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From Feminized to Feminist: Using Social Justice Solutions to Promote Librarianship

Honors Thesis

Presented to The Honors College of Salisbury University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation with University Honors

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### Abstract

Librarianship has existed in America throughout most of its history. Near the end of the nineteenth century, women began to enter the field and quickly shifted the profession to be female-dominated. Due to the prevalent sexism of America during this time, the profession was undervalued and classified as feminized. Many attempts have been made to earn librarianship the respect it deserves, but none have addressed the underlying issues of sexism. For librarianship to become recognized as a true profession, librarians must work to raise awareness about these issues and use their work within libraries to combat them. By doing so, the profession would become a feminist one. As a feminist profession librarianship would work to change the society it exists in from the inside. To become a feminist profession would not require librarians to change the work they are already doing or to take on new tasks, they simply need to be more vocal about the social justice aspects of their daily work. This paper will explore the history of librarianship, how it became feminized, and explore various social justice solutions that librarians can use.

## Introduction

Librarianship, like most professions, was originally limited to white men. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century new opportunities were opening up for women in America; one of these opportunities was the growing field of librarianship. The field was undergoing a dramatic change simultaneously with America's idea of gender roles and expectations. Women entered the field in large numbers just as the demand for these jobs was growing, allowing them to dominate the modern workforce. Soon, librarians were expected to be women. Sexist stereotypes and beliefs about women also became synonymous with the field. As it occurred in other female-dominated professions, these women were underpaid, underappreciated, and worked within a sexist society that usually limited their opportunities and left them vulnerable to harassment. Obviously, librarians wish to correct these issues but they are not limited to just librarianship. They are so closely tied with women's rights that "one cannot begin to remove the discrimination without making a dramatic change in the concept of the role of women in society. Nor can one change librarianship till the role of women changes" (Sukiennik, 1983, p. 111). Librarianship is not an isolated profession; indeed, its very goal is to work with and serve the public. It would be difficult to change the perception of the singular field if the society it operates in and serves still undervalues women and their contributions to the workforce. Librarianship is a field dedicated to making knowledge and information easily accessible to the patrons it serves. Promoting awareness and action for social justice issues, such as eradicating sexism, meets this goal and would earn women, and librarianship, more respect and recognition.



Librarianship has often been labeled as a feminized profession. Rather than accepting the label of feminized, librarianship needs to work to be recognized as a feminist profession. Though these terms sound similar, they carry vastly different connotations. A feminized profession is usually female-dominated and thus, it associated with the “‘negative’ connotations of characteristics labeled female such as passivity, emotionalism, and intuitiveness” (Weibel, 1976, p. 264). This leads to lower salaries for positions within the profession and a lower status of both the profession itself and those within it. A feminist profession differs in that it is not necessarily dominated by women, although that is more likely. A feminist profession is defined as “operating on a feminist value system wherein traditional roles based on sex and power are no longer extant” (Weibel, 1976, p. 264). To ensure this, “men and women of the profession” must “hold feminist values”, the most important of which is equality for all people (Weibel, 1976, p. 267). This concept of a feminist profession evolved out of second-wave feminism, when women were fighting to enter the workforce and higher education with the same rights as their male counterparts. Those within a feminist profession would be more likely to raise awareness and protest inequality in pay and status based on gender.

Librarianship is unquestionably a female-dominated profession; according to the 2018 statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women account for 79% of all librarians (U.S. Department of Labor [DOL], 2019). It is a feminized profession because the duties of the job have been categorized as societally feminine due to their emphasis of public service and organization. To be a feminist profession, librarians have to emphasize the equality of all people, despite race, religion, gender, or other barriers, in their professional goals and everyday work.

Though the main issue explored in this paper is gender, it needs to be mentioned that librarianship has also been separated by race for most of its history. Libraries were originally limited to employing and serving white men, but as women and people of color gained more rights to education libraries opened their doors to these groups. Despite this progress, even today 86% of all librarians are white (DOL, 2019). Librarianship is a constantly evolving field that is dedicated to helping all those seeking knowledge and though this, can promote social justice issues. Through a historical analysis of the field, those within it, and the public's perceptions of it, this paper serves to explore how librarianship has become feminized and suggest social justice solutions that will allow it to become feminist.

### **History of Libraries in America**

The first library to exist in America was for Harvard University students. It was formed in 1638 after John Harvard donated his personal collection of books to the school (Murray, Davis, & Basbanes, 2012, p. 143). This early library was not created from the conscious collecting of a curator but from the singular donation of a wealthy and educated man. In a modern sense, this collection was very limited in terms of the subjects it covered, but for the time it was considered quite expansive. These resources were available only to those pursuing a university education, which at the time were wealthy, straight<sup>1</sup>, white men studying law, medicine, or theology. Librarians reflected the demographics of the students as white men during this time. They were not in charge of collection development within the library, as the university relied entirely on donations.

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<sup>1</sup> Though this cannot be stated for certain, due to the lack of acceptance for homosexuality during this time, it can be assumed that these men were straight.

There was no universal rule to the organization of books within a library yet so the librarians had to create their own systems and help students navigate them<sup>2</sup>. The main duties of a librarian during this time were to track the books held by the library, assist students in their research, and help them find specific books.

The first public library to operate within a community similar to those today was the Boston Public Library. It opened in 1848, paid for by taxpayers and available to those same citizens for no additional cost (Murray et al., 2012, p. 148). Public libraries soon appeared in every American town and they each required at least one librarian, usually more, to staff them. Public librarians held most of the same duties as those in college libraries, but they were also important community members and would organize and host events. Libraries were now open to almost everybody in the town, regardless of wealth, education, or gender. However, the ability to read was still withheld from many people, particularly African-Americans, rendering libraries useless to them. African-Americans who did wish to use the library were often kept from doing so due to segregation. Even though their tax money contributed to the main public library, they were forced to use underfunded and undersupplied “Jim Crow Libraries” (1928). Libraries had greatly increased in availability but there were still limits to their use within the community. They operated within a racist society and were unable to escape that.

During the mid-nineteenth century while the number of libraries was growing, universities were evolving their teaching methods. The traditional “textbook, recitation, and daily drill” was exchanged for modern methods such as, “the lecture, the seminar,

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<sup>2</sup> The two main methods of organizing libraries today are the Library of Congress Classification and the Dewey Decimal Classification. The LCC was developed in the late nineteenth century (Library of Congress [LOC], 2014) and the DCC was created during the same time period in 1873 (OCLC).

[and] the research in original sources" (Brand, 1983, p. 33). This made the university library a necessary tool in scholarly education. Lectures and seminars were typically based on assigned readings that could be accessed in the library. Conducting new research required prior knowledge and background information that was held in dusty volumes on mazes of shelves. The role of the librarian in a university was becoming necessary to ensure the success of the students.

Libraries were becoming an expected staple in the 1800s, both in towns and universities. This required an organization oversee and facilitate the operations of these libraries. Thus, the American Library Association (ALA) was created in 1876. This original "Convention of Librarians" consisted of "103 librarians, 90 men and 13 women" who aimed "to enable librarians to do their present work more easily and at less expense." (ALA, 2008). Over the last century and a half, the ALA has evolved to provide a community for librarians and a platform to address issues that face the field. Women were still a minority within the profession of librarianship but their very inclusion to this conference showed that librarianship was willing to accept them. Soon there was a library in almost every town and with these libraries came library positions. This increase in the demand for librarians occurred during a shift in the larger professional sphere as educational standards were changing and a new demographic was ready to enter the workforce.

There were two main ways to join a profession prior to the twentieth century: university education or apprenticeship. Apprenticeship trained young men under an established professional in their desired field until the boy was ready to either replace his mentor or establish his own business. Librarianship was no different than these other



professions and most “training... consisted of library-based apprenticeship programs and on-the-job training” (Stauffer, 2016, p. 313). However, the nineteenth century was a time of transition and apprenticeship was becoming outdated. By the twentieth century, a university education and degree were becoming more important within the professional sphere.

### Education for Librarians

The first courses dedicated to training new librarians were created by Melvil Dewey, creator of the Dewey Decimal Classification. In 1884 he formed the Columbia Library School of Economy which was originally linked to Columbia College (now Columbia University) (Murray et al., 2012, p. 188). Dewey’s first class consisted of 22 students, 19 women and 3 men, much to the dismay of all-male Columbia College (Munthe, 1939, p. 114). Dewey’s inclusion of women forced his school to separate from Columbia and it became the New York State Library School in Albany, New York (Murray et al., 2012, p. 188). Dewey not only included women, specifically sought them out for his school, as he felt that they would be best suited for the profession. This was not necessarily an advancement for women’s rights as Dewey himself was quite sexist. Part of the application form for the women applying to his school was “a request for height, weight, color of eyes, color of hair, and a photograph” (Garrison, 1972, p. 150). Dewey also had questionable relations with some of the women in his class and “had been guilty of some vaguely defined, but unorthodox, familiarities” that would likely be considered sexual harassment today (Garrison, 1972, p. 150). While Dewey gave women an exciting opportunity to pursue education and begin an independent career, the professional sphere was still fraught with sexism.

Though problematic, Dewey ultimately shaped the education of librarians for decades to come. In fact, the methods of his school “[won] out so rapidly over the older tradition of haphazard-training-through-employment that... it triumphed in a single generation” (White, 1961, p. 90). Only a decade after the creation of Dewey’s school, similar programs were being implemented across the country. Cities with robust public library systems, like Chicago and Baltimore, were creating classes to train their future employees.

While women were welcomed into the field, there were still limitations on who would be accepted for employment. An article from *The Baltimore Afro-American* in 1925 noted that though the population of one of the city’s library branches had shifted from “80 per cent white to 90 per cent colored during the last ten years... there have been no colored admissions” to the training class. Women of color were still being denied access to work, even if it was to serve their own community.

One of Dewey’s former students, Katherine Sharp, modelled Dewey’s library school in Chicago. Though it was originally designed to help people simply use the library, by 1898 it was training future librarians (Stauffer, 2015, p. 103). These courses soon evolved into the first official degree program for library science that operated under a recognized university, the University of Chicago.

The first recorded year of graduates from the University of Chicago’s library science program is listed as 1929, with two women earning Master’s degrees (Richardson, 1982, p. 112). The first decade or so of the program saw the number of graduates in the single digits each year but by the 1940s those numbers were solidly in the double digits with women outnumbering men by a huge proportion (Richardson,

1982, p. 112). Women dominated the field of librarianship from the beginning of its standardization, even as they were kept out of other programs or careers. Though an already established profession, librarianship was undergoing an intense evolution that would dramatically change the field. Similar graduate programs in the field were soon developed at other schools. The first list of ALA-accredited schools was published in 1926, just a year after the organization adopted standards for each program to follow (Churchwell, 1975, p. 31). This accreditation was, and still is, vital to both the schools and their students as the ALA is America's ultimate authority on librarianship. An accredited school can be trusted to uphold the professional standards of librarianship and prepare future librarians for their job.

### **The Effect of Women on the Field**

Though the field began, as most professions did, by only allowing men, once women were accepted, they quickly dominated the field. Previous to Dewey's inclusion of women, "in 1870 approximately 80 percent of all library employees were male, but by 1900, approximately 80 percent of all library employees were female" (Gaines, 2014, p. 88). As previously stated in the statistics from 2018, this percentage has not varied greatly in the past century. Women flocked to this profession for several reasons. They had limited career choices available to them, mainly nursing and teaching, and librarianship offered a new career path. Librarians worked with the general public rather than only the sick and wounded or young children. Librarianship still embodied the feminine ideal and "traditional role as caretakers... arbiters of culture, and guardians of social morality" but it did so in less distinct ways than nursing or teaching (Stauffer, 2014, p. 257). However, while women dominated by sheer numbers, they did not

dominate in positions of authority. It can be assumed that the 20 percent of male library employees during 1900 were mainly upper-level and administrative employees since women were still restricted from positions of power. It is difficult to imagine a woman having a position of authority or control over a public place during this time period.

While there may be some examples, they are unknown to the author. Women were overwhelmingly limited to positions with less responsibility, and therefore less prestige.

As librarianship was growing and women were entering the public sphere, the larger culture of America was experiencing a similarly tumultuous shift in the expectations of gender roles. The previous masculine ideal, "the Patriarch" who had been born into wealth, was now being replaced by "the Self-Made Man" who had built his own business and worked independently (Keer & Carlos, 2014, p. 71). Men were beginning to shying away from the old professions that required years of education and working under a boss for a just livable wage, leaving these positions open for women to assume. Men desired the lucrative fame and wealth that came with the burgeoning industries of gold, oil, steel, and other similar commodities. Women saw the chance to fulfill these openings in traditionally masculine professional fields and seized it.

Women were also willing to work for less money and fewer hours than men. The ability to earn money was still completely new to most women, and so they had lower expectations than men who had been raised to expect an income that could support a family. Libraries found women to be a source of cheap labor as they would "usually accept a lower salary and remain satisfied with the salary longer than a man would." (Fairchild, 1904, p. 53). Women who worked during this time were usually unmarried with no dependents. This placed less pressure on them to earn a reasonable salary than



men who were the sole breadwinners. The women who were able to pursue a library education were also usually already middle-class and wealthy enough that they could afford an education. Once working, they either lived alone or supplemented their income with their husband's. This made women more desirable for librarian positions since libraries could save money by hiring them over their male counterparts. This influx of middle-class white women to the field was noted during this time but there was no call for diversity. These women were simply the people most suitable to serve the public during this time, due to their availability and cheap labor. The homogeneity of librarians was not seen as an issue or problematic.

By working for lower wages women were accused of "driv[ing] men out of the library profession," (Fairchild, 1904, 53). Placing the blame on women for the sexism enacted on them was an unfortunately common sentiment during the early twentieth century and one could argue, still is today. Women who wanted the independence of a paycheck and career were limited in their options. It was also very common for a woman to be paid less than a man. Women usually had less experience and education than their male coworkers, but there was also the sexist assumption that women were less capable and less willing to work. Even female librarians who often had higher education fell victim to these stereotypes. Women had been kept out of the professional sphere for so long that they could not be faulted for these factors. The men in charge of hiring for these positions were at fault for accepting these sexist stereotypes that allowed them to underpay their employees.

It is no coincidence that this shift in the gender demographics of the workforce occurred simultaneously with first-wave feminism. Women's suffrage had finally

succeeded in securing women the right and responsibility to vote in 1920 after a decade's long battle. Women were recognized as people capable of being more than just wives and mothers. The library science programs of these universities had high requirements but women still met them and were accepted into these programs (White, 1961, p. 99). These women were capable citizens, but they had previously been limited in their opportunities to advance and work outside of their homes and families. Librarianship welcomed women and their talents with open arms; it is no surprise that they flocked to it.

With women entering the field in droves, librarianship struggled to establish itself as a profession equal to others that had remained male-dominated. Librarianship followed the lead "of medicine, law, and theology" as their education "evolved" and yet, librarians struggled to earn the same recognition that lawyers and doctors received from the public (Churchwell, 1975, p. 2). While these other professions allowed women within their ranks, they had no Dewey-figure who specifically sought out and encouraged women. Librarianship had become a field made up almost entirely of women. In this way, it had surpassed greater society, which still struggled to see female and professional as compatible identities.

### **Obstacles to Professionalization**

Librarianship did try to professionalize but it faced difficulties. Those who had graduated with a degree in library science, both men and women, were intelligent and hard-working professionals dedicated to the accessibility of information. However, those outside the field felt that library science education was lacking. One early critique of the education was that it "include[d] too much details and attention to method... true professional education... should present a systematic body of theory and scientifically-

based abstract knowledge” (Garrison, 1972, p. 142). The first courses designed for library science were strictly bibliographic in nature and completely technical. Though this was a specialized skill, it could be learned through training rather than a university education. Bibliography is “the act of referring library users to sources” and before cataloging systems such as LOC and DCC were implemented, librarians were required to know the specific organization and contents of their library’s collection that students likely did not know or could not use (Miksa, 1988, p. 259). During these early stages of the field, librarians were more likely to choose the specific items for a patron rather than directing them to possibilities. In his courses, Dewey sought to “prepare librarians for this mediator’s role” by intimately knowing a number of sources that could be used to answer a patron’s request (Miksa, 1988, p. 260). The knowledge of these sources was specialized but it could also be easily learned. Today the field of bibliography has been changed by authorized systems of classifying sources and the ease by which a library’s collection can be searched through with online records.

The ALA’s standards for a degree in library science have evolved over the past century in an attempt to professionalize the field. During this period there has been “a transition from a standards-based skill focus to an adaptable flexible conceptual approach” (Couture & Ladenson, 2017, p. 178). Today’s Core Competencies have only one section on “Technical Knowledge and Skills”, while the other areas focus on a foundational background of the field’s history, and the various concepts, methods, principles, and techniques of research, management, information resources, and lifelong learning (ALA, 2008). These are the standards that university programs of library science

are expected to meet to receive accreditation. The focus on concrete skills has lessened and in its place is an emphasis of the basic theories of librarianship.

One of the biggest issues that hinders the professionalization of librarianship is the failure of public recognition in the hierarchy of roles within a library. Not everybody who works in a library is titled a librarian, most are library clerks or technicians. These positions generally do not require a graduate degree in library science or any secondary education. However, they are the ones to staff the circulation counter and therefore, have the most face-to-face interactions with patrons. Their main duties include checking books out, returning and re-shelving them and assisting with events held by the library. These tasks are very different from those of librarians who are in charge of curating the collection, planning the library's events, creating the budget, and teaching. However, most patrons are unaware of this hierarchy causing a "lack of differentiation between the "professional" librarian and the library clerk" (Garrison, 1972, p. 146). Library clerks are the lowest-level employees but they are also essential to the library and the ones patrons are most familiar with. They are the ones most often conjured when someone is asked to imagine a librarian. The professional librarians often work in specialized areas, such as a reference desk or office, which is separate from the public. Patrons generally do not see the being done by a librarian, just the outcomes.

In the past, those in power, such as the ALA and the heads of graduate programs, attempted to recruit more men to the field in an effort to strengthen its professional identity. However, men were hesitant to enter a field so heavily populated by women. It would be a threat to their masculinity to do the work of women, as library work had become. To recruit more men, advertisements for open library positions described the



work as “both mentally and physically rigorous and demanding” (Stauffer, 2016, p. 319). Librarianship already had a reputation for being feminine and therefore weak. This reputation had to be directly refuted to recruit men. It was also believed that “proportional representation by gender would be unsatisfactory” to these men and that “such a situation would drive men from librarianship” (O’Brien, 1983, p. 53). Men would not feel comfortable in a work environment that was equally men and women, they needed to be in a majority male workplace to feel comfortable. This was extremely unlikely to happen as the field was already so female dominated. Women in the field would be unwilling to leave or change their career path for the sake of men. Women were once again blamed for the lack of men in the profession despite the choice ultimately belonging to men. Women were seen as an obstacle to overcome if the field ever wanted to be recognized as a true profession.

One of the attempts to attract men included dividing the duties within libraries by the gender of its employees. When men did become librarians, the women they worked with found themselves to “be the supporting players, providing the foundation upon which the men would build their reputation, their distinction, and their profession.” (Stauffer, 2016, p. 315). Men were pushed to administrative positions within the library while the “clerical and routine work... was clearly ‘women’s work’”, forcing female librarians into the role of secretary or assistant to their male boss (Brand, 1983, p. 46). Women had been in the field since its standardization, but men were the ones to gain the prestige and credit for the field’s accomplishments. Men’s careers were always prioritized during the twentieth century, even in a feminized profession.

Some placed the entire blame of the librarian's low status on women. In an article originally published in 1936, male librarian Stewart W. Smith argued, "before librarianship can assume a rank in any way comparable to that of the other learned professions, there must be, first of all, a recruiting of more men to the ranks" (p. 96). He prefaced this point with his hesitation "to express my convictions for fear of being accused of masculine jealousy or of being anti-feminist generally" (Smith, 1936, p. 96). Yet his argument is blatantly anti-feminist. He believed that women were bad for librarianship because they would often quit after they got married or had children (Smith, 1936). A high turnover rate does hurt a field, but that blame should not have been placed on the individual women. Instead, the expectations of the society they lived in was at fault. Not all women wanted to sacrifice their career for their husband or children. Many were forced to do so at the pressure of their boss, husband, or simply because it was expected of them. Rather than arguing for more men to enter the field, Smith should have argued for women to have more choices. He could have argued for maternity leave, the normalization of a women working outside of the home, or accessible childcare that would have allowed both parents to work. These were radical ideas in the early twentieth century but they were not unheard of. Of course, the easiest option was to simply ask for more men and ignore the larger issue of sexism.

A direct reply to this article came only three years later when Katharine M. Stokes pointed out these flaws in Smith's argument. She stated that most female librarians did not actually choose to quit their job upon marriage but that their directors assumed they would want to and made the choice for them. They believed that "her interest will no longer be centered in her work and that her personal life will claim too much of her time

and energy”, leaving her unfit to work (Stokes, 1939, p. 112). Stokes made the better argument about librarianship’s issue with gender because she took the gender roles and expectations of this time into context. The issue was not that women were holding librarianship back, but that society’s expectations of women were holding librarianship back. Women were told that they must sacrifice their jobs and life outside of the home to care for their family, often without a discussion. This forced librarianship to come second, it was a job, not a career.

The idea to encourage men to enter the field of librarianship was not problematic but the methods used most certainly were. Librarianship was heavily dominated by white women during the 1900s and frankly still is today.<sup>3</sup> In the past, excuses could be made for this fact due to the rampant sexism and racism that was so normalized in America and from which it has supposedly progressed. Librarianship would benefit from having a diverse workforce, not just in gender, but also in race and sexuality. Diversity within a field and workplace leads to different perspectives, ideas, and experiences which prevents homogeneity. The mindset behind pushing men into librarianship revealed the sexist bias of those who suggested it. It was to better the field but only because women were faulted for worsening it. The men who did enter the field often had an unfair advantage revealing further sexist biases. Christine L. Williams conducted a study on the phenomenon called the “glass escalator”, in which men who enter feminized professions receive higher pay and promotions more easily. She noted that, “it appears that women are generally eager to see men enter ‘their’ occupations” but they then “resent the apparent ease with which men advance” (Williams, 1992, p. 260). It can be difficult for women to fully accept the

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned previously, as of 2018 86% of librarians are white (DOL, 2019).

inclusion of men to their field because when it comes, these men often receive unfair or unearned recognition. If the men who entered the field were treated as equal to their female co-workers, meaning they receive no judgement for their gender (positive or negative) and they do equal work for promotions, it would not be an issue for men to be librarians. Unfortunately, society does not allow for this.

When men do choose to enter the field, it is often assumed that they must be interested in the administrative positions. This is not an isolated issue in librarianship but one that occurs in most feminized professions. Some men may be truly interested in these positions but what often occurs is that they are “kicked upstairs” to the “more prestigious, better paying ones” (Williams, 1992, p. 256). A specific example in Williams’ study was a male children’s librarian whom she interviewed. He truly enjoyed his job and was content to stay there but he kept receiving pressure to move up in his field and pursue a more masculinized position (Williams, 1992, p. 256). His supervisors likely ignored or overlooked women in his library who wanted an administrative position. Masculinity is dictated by power; a children’s librarian carries little power and is also associated with the feminine task of childrearing. Women do not face this same pressure to excel and grow despite their ability to do so. It is seen as normal for a woman to aim for being a female children’s librarian as not just a temporary position, but a career. She is rarely asked if she ever desires more or encouraged to advance.

Another issue with the masculinization of librarianship is the attempt to erase the feminization of the field. The women in the field are stripped of their femininity because it can damage their public image. For example, “the term *librarian* is being replaced with *information specialist* as *librarian* is too closely linked with women in a negative light”



(Gaines, 2014, p. 92). Librarianship is not inherently feminine; it is only after so many years of having mostly women librarians that the job title and duties has become associated with women. Information specialist is an accurate description of the job and emphasizes the expertise of the librarian but it ignores the larger issue, which is that any connection with femininity is viewed as negative. Rather than working to correct that belief, those who implement this term choose to ignore it and appease sexist attitudes. Information specialists will still be mostly women, so in a few years that term might be seen as feminine by the public. It can be difficult to correct established mindsets and beliefs but that is the only way to enact long-term change. Without addressing the root of the issue it will continue to grow and spread.

Since librarians are mostly white, middle-class women, a clear stereotype of the field has emerged. The lack of diversity in the field has made it easy to construct a singular identity that is used to encompass almost all librarians. These stereotypes include “the middle-aged, bun-wearing, comfortably shod, shushing librarian... the sexy librarian, the superhero librarian, and the hipster or tattooed librarian” (Keer & Carlos, 2014, p. 65). People who do not fit into these stereotypes may hesitate to enter the field or when they do, find other stereotypes being pushed on them. Men risk losing their masculinity and thus, heterosexuality, because they are joining a feminine profession. Men’s sexuality is so closely tied with their masculinity that men within a female-dominated profession must be feminine and therefore, homosexual. Due to the stereotypes of and discrimination against gay men, it is no surprise that men would wish to avoid being labeled as homosexual, especially when they are straight. Women of color who are already overly sexualized and exoticized may find themselves on the receiving

end of unwanted advances and comments from both patrons and administrators. These stereotypes both damage those already in the profession and those who are considering joining.

Of course, stereotypes are not usually enjoyed by the people they are supposedly categorizing. Either the librarian fits one of these stereotypes, erasing herself as a real person, or she does not and thus feels isolated within the profession. Many librarians have attempted to subvert or erase these stereotypes but it has been difficult. Most people are “addressing the symptom” of stereotypes “without fully articulating the problem” which is that librarianship is a very homogenous field that needs diversity (Keer & Carlos, 2014, p. 67). These stereotypes mirror what people are most familiar with. This is not to say that any librarian who wears her hair in a bun, shushes a disruptive patron, or is attractive is harming the field. However, the image of a young, white woman as the eagerly helpful and attentive librarian is overwhelming to the point of erasing the real people of the profession. These stereotypes will not exit the collective conscious until they decrease in the real world. As librarianship diversifies this stereotype will likely fall away.

Though low wages helped get more women into roles of librarians, it further harmed the field as a profession. Since women entered the field just as it was standardizing and solidifying, it is “impossible to determine whether the low salaries were responsible for the presence of all the women or whether the women were responsible for the low salaries” (Hildenbrand, 2000, p. 54). If men had flocked to the field rather than women, it is entirely possible that wages would still be low, but it is more unlikely. It is also unlikely that men would be content in such a profession when they were the sole breadwinners. Hildenbrand’s use of the word “responsible” continues

the trend of blaming the women so eager to enter the field rather than the men in administrative positions who took advantage and underpaid them.

This trend of underpayment is seen in many other feminized professions such as teaching and social work. Despite the importance of this work and the education required for it, it is common for teachers and social workers to earn a low wage. Like these professions, librarianship is also a service field, and so some argue that the salary should not matter. They believe that people who go into librarianship, or teaching or social work, should do so because they love the work and want to help people, not to make money. Yet librarians find themselves asking, "what does it mean for our professional identity if we're all doing this because we love it, and in spite of the pay?" (McElroy, 2017, p. 89). Low payment only furthers the belief that librarianship is not a real profession. At the end of the day, it is a job and the vast majority of librarians depend on their positions to support themselves. Many librarians do enjoy serving others but that sentiment does not pay the bills.

As women began to dominate these different fields such as nursing, teaching, and librarianship, new terms were being coined to describe them. Other jobs may be defined as white-collar or blue-collar, which differentiate the type of work being done. Pink-collar work specifically refers to the gender of those in the profession. Both blue- and white-collar work refer to more stereotypically masculine work but in different ways. Blue-collar work is traditionally masculine coded work that includes trades and hands-on work, while white-collar work is the more modern form of masculinity and usually describes corporate desk work. White-collar work generally refers to new professions created by the accessibility of university and careers that require specialized knowledge

while blue-collar work can be learned by training and generally does not require higher education. Pink-collar work simply refers to women's work, and is usually related to positions of service, either to a male authority figure, such as a secretary or assistant, or to the public, such as a florist or childcare provider. This is similar to the term feminized profession because it devalues the work being done. The issue with the "phrase 'feminized profession', without an equivalent 'masculinized profession'" is that it "requires the unsigned, normative profession to be constructed as masculine." (Stauffer, 2014, 255). Blue- and white-collar work are usually masculine, but they require further separation from each other with different terms. The terms also make sense in that office workers typically wear white dress shirts and tradesmen wear blue coveralls, but women do not always wear pink shirts to work. To specify these professions as being strictly coded by gender insinuates that women cannot enter or work in regular professions, because those are limited to men.

As this history, research, and the testimonies from personal experience show, librarianship suffered from being a feminized profession. This is not because women are poor workers or less professional than men, but because society believed those things to be true. Due to the historical, and unfortunately sometimes modern, sexism that women face, they were long regarded as less intelligent, less hard-working, and less suitable for professions than men. As women have gained more rights and fought for equal treatment, these beliefs have become less prominent, but it would be naïve to assume they do not still affect the world today. For librarianship to receive the pay, recognition, and respect that it deserves there needs to be a larger societal change that accepts women and their work in the professional sphere just as easily as men are accepted. The best way to fight



for this change is for librarianship to embrace the qualities of a feminist profession and emphasize social justice issues in their work, rather than accepting their role in a feminized profession or attempting to masculinize it.

As evidenced throughout this paper, it is not enough for a field to be dominated by women to define it as a feminist profession. If so, librarianship would already have that title. Instead, this characteristic has harmed the field due to sexist societal standards that looked down upon women. As feminism is not a belief held only by women, feminist professions are not defined by the gender of their employees. Instead, the profession is defined by the ideals of its workers, the most important of which is the fundamental belief in human equality and pursuit of justice despite differences in gender, race, ethnicity, background, religion, or any other factor. This belief can be put into action through a focus on the social justice issues of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and any other forms of discrimination. Social justice activism requires skills “of inspiring, working with, and organizing others to accomplish together a work of justice... [and] it aims at the good of the city,” or community (Novak, 2000, p. 13). Librarians already inspire, work with, and organize their patrons in their everyday work. Doing so with an intention and focus on social justice would promote themselves as a feminist profession.

### **Librarianship as a Feminist Profession**

The intersection of feminism and librarianship is not a new phenomenon but it has not been consistent. As a profession of mostly well-educated women, it makes sense that it would align itself with the various feminist movements America has experienced over the years. Librarianship and the emergence of women in the field occurred during the first wave of feminism. Second-wave feminism also impacted the field. In 1970, the ALA

created the Feminist Task Force; in 1976, the Women Library Workers Journal was first published; and in 1976, the Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship was formed (Hildenbrand, 2000, 53). The goal of each of these was to raise awareness and create solutions for women's issues, both in librarianship and more generally. The Feminist Task Force and Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship are both still operational within the ALA today but the last issue of the Women Library Workers Journal was published in 1993 (De Sando, 2017). Some libraries have also developed personal statements, goals, and committees that deal with feminist issues. These include calls for diversity, advocacy for minorities, and addressing issues that face the underprivileged populations in their community. It has become a common cause but not one openly discussed or emphasized with patrons. Librarians recognize the need for feminism and understand how their work promotes those values, but their patrons may not. A big aspect of feminism is social justice activism that raises awareness and promotes change for feminist issues.

The library is an ideal space to further social justice learning and causes. Public libraries especially have a unique opportunity to easily cater to a diverse group of people within their community. Their services are available for free and they are built, staffed, and funded by taxpayer money. A recent opinion piece from *Forbes* entitled "Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money" suggested replacing these community-funded libraries with chain-operated bookstores (Mourdoukoutas, 2018). This idea was widely condemned, to the point that *Forbes* deleted the article from their website. Luckily, the ALA archived it within their own website. Despite recent doubt on the relevancy of libraries, people are clearly still passionate about the work they do.

Libraries exist as places for reading, learning, and community engagement/involvement, all at no upfront cost to patrons. It is funded by the same population that it supports and serves. Though bookstores are wonderful spaces, their purpose is very different from that of libraries.

Most scholarship on librarianship and social justice issues focuses on public libraries and their librarians. However, academic libraries are still a valuable space to promote these issues as well. They do come with their own sets of challenges, though. Some academic libraries do serve the larger community and are open to the public, but most of them limit their patrons to only students, staff, and faculty of the university. Academia is historically a patriarchal institution that caters to privileged white people. However, as education becomes more accessible, the demographics of universities are changing. It has become more common to see students of different races, socio-economic backgrounds, and ages in the classroom and academic library. This is similar to the change that public libraries experienced throughout the twentieth century as literacy rates soared and segregation was finally made illegal. Public libraries were originally fairly limited in the community they served but they eventually expanded to include everyone within their community. It is important for the academic library to serve these new populations and increase awareness of the issues facing them, which may be different from the issues the library is used to working with. Luckily, libraries are spaces dedicated to “innovation, diversity of ideas, and open accessibility”, all of which are also ideals of social justice (Watts, 2017, p. 212). Social justice depends on citizens being critical thinkers and open to new ideas. Activists are able to consider new solutions to older problems, a task with which the library is able to assist.

A large branch of social justice activism is addressing the history that is behind these issues and working to correct them in modern society. As society progresses, such as the strides made by the Civil Rights Movement and Women's Movement, it can be easy to forget the trouble of the past and only focus on how things have improved. The unfortunate effect of this progress is that people do not believe that activism is continually needed. Libraries can combat this issue by keeping that history alive. Their "emphasis on refusing to forget or gloss over the painful parts of history is a large part of a library's potential to serve as a feminist space" (Watts, 2017, p. 210). Many libraries, and academic ones especially, have local archives and specially trained librarians to assist patrons in using them. These archives usually maintain documents and objects such as political cartoons, posters, and other historical artifacts. When students access these items, they must confront the reality of a society that allowed these items to be created, which can be difficult. Librarians should encourage students to explore these difficult topics in their own research and also offer support and explanation when necessary. For example, despite the inherent villainy of Adolf Hitler, his book *Mein Kampf* remains on many library shelves because it is such an important part of history. To censor Hitler's words would be to forget them. The librarians should emphasize the history of such controversial texts and ensure that students fully realize the weight of such words. Part of teaching these painful parts of history is a focus on that pain and its wider ramifications to ensure it never occurs again.

Another obstacle to addressing social justice in the academic sphere can be the hesitancy of its patrons to open up to the librarians. Libraries should focus on the social justice issues that most explicitly face their communities in order to best serve them.



However, it can be almost be impossible for librarians to meet the needs of their patrons if they are never made aware of what those needs are. Rachel Lockman, a librarian who moved from the public sector to academia, noted that when she “worked in public libraries, I was distinctly aware of the challenges many of my patrons faced... in a way that often goes unacknowledged in the academic sphere.” (2015, p. 193). Students may face challenges such as learning disabilities, mental illness, food/housing insecurity, or even just a general struggle with the transition to college. However, the student may not want to bring up these issues to a librarian out of embarrassment or because they do not understand the help a librarian could provide. Patrons of an academic library may view themselves as more privileged than those of a public library and therefore, think of their issues as unimportant. Most public libraries make it a point to emphasize their connection with the community, making it easy for patrons to seek them out as a place for advice and guidance. Academic libraries do not highlight their community involvement as much, which may cause students to feel more isolated or even abandoned.

One way in which librarianship is diverse is all of the different types of librarian positions that exist. As discussed previously, there are public libraries, academic libraries, and even specialized libraries, such as law or medical. Within these different types of libraries, there are also different types of librarians with specific specializations. Some of these include working at the circulation desk, in cataloging, in outreach, in archives, as a technology specialist, or in administrative positions. Most libraries, both public and academic, employ reference librarians who may also be referred to as research and instruction librarians or simply research librarians. These librarians are uniquely suited to fight for social justice issues in their everyday work and interactions with patrons.

### **The Role of a Reference Librarian**

The general duty of a reference librarian is to answer the questions of the library's patrons by using the library's tools. The ALA defines a reference librarian as someone who can "recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help patrons with specific information needs." (2016). In a public library, these information needs are often general inquiries, questions about programs held by the library or greater community, and how to use the services provided by the library. In colleges and universities, reference librarians are tasked with assisting students, and sometimes faculty, in their research. This research is more academically-focused than that usually done by patrons of the public library. Reference librarians may also work "as teachers, in formal instruction classes... and as partners in developing literacy programs" within the university to ensure that students are information literate (Hope, Kajiwarra & Liu, 2001, p. 15). Information literacy refers to the ability of students to find, evaluate, and use sources within their research. These classes and programs are sometimes built into the required curriculum of the school but often only occur at the request of a professor. The reference librarian is tasked with building the student's foundation for conducting research.

Reference librarians are unique within academic libraries because they work closely with both the faculty and students. Librarians at the circulation desk have limited interactions with students that are mostly limited to the resources the student is checking out, due dates, and any late fees they may have incurred. Cataloging librarians are in charge of the description of the library's materials so that they are easy to find. They work closely with the library's resources but not its students. Some libraries also have archives where librarians preserve and share historical objects and documents. They may

work with students doing specific historical research but not the general population of students outside those disciplines. Reference librarians usually staff a specific reference desk that is prominent and accessible to all patrons of the library. They may hold office hours or make themselves available for meetings with students to address their research concerns one-on-one. Reference librarians mainly interact with students in one of two ways: either in a classroom instruction setting called a "one-shot" lesson or when the student approaches the desk with a question and the librarian conducts a "reference interview". The term "one-shot" refers to classroom instruction led by a librarian. These classes are often organized at the request of a professor when an intense research assignment is approaching. In this context, the goal of the reference librarian is to assist students with their research of this specific assignment. "Reference interviews" occur when the student has a specific question about their own research and seek out a librarian for help. These questions are usually about finding sources on a specific topic or navigating the library and its resources. Larger schools will usually have multiple reference librarians who specialize in different subjects to better help students with discipline-specific questions. Reference librarians also collaborate with the professors of the university when they are asked to lead classroom instruction or if the professors have their own research inquiries. The goal of the reference librarian is to be as helpful and accessible as possible.

Unfortunately, the role of the reference librarian may not always be made clear to students. Academic libraries need to thoroughly advertise both the reference librarians themselves and the help they can provide to students. One study conducted by the University of North Carolina found that one of the most effective ways to let students

know about reference services was to emphasize it during one-shot library instruction (Sobel, 2009, p. 368). These students had already seen the help that librarians could provide them and were directly told about the other services offered through the library. However, this offers its own difficulties as not all students will take a class that offers any library instruction during the semester. The students who do not have classroom time devoted to library instruction can still benefit from the resources these librarians provide but they may not be aware of them. Sometimes reference librarians will host events, such as readings and research workshops, within the library that students attend but these can be rare and attract students who already know about and how to use these resources. It can be difficult for librarians to reach those students who need them the most.

Reference librarians typically alternate between working in their private offices and spending time on the research desk. Sometimes this research desk is adjacent to the circulation desk. This can lead students to misunderstand reference librarians to be part of the circulation staff. Clear distinction between these areas is very important for students to understand the differences in these positions and use all of the tools with which the library is providing them. This is similar to the confusion that exists between library clerks and librarians in public libraries.

Although their job title is librarian, reference librarians often find themselves in a teaching role as well. Professors will request classes with librarians, either as a general introduction to academic research, or as a guide for a specific research assignment. The role of a reference librarian is closely tied to the feminine profession of teaching but at the academic level, which is very patriarchal. Teachers are overwhelmingly female until the postsecondary level when women account for only 49% of teachers, according to the



Department of Labor (2019). It is also important to distinguish between faculty and staff in an academic setting. Faculty are regarded more highly than staff and often receive higher pay, more benefits, and the option to pursue tenure. All universities distinguish professors as faculty but only some do so for librarians. It varies from school to school which makes it difficult for the profession as a whole to receive a status equal to that of professors, even when the university considers them to be so. This can lead to disconnect between the two groups as “faculty do not respect the roles of librarians and librarians view faculty as arrogantly ignorant of the functioning of the library, its personnel, and its tools.” (Badke, 2005, p. 65). There may be miscommunications between the two groups which can make it difficult to navigate a library instruction class. While it is technically the professor’s class, it was usually planned and is led by the librarian. There is a very specific hierarchy in academia that reference librarians may find themselves lost in, if not at the bottom.

Expecting reference libraries to teach at the university level has been a requirement for the job since the twentieth century. In the 1938 article “The Reference Librarian”, Dorothy Male Fenton argues that the librarian “may develop into a more effective medium between the classroom and the library stacks... if encouraged by and advised by the professor” (p. 153). This attitude still exists today, as “one-shot” instruction comes only at the request of faculty and not at the librarians themselves. Even the term “one-shot” implies a limited opportunity for librarians rather than a long-term relationship between them and the students. The success of the librarian is placed on the professors with whom they are supposed to be working. This becomes difficult when librarians are “undermined” by faculty because professors “are unclear about

information's theoretical foundations and tend to minimize their importance to research practices" (Quarton, 2014, p. 56). As a feminist profession, librarians need to be confident in their expertise and the worth they can add to a class. This needs to be advertised to the professors who were never made aware of the value of information literacy and created their own assumptions about library instruction. Faculty and students would better understand the purpose of reference librarians and the valuable help that they can provide.

Reference librarians, like almost all librarians, work in a service position. They are meant to help students and faculty as needed. Their daily work may include designing classroom instruction lesson plans, reaching out to faculty, designing literacy programs, assisting students, and conducting their own independent research. This work is necessary but often goes unappreciated. Veronica Arellano Douglas and Joanna Gadsby, two research and instruction librarians of different colleges, conducted a study on the specific role of instruction coordinators. Instruction coordinators are tasked with overseeing and managing the various classroom instruction sessions that occur. Arellano Douglas and Gadsby found that most instruction coordinators complained of their daily tasks being "equivalent to office "housework": the invisible labor that is done so that others can live and work comfortably and blissfully unaware of the tasks needed to foster that calm environment" (2017, p. 270). This could also apply to the general work of most reference librarians, whose work is necessary but often goes unnoticed.

Reference librarians are asked to be consistently available, which can be problematic within a female dominated profession. The goal of reference librarians within libraries is to always have someone available to help those who need it, whether

that is on the desk, in their office, or through other means, such as an online chat. As with other service positions that are female dominated, “this can lead to negative, sexualized, or otherwise unwanted attention from patrons” (Bloom, 2017, p. 331). Men may view these women as easy targets who are forced to engage with them. It can sometimes be difficult to draw the line between a research question, casual banter, and an intrusive personal question or threatening situation. If the patron does not recognize the librarian as someone of a professional status, they may be less likely to treat them with respect. It is important for the women in these positions to be aware of what is acceptable within the context of these interactions and when to end the conversation.

This service aspect of librarianship fits neatly into the ethic of caring with which all women find themselves laden. As all women are potential mothers, there is a belief that all women must be nurturing and caring. This occurs in librarianship because “... the *Guidelines* formalize an expectation that librarians perform emotional services for other people” even though their role is to serve as a “skilled research guidance or professional consultation” (Emmelhainz, Pappas & Seale, 2017, p. 33). The *Guidelines* referred to in this quote are the ALA’s *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* (ALA, 2008). These *Guidelines* are problematic in that they emphasize the importance of the librarian’s personality and connection with their patrons over their professional skills. This request for a pleasant personality is common in feminized professions that serve the public.

In academic librarianship, this emotional labor includes dealing with the stress and frustration of students who are struggling to complete a research assignment.

Librarians are expected to not only solve the student’s academic problems but to also

support their emotional issues. This role is not usually addressed in job descriptions or performance reviews and yet, it is an essential part of a successful reference interview. Students usually come to the reference desk in a state of confusion or frustration. A librarian can provide comfort to the student by guiding them to helpful sources but this does not always occur. If a student is particularly stressed or angry, it is unlikely that the librarian will be able to assist them. Students are not given a similar list of guidelines on how to behave with a reference librarian whom they may not see as a professional or someone who deserves the same respect as their professor. This emotional labor differs from that of assisting students with the personal issues previously mentioned such as food or housing insecurity, mental illness, or learning disabilities because of the attitude of the student. Students who approach a librarian to ask for assistance with those issues would hopefully do so in a calm and understanding manner and if not, can be directed to a more helpful source such as mental health experts on campus. The librarian is not expected to carry the emotional burden of those issues; they are expected to provide research help and aid. Students who project their negative emotions on librarians and expect them to directly solve those issues are asking the librarian to do emotional labor.

The goal of the reference librarian is to not just provide a patron with the answer, but to also ask further questions and provide a method of discovering answers. If a patron approaches the reference librarian to ask where they can find sources on a specific topic, it would be easy for the librarian to print out an article or suggest a book. This method provides the student with a source that may not quite answer their research question, which can be more complex than the one they ask the reference librarian. Students often have a general idea of a research topic, but it may lack the specificity that academic



research requires. A librarian can discover these issues and help a student narrow their question through an extensive reference interview, rather than a singular answer to their question. If the student and librarian conduct the search together and collaborate on the methods used, the student is more likely to find multiple appropriate sources that will benefit their research and be able to conduct further research on their own. It is important for students to not only “have information literacy skills” that enable them to search keywords, evaluate an article, and choose quotes, but to also “be lifelong critical thinkers and learners” (Accardi, 2013, p. 57). Critical thinking is a skill that is useful in everyday life, both in university and after graduation but it is difficult to teach. As students grow more accustomed to thorough discussions rather than instructions, they will develop these skills. Critical thinking also helps students better consider the social justice issues around them because they can conduct better research and confront their own biases.

### **Using Social Justice in Reference Librarianship**

One of the best ways for librarians to teach critical thinking and promote discussion of social justice issues is to use feminist pedagogy in their reference interviews and classroom instruction. Feminist pedagogy first emerged as teaching theory in the early 1980s, right after radical second-wave feminism, which focused on issues such as education for women and more equality in the workplace. At its most basic level, feminist pedagogy is “engaged teaching/learning... engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change”, just like librarianship (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6). The goal of using feminist pedagogy and of being a feminist profession is to enact change. Instructors who use feminist pedagogy in the classroom do so to raise awareness about social justice issues and help students be active, rather than

passive, learners. Librarians can use feminist pedagogy not to push a certain set of beliefs, but to teach students how to be critical thinkers within the real world and have informed opinions on important issues.

Feminist pedagogy can be used in both class instruction and one-on-one reference interviews. In a classroom setting, the librarian will most likely have a well-designed lesson plan that has prepared her for the class. She will know the subject being taught, the professor's expectations for the students, their current progress, and be able to anticipate any issues. For example, if the librarian is asked to instruct a business class and the topic of the assignment is to research successful CEOs and write about their businesses, the librarian might expect students to be drawn to already well-known CEOs, most of whom are white and male. The librarian can introduce the idea of seeking out CEOs who are minorities or women and offer several suggestions of good resources. This is not to attack the students as racist or sexist, but to ask them to reflect on their own biases and widen their research horizons. A diverse range of topics will make the students' research and final product more interesting. It also benefits their research by adding another layer they can address such as why this CEO may not be as well-known or if there were any obstacles they had to overcome to reach their position within the company. In a reference interview the student usually already has at least a vague idea of the topic they would like to research. The librarian may have no background knowledge on this topic but they can direct the student to consider how issues of sexism, racism, classism, or any other forms of discrimination may have an effect on their topic. Introducing these ideas within the reference interview or during classroom instruction allows students to reflect on how it ties into their research and if it is something they need to address.

This theory of teaching can have a radical effect on its students. Feminist pedagogy was first used in women's studies classrooms but has extended to other disciplines and forms of teaching since then. It has been found that "men who enter [women and gender studies] courses have more egalitarian and feminist attitudes than other men" but "they have worse attitudes than" their female classmates (Flood, 2011, p. 138-139). At the end of these courses both the men and women "show similar rates of improvement in the gender-related attitudes and behaviors measured" but since the men started below the women, they end below them too, maintaining the gender divide (Flood, 2011, p. 139). When students enter college they may be arriving on unequal footing in terms of social justice awareness due to their own personal experiences, attitudes, and communities. The students who do not already have these more egalitarian and feminist attitudes will likely never place themselves in a classroom that would expose them to such ideas. Using feminist pedagogy in non-gender specific instruction, such as library instruction, may be the first exposure these students have to feminism thought.

Feminist pedagogy is inherently hesitant to accept authority, including that of the instructor. This can be difficult for a librarian to balance when their authority can already be so challenged by the faculty and students of their university. However, feminist pedagogy is more concerned with any authority enacted on students, rather than the authority of any hierarchies in university. The goal is to empower students and develop their leadership skills with the teacher as a role model of empowerment and leadership (Shrewsbury, 1997). Students hesitate to accept their own authority because they are used to being at the bottom of the academic food chain. However, part of entering university is

joining academia. As students learn information literacy and conduct their own research, they become stronger authorities on these subjects. Librarians should not sacrifice their own authority, which may already be at risk, but balance it the newly realized authority of their students.

In information literacy, authority does not only apply to the instructor; authority is also considered with the sources being used. Students are asked to research the author or creator of sources they would like to cite to ensure that the information within the source is accurate. If the author of a source has a Ph.D. in the subject, has written on it extensively, and it was published in a well-renowned academic journal, then the author has a strong authority on the subject. A blog post may not immediately lend authority but with some research it might be discovered that the author of the post is directly involved with the subject in some way and is a strong authority on it, albeit an unconventional one. For example, the women who founded the Black Lives Matter movement, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, each have varying degrees of academic authority through education and awards (Black Lives Matter). Due to their creation of, and extensive involvement with, the movement they have become experts on police brutality and an authority on the topic, despite possibly lacking some of the credentials of other authors. Authority is not always clearly defined by credentials and education, experience is an important aspect of it. A feminist instructor should consider new or oppressed voices as sources of authority, even though they may not be conventional.

Reference librarians should not only emphasize critical thinking in their interactions with students, but in their other work as well. While the reference librarian may not necessarily be in charge of building and curating the library's collections, they



are active users of the collection. They know where it is strong and where it may be limited. Most often a librarian will recommend books for purchase based on faculty requests, gaps they notice in the current collection, and the interests of the community around them. It is their duty to evaluate these recommendations and their own biases and judge if the library would benefit from adding a title to the collection. If a librarian asks the library to only purchase books by white or male authors, it is probably an unconscious choice on their part rather than a specific attempt to silence the voice of minorities. However, it should be addressed. After recognizing this issue the librarian should step back and consider if these books are truly the best on the subject or simply the most accessible or promoted. There may be other sources that bring more expertise to the subject that are not as well known. This can also go for the general subject matter covered within the collection as well. A university collection on American history that only looks at America in a positive manner will lead to weaker research than a collection with books that objectively address and analyze America's issues such as racism, sexism, and corruption. A good collection should have sources that look at their subject matter without bias and have solid research behind them. This will allow students to conduct research that is similarly objective.

Of course, a reference librarian is not chained to her desk or trapped within her place of employment. Even outside of that space she still possesses useful skills that can aid people. Her reference skills and work for social justice can extend outside the library, or even outside the campus, into everyday life. An organization called Ready Reference did just this in 2004 when they protested the meeting of the Republican National Convention in New York City, which some people saw as exploitation of the site of 9/11.

This group came together and created kits that included “maps, legal information, lists of events and more” and used phones to contact volunteers stationed at home in front of a computer to answer more difficult questions and assist other protestors and people attending the convention (Friedman, 2014, p. 264). Most of the volunteers were reference librarians, but some were people just that believed in the cause and cared about access to information. Reference librarians were vital to the creation of Ready Reference because they had the skills to provide assistance and were able to organize the group. As special events come to a librarian’s community, she can ask the school to consider setting up a similar program. For example, if a political candidate is holding a rally or protests are occurring within the community, academic reference librarians can attend and provide access to strong sources. This introduces community members who do not use the library to the help that librarians can provide.

It can be difficult to imagine the actions of a singular college, or even a single librarian within said college, creating change on the level needed to act against the widespread stereotypes and issues of librarianship. The issues presented in this paper are mostly systemic and continue today due to a societal history of sexism and privilege. However, systemic injustices are not the only issues that social justice works against. The term microaggression has become an unfortunately familiar one in modern society. The term first emerged in the 1970s and is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “A statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination or prejudice against members of a marginalized group such as a racial minority”. Microaggression refers to any form of racism, sexism, or other discrimination that is not overt but still effects the person it is directed towards. Microaggressions can

unfortunately happen anywhere and can be difficult to correct because the issue can seem so minute. However, if the aggression is never addressed, it will continue to occur.

Lockman, the previously mentioned librarian who shifted from the public sphere to the academic, is all too aware of the microaggressions that can occur within a library. In reaction to this negative term, she proposes "*microactivism*" as a form of social justice work (Lockman, 2015, p. 194). Just as microaggressions can have a deeper impact than the small action seems to warrant, microactivism can have the same effect but in a positive manner. Lockman provides specific examples that can enact change, such as "in our reference interactions with patrons, in our selection of materials in our curricula, in our cataloging practices" (2015, p. 194). Adding diverse books to the collection, using feminist pedagogy when interacting with students, and emphasizing critical thinking within information literacy may feel like small, unnoticeable changes but they can have large effects. Simply introducing one student to a concept of social justice can inspire them to share with others and even become involved themselves, sparking wider change. No action, negative or positive, exists in a vacuum, they can all have unintended consequences.

### Conclusion

If librarianship embraces these ideals of social justice to become a feminist profession, they may see similarly large impacts from these small changes. The history of the field's feminization and professionalization is rooted in the racism and sexism that plagued America for centuries, and while actions have been taken against these prejudices, they are still deeply embedded in the American conscious and continue to impact everyday life and experiences. This has led to unfair stereotypes of librarians and

judgment of the field as less respectable than other professions. Many attempts have been made to advance librarianship, such as the standardization of education and masculinization of the field, but those have failed to address the true causes that hinder librarianship. As long as these libraries exist in a society that devalues women and their work, librarianship will struggle to establish its worth. Feminist professions directly address and work against historical discrimination that continues to affect people, both in the profession and larger society. It would not require librarianship to radically change their goals or the work being done to become a feminist profession. Librarians just have to be more focused and open about the social justice aspects of their work, making it clear that they are not content to live and work within a sexist society that does not value their work.



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