* my first inclination was to say, "Sorry, I can't do that—I don't have time, my writing skills aren't good enough, and what do I have to say that people would want to hear?" I did the same thing to myself that hundreds of support staff do every time they hear the words "professional development." They immediately exclude themselves from the conversation because they are not librarians; everyone knows that librarians are the professionals who receive the development opportunities. For many people, the experience of professional development is similar to the old adage, "the rich get richer." Think about that for a moment—how the majority of professional development funding often goes to the librarians. In academic libraries, the librarians need professional development for "promotion and tenure." In public libraries, the librarians are the people who are the most visible in the community and need to keep up on what is happening in the library field.

In libraries all across Oregon and the United States, professional development of any kind is one of the first items to be cut as budgets are reduced. And typically the funding allocated for support staff development is cut before reducing funding for librarian de-

velopment. Have you ever thought, as I have, that although support staff are the least able to pick up their own tab for professional development, they are usually the first to have their funding cut? Aside from the issue of receiving less funding, support staff often are the ones selected to make sure the library is staffed while others are out of the library attending meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences. (Please note: this is a major reason the Support Staff Division elects to hold their conference in July rather than at the OLA Annual Conference. Many support staff would be unable to attend in April.) Possibly one of the most difficult issues to address is providing development training to support staff in the face of the multitude of levels of experience and expectations represented throughout the support staff community. It occurs to me that while support staff have a vast range of educational levels (high school through college and beyond) which makes development training a special challenge, librarians have a common ground, the MLS.

A wide range of responsibility levels, as well as skill levels, exists in support staff throughout the various types of libraries. Some support staff work in extremely small libraries where staff consists of only one or two people. I realize this scenario creates a special situation for librarians as well but it seems it is usually the support staff who suffer from the inability to "get away" for professional activities. I also realize that within the last five years the situation has improved in many libraries throughout Oregon. The Oregon Library Association's Support Staff Division continues to provide an annual conference where all those who work in libraries are welcome!

### **What Support Staff Can Do**

1. Take the initiative by requesting professional development, and when you do be prepared to provide your administrator with an explanation of how it will help you and others.
2. Apply for grants and scholarships to assist with the costs of professional development opportunities, especially if your library budget doesn't provide staff development funds.
3. Talk with others about development opportunities and expand your horizon regarding how to get things done. There may be only one pot of gold but there are several different paths to find it.
4. Be interested in library-wide topics as well as your own field of expertise.
5. Care about your entire library and staff.
6. If you are not interested in getting more training and networking with others, do not feel slighted because someone else does. Harboring ill will doesn't do you, your peers, or your library any good.

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## Professional Development

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### What Librarians and Library Administrators Can Do

1. Budget for support staff development.
2. Encourage and motivate your staff to expand their professional views.
3. Provide new training opportunities for those who are interested.
4. Assist support staff who want to participate in organizations like OLA/SSD.
5. Provide opportunities for support staff who have attended professional development to “give back” to

their peers through brown bag lunches or in other creative ways.

6. Reward those who show initiative. Think about how you treat staff who are challenging the boundaries of support staff/librarians.
7. Evaluate how you recognize your staff—both librarians and support staff.
8. Remember, support staff are professionals too! **Q**

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## Unlocking Potential

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### It's Not Easy and It's Not Cheap

“No pain, no gain” is another old axiom that seems apropos to an aggressive staff development program. To date, we have encountered the following challenges:

- Meetings, conferences, and field trips impact scheduling, and can compete with direct service to our clients. For instance, it's clear that we will have to increase the budget for substitutes in the reference department.
- Transitioning to a goal-directed organization that encourages creativity and innovation can be difficult for some management styles. It's a lot easier to just tell someone what to do!
- Communication takes both time and commitment.

### If You Can Imagine It, You Can Do It

We have all seen great library programs that lack adequate funding, and we have seen well funded library

programs that are missing some critical ingredient. Funding doesn't seem to be the primary problem. I am convinced that the critical component is an ongoing commitment to development and innovation.

I am concerned that the library landscape is changing much too rapidly for any library to simply embrace yesterday's approach to our profession... or even today's approach. I believe that the institutions that will do best in the coming years are those that seek change, rather than those that react to change.

At Deschutes Public Library we are convinced that the best method to anticipate and adapt to this changing world of technology is through staff development. We are convinced that, now more than ever, a library is only as good as its staff.

Providing the necessary level of staff support is much more than a fringe benefit, it is the heart of library development in these turbulent times. **Q**



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