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Paraprofessionals: Surpassing the Grade

Stephen G. Margeton
The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law

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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 low 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. Paraprofessionals learned the new technology in law libraries, the '80s and '90s saw a tremendous growth in technology in law libraries. The lack of an opportunity for formal training further exacerbates the situation. Additionally, although paraprofessionals do not receive the same remuneration or praise as professional librarians, they face similar problems: heavy workloads, burnout, isolation, and, in some instances, a lack of professional pride and recognition. The lack of an opportunity for formal training further exacerbates the situation. These factors together make it 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. Paraprofessionals are enthusiastic, innovative, proficient at their tasks, and always ready to please. Although their work is often not glamorous, they rarely complain.

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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 para-professionals is to offer further professional training. Paraprofessionals, just like other library employees, need these opportunities for training and development.

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.

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 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/).