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A Library Technician Classification Study: Addressing Obsolescence, Compression, and Retention

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The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 503 recently ratified a contract agreement with the Oregon University System (OUS) that includes revised library technician classification descriptions and improved salary ranges.[1] Many academic institutions use job classifications to describe the requirements, responsibilities, and pay scale of jobs. These systems aim to provide consistency and equity across large, decentralized organizations. However, the employer loses the ability to quickly react to a changing job market and to easily respond to salary equity concerns. Addressing these issues in a multi-campus statewide university system is a significant challenge. Union representation adds another layer of complexity; while management may revise the classifications, salary ranges are always bargained. This paper examines the nature of collective bargaining in this context.

Review of Literature

Literature on any aspect of unionized library support staff in an academic library is sparse. There is research available concerning unionized academic librarians, unionized public librarians, and a strong history of research on public library service to unions. However, there is limited writing on to the effect of collective bargaining on the compensation of non-professional academic library workers or concerning the creation or revision of classification specifications.

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has published several volumes concerning various aspects of unionization among its member institutions. However, most are primarily interesting for historical perspective as they are somewhat dated. The first of these, ARL's Review of Collective Bargaining Activities in Academic and Research Libraries, ARL Management Supplement Volume One, Number Three, described the process of contract negotiations, defines the roles of the institution administration and the union, and identifies trends among unionized libraries. The Supplement focuses on academic as well as public libraries. Of particular relevance is that the authors noted that "Job classification usually remains a management function. Typically, library management sets forth job duties and the union has the right to review the descriptions and make suggestions. These suggestions are just that; the union has no veto power."[2] Also, in addressing compensation issues, the Supplement states "The most obvious economic consequence of unionization has been the substantial rise in salaries and benefits. . . An additional factor requiring consideration is what the effect of unionization will be on total percent of budget allocated for salaries. There are indications that the change has not been drastic if unionized institutions."[3]

Well's Personnel Classification Systems in ARL Libraries. SPEC Kit 85 provides the actual classification schemes from eleven participating institutions, and is an interesting historical document of the responsibilities, skills, and abilities required of library support staff in the early 1980s.[4] Lynden's Unionization in ARL Libraries, SPECK Kit 118 is limited in scope, as it summarized the results of a survey of ARL libraries and primarily focuses on professional librarians. Analysis of trends pertaining to support staff is minimal: between 1980 and 1985, 1,200 support staff in ARL libraries had joined unions.[5]

Stambaugh's Library Support Staff Position Classification Studies SPEC Kit 252, despite also being limited scope (another summary of a survey limited to ARL institutions), is the most complete and recent analysis of the topic. Indeed, at the time of publication, one of the authors noted that "In preparation for a review of its technician series during the spring of 1999, the University of Oregon Library discovered no current articles or reports by academic or research libraries to serve as a guide." SPEC Kit 252 found that 61 percent of the survey respondents raised pay levels due to the survey and subsequent realization that support work has become more complex. The authors decide that the greatest trend is "that libraries recognize the need for an expansion in classification levels in order to cover the complexity and/or variety of duties performed by support staff at the same time that they (the libraries) are willing to pay for the upgrades and reclassifications themselves." They conclude with the advice that "Based on the experiences of survey respondents who have recently conducted classification studies, however, a library should be the instigator in revamping its

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system. . . This ensures the likelihood of establishing classification specifications that accurately reflect the work being performed and fit within appropriate salary schedules, thus attempting to satisfy both employees and the institution." This observation is reinforced by the survey's finding that only 10 percent of the classification studies were instigated by a union. It is also interesting to note that, despite the twenty-six years between the Supplement and SPEC Kit 252, the concept that it is management's right to determine classification specifications has not changed.[6]

In "The Unionization of Library Support Staffs" Flanagan provides a historical perspective on the growth of union representation among library support staffs, including conjecture on motivations for that growth.[7] James Kusack's "Unions for Academic Library Support Staff" found that the net effect of collective bargaining by library support staff on compensation was often conflicting and inconclusive. Kusack summarized by concluding that there is "probably some advantage. . . to collective bargaining. . . but the gains are not nearly as large as those enjoyed by workers in other occupations."[8]

The American Library Association-Allied Professionals Association (ALA-APA) and the Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, performed a survey of 3,418 public and academic libraries (generating a 24.5 percent response rate) and asked two union-related questions. The results, published as a PowerPoint titled "The Union Difference for Library Workers," found that there is a strong "union effect" on salaries of unionized library support staff. For example, among library technicians in all regions and union affiliations, the reported mean salaries are 24.5 percent higher than non-unionized counterparts. Among library clerks in all regions and union affiliations, the reported mean salaries are 32.6 percent higher than non-unionized counterparts.[9]

Weber's "Support Staff Unions in Academic and Public Libraries: Some Suggestions for Managers with Reference to the Ohio Experience, 1984–1990," is an invaluable resource for library management and support staff for understanding the logic behind the actions and motivations of administration and labor. Weber's article is based on his experience as director of staff services at Kent State University Libraries after the state had passed a public sector collective bargaining law. Weber details the various motivations for library support staff to organize, citing technological changes, over-education within the support staff ranks, and the compensation disparity within a workforce primarily comprised of female workers. However, the real value comes in his suggestions for how library management should negotiate and administer a contract. Weber provides strategic insight not found in other library literature, such as covering strategies for bargaining the contract, choosing the bargaining team, choosing proposal topics for negotiating, and ideas on how to successfully administer the contract once ratified.[10]

Classification Study in the Oregon University System

In 2007, SEIU included salary range raises for library technicians in their list of selectives, **[QY: "selectives" okay?]** but it ultimately did not reach the bargaining table. Subsequently, the OUS library directors began to lobby OUS administration to address library technicians during the next bargaining. In preparation for the 2009 bargaining session, the OUS administration and libraries began a classification study to revise the library technician 1, 2, and 3 classifications, citing various implications of using outdated descriptions and salary ranges. The libraries shared a few primary concerns: the classifications were increasingly obsolete due to technical advances in library work; difficulty in finding and retaining skilled library technicians due to low wages; and long-term employees had reached maximum salary levels.

Each library also had unique motivations for participating in the study, based on their respective budget and employment environments. For example, Portland State's roster included nearly thirty LT 3s, three LT 2s, and no LT 1s. Rather than retention, the problem is a sort of slowly-advancing salary compression; many of the LTs had hit the ceiling of their salary range, while shorter-term employees' salaries continued to rise. Another library cited a situation wherein campus budget cuts would result in layoffs, enacting union displacement ("bumping rights") wherein office specialists 1 and 2s (higher classifications than the respective LTs) could be eligible for displacing employees of a lower classification. As the duties and responsibilities of office specialists and library technician are, as described by the OUS Classification Specifications, somewhat similar, LT 2s and 1s were being displaced by OS 2s and 1s. Unfortunately, the library would find that the office specialists did not have the skills and experiences necessary for library work.

The Classification Study Process

The OUS/SEIU contract (2007–09) provides guidance on revising classifications and adjusting salary ranges, identifying as employer rights: "all rights related to the management in the direction of its operations. . . including the direction of the work force. Rights of the Employer shall include, but not limited to, the right to . . . Manage and direct employees. . . determine methods, means, and personnel by which operations are to be conducted."[11] The contract also states that, "No changes shall be made in the Compensation Plan which affect bargaining unit employees unless the parties to this Agreement have negotiated the changes and reached agreement on what changes will be made."[12] In summary, OUS administration has the right to revise the classifications, but not to change the compensation plan for the classification; salary is always negotiated at the bargaining table. Though improving salary, and thereby retention, was the primary

goal of several of the participating libraries, simply raising salaries was not an option under contractual agreement. Therefore, the classification study became the tool for addressing classification obsolescence, salary compression, and retention.

A Classification Study Team formed comprised by a library subject matter expert and the classification specialist from each campus, charged with creating revisions of the specification. The team provided each library technician a position analysis questionnaire (PAQ), which gathered information regarding their position, including the purpose of the job, primary duties, decision making authority, required levels of analysis and problem solving, and required qualifications. Supervisors added their assessment of the employee's statements, providing perspective and adding detail and corrections where appropriate. Other source material included the current classifications and employee position descriptions. The team broke into smaller groups that focused on drafting specific sections of the specifications, and then met together to review final drafts. At that point, each library representative reviewed the drafts with their respective library supervisors. **[QY: Use of "library technician" and "LT" inconsistent. Should acronym be used?]**

Once a draft of the three classifications had been finalized, OUS submitted them to SEIU for the membership to comment on. OUS administration, retaining the right to revise the specifications, was under no obligation to accept any of the changes, but did incorporate several suggestions. Changes to compensation, however, are bargain-able, and each bargaining team brought to the table salary range proposals based on independent market research. As is common in bargaining, both teams compromised from their initial starting points before reaching an agreement.

The Value of Words

The ARL's SPEC Kit 252: Library Support Staff Position Classification Studies (1999) noted that "Technology has brought about a dramatic change not so much in what libraries do, but how they do it. Duties and responsibilities remain essentially the same, but the skills and abilities necessary to accomplish the required tasks have altered."[13] Ten years later, and library workers are actually doing different things, in different ways. Ten years ago, electronic publishing was still relatively nascent and the changes that electronic publishing would create, such as distance learning, federated searching, and virtual reference were barely on the radar; now they are considered commonplace.

In this context, the team aimed for longevity, writing the classifications at a high level and avoiding the mention of specific technologies or systems. Also, the team wanted to reflect that some library technician jobs now require skills similar to those required in the various information technology-type classifications (a higher salary range).

For example, from OUS's Specification for Information Technology Consultant:

> "The INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CONSULTANT has a varying level of responsibility for direct consultative support and training to students, staff, and faculty on information technology-based systems primarily in the areas of applications software, multimedia, database resources, and network support. . ."[14]

Certainly, the team did not intend for the library technician specification to be an analog to an information technology consultant; there are more differences than similarities. But where there are similarities, an LT should be compensated appropriately. Choosing similar phrases to describe the work performed by the technicians would have an effect on compensation. During bargaining, OUS and SEIU performed salary surveys based on the market value of the skills and abilities described in the classifications, as well as comparing library technician salary ranges versus those in various comparator groups.

Managing employee expectations during a classification study is extremely important, as there may be salary implications. The Portland State Classification Team representatives provided updates to their library staff, reiterating that the purpose of the study was to update the classifications, salary implications were part of bargaining, and there may be no actual changes in the salary structure. Further, if there are salary range changes, they would be handled in a "least impact" method of implementation: employees are placed at the appropriate step of the salary range for the new classifications. Employees who are below the first step of the new salary ranges shall be placed at the first step of the new salary range. Employees who have been at the top step of the former salary range will receive an increase of one step in the new salary range. For most library technicians, the "least cost" method means there would be no immediate salary impact.

Outcomes of the 2009–11 Bargaining Session

The nationwide economic recession influenced the bargaining session, as the parties agreed to delay the implementation of the specifications and salary ranges until October 1, 2010. At that time it was agreed:

> Library Tech 1 will move from range 11 to 13; base salary from $1,854 to $1,988 Library Tech 2 will move from range 13 to 16; base salary from $1,988 to $2,223 Library Tech 3 will move from range 17 to 19; base salary from $2,293 to $2,484[15]

In the meantime, a process will be established for reviewing each library technician position versus the revised classifications and determining the appropriate classification level for each. The higher salary ranges will alleviate, to a degree, salary compression, and the revised classifications should enable hiring managers to recruit candidates with current skills and experiences. However, whether or not the study effects retention will be difficult to determine in the short term, as current unemployment rates are likely to be a greater factor.

Conclusion

To appreciate the scale of a system-wide classification study, it is helpful to consider the impact on the breadth of personnel involved. The OUS is relatively small, but, by the end of the study, a few hundred people were involved including library technicians, library management, human resources classification specialists, representatives from the chancellor's office, and representatives from SEIU. Each party played an important role, and some parties had opportunities to veto the process. It's also useful to consider the timeline of the project; OSU administration had submitted the LT study in two previous bargaining sessions before it was accepted during the third; the bargaining sessions are biennial, which means that the concept was in discussion for four years before acceptance, and then the process required another three years for implementation. With these factors in mind, it is important for general agreement to be reached amongst university/library administration that a classification study is needed, and then for all parties to have patience and be persistent.

Another factor that stems from such a diverse group of stakeholders is that it is less likely that truly progressive changes will occur. Initially, the OUS Classification Study Team considered different classification formats, but found resistance from within the team as well as within the various constituencies. Focusing on a simple revision of the specifications was clearly the best chance for progress in that environment.

In the author's experience, there seemed to be a lack of clear understanding of the traditional roles of management and unions in regards to revising classifications or in rising salary ranges. Certainly, reading the OUS/SEIU contract provides much information and insight, but there seemed to be a conflict between our era's current pressure on management to be transparent and collaborative and how the process was implemented. Usually, library management strives to work collaboratively and consultatively, but the library technicians were given few opportunities, and at prescribed moments, to provide input. An interesting opportunity for further research could be revising a document such as the 1973 Review of Collection Bargaining Activities in Academic and Research Libraries, which discusses the roles and rights of management and unions. As SPEC Kit 252 notes, there is a dearth of literature on the topic. An ongoing revision of the SPEC Kit or the continual inclusion of union-related data in the ALA-APA survey would be useful.

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