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YOUR PHILOSOPHY

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Typically the workday for any school librarian (SL) begins as soon as the door to the library is open and ends when it is closed because, unlike teachers, you can always expect that someone will drop in who is grateful to see that you are there. Your job is often frenetic and disjointed as you move from one class, teacher, student, or parent to another with no logic and, most often, without being able to complete any one task before having to move on to the next. In such an environment, it is easy to lose track of a large overall design for what you are doing.

How you begin your new job sets the tone for everything that will follow. You do not want to launch your new position by plunging into its myriad details without something to anchor you and provide a framework for what you are about to do. You need to determine what your philosophy is and what vision you want to hold for your school library program (SLP). While you have a natural urge to get down to practicalities, having a philosophy and vision in place will serve as a foundation for the many decisions and choices you will be called upon to make.

Begin by Identifying Your Philosophy, Mission, and Vision

According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, a philosophy is “a theory underlying or regarding a sphere of activity or thought.” Philosophy is rooted in beliefs. Later you will craft your mission and vision. Mission explains purpose; and vision is about how you wish to be perceived. Keep these brief definitions in mind as you proceed as the terms are often confused.

Although not labeled as philosophy, the nine Common Beliefs presented in *AASL's Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* offer ideas and language you should consider incorporating into your Philosophy Statement. Among these are “Reading is a window to the world”; “Ethical behavior in the use of information must be taught”; and “Learning has a social context.” The explanation for these nine Common Beliefs can form the philosophical basis for your program.¹ Play around with the wording until you have something that fully expresses your philosophy about the SLP. It should be three to four paragraphs and not longer than a page. If there is an existing philosophy statement for the SLP it might be usable and not need any tweaking. In that case, all you need do is keep it in mind as you plan for the future and conduct your daily routines. If changes are required, make them for your own use until such time as you have established yourself. You can then suggest a small committee of faculty, parents, and, in middle and high schools, students to help develop a new philosophy statement.

A *Mission Statement* identifies your purpose—your reason for being. The mission given in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* is clearly spelled out in two sentences: “The mission of the library media program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. . .,”² The bulleted ideas beneath this passage detail what is necessary to achieve the mission. Note that the first sentence explains the purpose of the program while the second defines the critical role played by the school librarian.

As a new school librarian, you may be most comfortable in using this as your mission statement, citing the source, or modifying it slightly to better represent what you see as your purpose in your school setting. Whatever you end up with should be brief. You want to keep it as close to twenty-five words (not counting “the mission of the Blank School Library program”) and definitely fewer than fifty words, and then memorize it. If the statement is longer than fifty words, you will not remember it, and if you cannot remember it, you really do not have a mission statement.

At the ALA Annual Conference in 2014, the AASL Board approved the following new mission statement for the association, “The American Association of School Librarians empowers leaders to transform teaching and learning.” This is probably the most succinct mission statement you will see. Consider incorporating the concept of transformed teaching and learning into your own statement.

Empowering Learners does not offer a vision for the school library program, but it can be an uplifting experience to create one. This is where you imagine an all-perfect world. With that in mind, consider what the SLP would look like. You will probably never get there, but it reminds you of what you are fighting to achieve every day. If it is sufficiently compelling, it can motivate others such as parents and teachers to help you reach your inspiring vision. As with your mission statement, your vision statement should be close to twenty-five words and not more than fifty. Once you have both written, print and frame them. Hang them prominently in the library so everyone can see them—especially you.

Before you complete your philosophy, mission and vision statements, check to see if there are existing ones for your school and district. Most have mission statements and many have vision statements. High schools evaluated by an accrediting agency invariably have a philosophy statement for the school and for the library program. Review all of these to see how well they are aligned with what is in *Empowering Learners*. You want to be sure that your program emphasizes the core ideas of the national standards, but you should also recognize that the SLP must demonstrate how it advances the school’s or district’s concerns.

CREATING A PHILOSOPHY, MISSION, AND VISION

What words do you want to include in your philosophy?

What words do you want to include in your mission?

What words do you want to include in your vision?

Use these terms to create a draft of each.

Your Philosophy and the School Community

Once you have a working philosophy in place, keep it in mind as you meet and get to know students, teachers, and administrators. While your philosophy will affect your dealings with everyone, these three groups are the ones you will be working with on a daily basis.

Students

However you worded your philosophy, you undoubtedly indicated that the SLP needs to be student centered. What does this really mean? If you ran a business and you had just identified your most important customers, how would you treat them?

Chapter 5 of this book goes into detail about the relationship you will build with your students, but the first step is to acknowledge that they are the reason you are there. If they dislike you and hate being in the library, nothing you do will matter. While this statement may seem extreme, and many will not recognize its truth, the fact is that your impact on students is heavily affected by the way you interact with them.

When students withdraw from you, the cost can be high. You can teach, grade, and demonstrate that they have attained certain skills, but you will have failed to show them the role libraries can play in their lives. One of the underlying messages of every lesson you present is that learning is more than just something students do for a good grade. It leads to their growth as individuals. When they explore topics, the knowledge they gain becomes a part of who they are.

However, if students are disengaged, they will not hear the lesson, let alone respond to your ultimate goal. If they don't hear the lesson, they are less likely to seek information for its own sake. If they don't seek information for its own sake, they will not become lifelong learners.

Teachers

While being student centered is your focus, access to students is through teachers. Even if you are in a rigidly scheduled elementary school, teachers' attitude toward you will affect how students perceive you. Connecting with teachers is an essential aspect of your philosophy and job. They need to see the program's "dynamism" and to feel that you are eager to meet their information needs.

Although chapter 6 focuses on specifics for developing, maintaining, and expanding your relationship with teachers, you need to pay attention to this from the beginning. The first step is to acknowledge that *you* are the one responsible for creating this vital link. From their perspective, teachers are doing fine without you. What do you have to offer them? Starting on day one, you have to be proactive, seeking them out and establishing a collegial bond.

You will probably develop personal friendships with faculty members, but, unlike them, you must not actively dislike anyone. In order to implement your philosophy, demonstrate your mission, and achieve your vision, you must get along, at least on a professional level, with each teacher in the school. Every staff member is entitled to receive your best possible service.

Administrators

Principals and supervisors are usually not incorporated into your philosophy, but you will be more successful if they know and support it. You will frequently hear SLs bemoaning that administrators have little awareness of what they do. Large-group instruction, creating a budget, and buying books and supplies seem to be administrators' concept of the sum total of your job. As a result, they observe only your teaching as part of the formal observation process, ignoring everything else you do.

In chapter 7 you will discover ways to bridge this gap in understanding, but, as with teachers, the responsibility is yours. You must be the one to reach out to administrators and do so in ways that will get you heard and respected. Complaining is easier than finding the right approach to communicating regularly and positively with your principal, but the rewards of the latter are well worth it.

Your objective in all your dealings with administrators is to have them recognize the scope of what you do and how it increases student learning and achievement. To be successful, you must present yourself as a team player and the SLP as a vital part of the solution.

THE BIG THREE

With which of these three groups (students, teachers, and administrators) do you think it will be easiest to build a relationship?

Which of the three groups do you think will prove the most challenging?

What aspects of your philosophy will most appeal to each group?

Your Philosophy, Mission, Vision, and Your Job

In library school, being an SL seemed rather simple. You were expected to develop and/or carry out the SLP, which entails working with students and teachers, teaching classes, ordering print and online resources, demonstrating their use, and providing open access to ideas and information. But once you are on the job, it sometimes feels as though these critical areas take a back seat to the numerous other demands placed on you.

As you cope with many things that you had not expected, your philosophy, mission, and vision will once again serve you well. No matter what you are asked to do, filter it through your core beliefs so that you can view all your tasks as advancing the SLP's fundamental values in some way. Consider whether a given task reflects your mission—or how to reframe it so that it does. Try to identify where it can be seen as a step toward achieving your distant vision.

Scope of Your Job

The first place to determine what you are expected to do is the official job description. You might be surprised to discover what is required and what is missing. Are you expected to have a “duty period” which may take you out of the library? Is your day longer than that of classroom teachers?

Although some of the duties in your job description seem extraneous to your primary function, approach them from your philosophical base. Instead of seeing them as tasks that detract from what you are trying to do, look for ways to use them

to further your SLP. At the elementary school level, you may be assigned bus duty. Rather than regarding it as an annoyance, embrace the opportunity to greet or say good-bye to students for the day. This is one more way of building your relationship with them and through you they see the library as a welcoming space. Even better, offer to keep the library open for the same amount of time as the required duty would take so as to increase access for students, teachers, and parents.

Do not overlook what is generally the final item listed in the job description. It usually reads something like, “and all other duties deemed appropriate.” As you have probably guessed, you are not the one who determines whether a duty is appropriate. This umbrella clause can cover a lot of surprising territory, including covering for teachers (even in physical education classes) when the office cannot find substitutes.

Whatever you may think of your job description, you will not be able to change it easily. The board of education passed it, and board action is required to alter it. However, you can sometimes be creative in how you accomplish some of the tasks in the description. For example, when substituting, you can ask to meet with the class in the library. If the teacher did not leave a detailed plan, you might be able to adapt what you are given to include aspects of information literacy.

Other Jobs

Among the jobs you may not have anticipated are caring for aging copier machines, finding information for teachers' children, performing reference services for parents, or being called on to help with a computer or printer problem in a classroom because it is easier to ask you than to get someone from the district technology department (if the district even has one). Just because these tasks were not listed in your job description does not mean you should refuse to do them.

The worst thing you can do for your program and your own future in the school is to respond either in your tone of voice or body language with, “When did this get to be *my* job?” If one of the phrases in your philosophy statement is about being an “essential link,” you can view any of those “special requests” as an opportunity to show the diversified ways you make a contribution to the school community.

In every situation, the choice as to what to do is yours. Some SLs look on these assorted tasks as showing a lack of respect for their professionalism. After a while, their attitude will send a message and they will get fewer people asking for this type of help. However, there is a cost. They are perceived as difficult and complaining. Taking care of these jobs will consume some of your precious time, but if you do them graciously you build friendships and earn respect as someone who can be counted on in a pinch.

In middle or high schools you might be expected to serve as an adviser for a class, club, or team. Any of these gives you access to students in a less structured setting, allowing you and the students to get to know each other better. Whether you coach them for an academic competition or meet with graphic novel fans, you will learn a lot about how they think, what they like and don't like, and what they want from the library. This contact is invaluable.

Tech Takeover

The balance of your job is increasingly being skewed toward technology. In the early days of "AV," this meant setting up 16mm film projectors and changing lamps in overhead projectors. Later it necessitated managing VCRs and preparing carts for the classroom, often keeping track of them as they went in and out of the library. Sometimes the SL was the one expected to videotape class and school events.

Several of these types of jobs will still be part of your responsibilities, but numerous others have been added. Many SLs are now webmasters for their school's web page as well as the one for the library. Once again, turn to your philosophy and mission to see how these added duties fit. While many of these duties help you become a more visible presence in the school, others take away more than they add to what you are trying to accomplish.

Eliminating these tasks takes time and patience. If they are not in your job description (aside from "all other duties deemed appropriate"), you might be able to make changes later. After you have built up your credibility with your principal, you can discuss how these added responsibilities are preventing you from developing the SLP in specific ways. Be prepared with ideas as to who would be the more logical persons to get them done and offer to do other jobs more aligned with your philosophy and mission.

Added Teaching

Although rigidly scheduled SLs anticipate having classes most of the day, you may be surprised to discover that you have been assigned to teach computer classes or are expected to teach a basic skills reading class. At middle or high school, you might be required to provide a course on the research process. Since such a course is disconnected from other teachers' classroom activities, the topics you might suggest for students to explore will probably have little relationship to what they are currently studying. As a result, much less learning occurs than when you develop an assignment in collaboration with teachers. In essence, this type of course poses as much of a challenge as hosting students during the teachers' prep period at the elementary school level.

Reconcile yourself to the situation. You will be unable to change these assignments for quite a while—and perhaps never. Rather than waste energy being annoyed by an administration that has no understanding of what you could accomplish without this added burden, seek ways to turn it to your advantage.

Find methods for bringing information literacy skills to computer classes you teach. Complement basic skills texts with great books from your collection to nurture a love of reading even in students who are struggling with the reading process. For middle and high school classes, talk to subject teachers at those grade levels, and see if you can collaborate on a research project that will have them grade the content areas while you do the rest.

TASKS BEYOND THE SLP

Which of the responsibilities described in this section did you expect?

Which one (or ones) do you think should not be part of your job?

What have you learned that will help you take on these tasks with a positive attitude?

Can Anyone Do It All?

You might have noticed that the extensive list of what you will be expected to do overlooked some major requirements. Your library teaching duties and the ongoing backroom tasks were among the omitted items. By now, you are probably wondering how you can possibly get everything done. It would seem to be a job for Super Librarian, for only someone with super powers would be able to accomplish it all.

A Bit of Balance

A little perspective is helpful here. First, reassure yourself. You will not be doing everything every day. While even those with a flexible schedule will almost

always meet with classes, and duty periods must be attended to, you will begin to see there are spaces within your day that lend themselves to different tasks.

On the other hand, there will be times when you feel pulled in many directions simultaneously. A clear understanding of your priorities—your mission statement—is necessary so that you stay focused. Student and teacher needs always come first. That said, when you have a request (or demand) from an administrator, you must find a way to attend to it, no matter what. Accept the fact that your days are likely to be hectic, with some more so than others. Laughing at the insanity helps.

Be prepared on those difficult days to put off doing anything not requiring your immediate attention and deal with what does. Take a deep breath every now and then and remind yourself of your philosophy, mission, and vision (which may seem even more impossibly distant at this point). It will ground you and prevent you from succumbing to feeling overwhelmed. Even more important, by keeping the sensation of being beleaguered at bay, you will not become irritable and brusque with students and teachers. Once again, laughing will get you through it.

Reality Check

One of the many aspects of your job not covered in library school is the length of your day. A few of you may even have thought that being an SL would be easier than being a classroom teacher because you would not have lesson plans or papers to grade. Obviously, rigidly scheduled SLs have both, although their lesson plans can be reused with classes at the same grade level, lessening prep time somewhat. However, that just begins to address the issue.

While flexibly scheduled SLs at any level are now expected to turn in lesson plans in many places, and middle and high school SLs often participate in grading papers by evaluating the resources used in students' bibliographies, you still have to make time to read professional literature, prepare purchase orders, catalog material, explore electronic databases, and weed the collection, along with a host of other tasks.

Teachers do much of their noninstructional jobs during their prep period or at home. Your duty-free time (if it is on your schedule) is likely to be taken up by staff or parents who drop in and are so happy to catch you "not doing anything." While you can read journals and do a few other tasks elsewhere, many of your jobs need to be done in the library.

You must face the fact that your day will extend beyond the hours in your contract. Expect to arrive early or leave late on many days—more so in your first years on the job. Most of you will not be paid for summer work, but if you don't make time to go in, you will be inundated with mail and boxes of books and supplies when school starts.

A cautionary note is necessary. You can easily get so caught up in trying to get everything done that the library takes over your life. Set deadlines for how late you will stay and how many days you will do so—and abide by them. Family, friends, and outside interests are vital. You will be a better SL if your job is not your life.

Getting Help

For your survival, accept that you cannot do it alone. If you have a support staff, learn to use it well. Few of you will have more than one clerk, but maximize this resource. Most clerks will enjoy opportunities to do more than routine tasks. Teach them to become active paraprofessionals.

If you are without support staff, find volunteers and get them excited about the contribution they are making. At middle and high schools you can create a library council. Fourth and fifth graders can also become helpers. Be sure to give them interesting tasks in addition to the mundane book shelving. For example, they can be trained to pull books for a class.

At the elementary school level, parents and senior citizens are generally your best resource. Ask for advice from the other SLs in the district as to how best to recruit them. While training volunteers takes time, if you engage their interest by using their talents in the library, they will return regularly so you can count on them. You may even discover that you have recruited new members to the profession, since your best helpers often become so enthusiastic about working in the library that they will go back to school for courses.

Remember that you are responsible for the behavior of your support staff, whether student or adult. Their attitude toward students and teachers will affect the climate of the school library. In part, how you treat them will carry over to how they interact with others, but you need to go further.

Talk about your philosophy, and let volunteers and support staff see how it informs your actions. Encourage them to ask about your decisions, so they can see how you are guided by your philosophy in specific situations. Through these discussions they see how your philosophy, mission, and vision come into play on a daily basis, and in assimilating it they too will incorporate the concepts as the natural way of dealing with any and all of your users.

Some of you will be responsible for multiple schools and a complex schedule. Sometimes it will seem as though whatever you want is in one of the other buildings. Having volunteers working in one school while you are at another can be a help or a hindrance depending on how well trained they are. You do not want administrators to get the idea that the library can be run successfully by volunteers. Chapter 3 offers some helpful ideas for coping with this challenge.

A FULL PLATE

Which tasks do you think have medium priority? (This may change as you become more familiar with your job.)

Which do you think have the lowest priority?

How many days a week will you extend your hours?

What help is already available? Where do you think you can get more?

Define Who You Are

Your roles and self-perception are implied although not specifically mentioned in your philosophy. Both need to be recognized and understood. *Empowering Learners* spells out the former, but you must determine the latter.

Roles

According to *Empowering Learners*, you are a teacher, an information specialist, an instructional partner, and a program administrator.³ These responsibilities should be carried out in a way that attests to your philosophy and mission. Therefore, everything you do must in some way connect to being student centered and whatever else you have incorporated into your statements.

Remind yourself that the philosophical base of your roles creates a consistency that weaves the SLP into a unified whole and your mission statement is a clear definition of your purpose (and what makes the SLP and you unique). Whether you are creating a lesson plan, working at some level with a teacher, explaining how to evaluate the credibility of a website, or reviewing library policies, everything should always connect back to these grounding statements.

While you cannot do so on a daily basis, take time at week's end to reflect on what you have done. Did your actions and decisions put student needs at the forefront? In what ways have you enhanced others' view of the dynamism of the SLP? How well did you link students and staff to the resources they needed?

Some weeks you will do better than others. The personal evaluation should not make you think you are failing but rather help you see where you have been most successful and which areas need more work. Think of ways you might have handled a given situation better. If you are stuck, talk with another SL in your district, or better yet, turn to a colleague at your school. Some state school library associations have mentor programs or help desks. If neither is available, seek out someone whom you perceive as a leader and ask for help. You might be surprised to see how willing the person is to offer you guidance.

Self-Perception

You will often hear rigidly scheduled elementary SLs complain that they are babysitters, enabling teachers to get their prep time. While a rigid schedule is not the preferred approach for teaching information literacy skills or any of the other aspects of the SLP, perceiving yourself as a babysitter just makes a bad situation worse. How can you be student centered if you feel you are just a babysitter marking time? Change that mental image and you will be amazed by the effect.

If you believe teachers are too lazy or too busy to work with you, you are likely to have your view confirmed. Unwittingly, you convey that message in your tone of voice and with your body language. Expecting that teachers will be excited by what you have to offer will very often bring positive results.

Another aspect of self-perception is how you see yourself within the school. Do you consider yourself to be a teacher or a member of the staff? An SL in a conversation said, “You teachers . . .” and, without recognizing it, immediately separated herself from the faculty. Be aware of pronouns. Use “we” as much as you can when discussing situations with teachers.

TIME TO REFLECT

Which role—teacher, information specialist, instructional partner, program administrator—most easily fits your philosophy, mission, and vision?

Which role requires more effort to incorporate?

What is a better view than “babysitter” for how you approach rigidly scheduled classes?

Who Am I?

What you call yourself and what others call you are not among the most significant contributors to your success, but how you handle your job title is an indicator of your self-perception and complements the image you want to create of the SLP.

Your Title

An old nursery rhyme goes:

*Elizabeth, Elspeth, Betsy and Bess,
They all went together to seek a bird's nest;
They found a bird's nest with five eggs in,
They all took one, and left four in.*

The riddle is solved when you realize that Elspeth, Betsy, and Bess are variations of Elizabeth. Many years ago your title would simply have been librarian or school librarian. Today you might be called a school librarian, library media specialist, teacher-librarian, or a number of other variants.

This issue surfaces regularly among SLs. Some prefer to be called librarian. This is the term most frequently used when talking informally within the profession, primarily because it is the shortest. The main reason for using one of the alternatives is that people, recalling their school experiences, think they know what a “librarian” does. Hearing the other titles makes them aware that there is something more going on.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) officially declared in 2008 that our title is School Librarian but state certifications and preferences in districts use other titles. Many prefer the term *teacher-librarian* because it emphasizes the importance of the instructional role. Another segment of librarians see eliminating “media” from the job title as limiting. A number have chosen to add “technology instructor” and some have chosen *cybrarian*. The debate continues, but, if your title is not already set for you, decide what your preference is and use it consistently.

What Others Call You

No matter how frequently you employ your title, you will be referred to in many different ways. Invariably the word *librarian* will be included somehow. A principal may introduce you as the “library teacher,” differentiating you in this way from the reading or computer teacher. Parents tend to address you simply as the “librarian.” Teachers, wanting to be sure their students get it right, are most likely to use whatever title the school uses.

Some of you are very aware that you are far more than what is implied by the term *librarian* and will explain the distinction whenever the opportunity arises. Most of you overlook the variations, considering them too unimportant within the larger context. The best approach is someplace in the middle, although distinctly more in the category of “do not overreact.”

Never correct anyone for what they call you. As noted, the nomenclature is confusing enough within the profession. On the other hand, find subtle ways of reinforcing your proper title. When you speak with that person on another occasion, you can mention your proper title within the conversation. At another time, you can discuss the variety of names for SLs and explain why your job covers so much territory it is difficult to find a title that incorporates it all.

Why should it matter, and do you really need to bother? Again, this is not a major issue. The question, as always, is how does your title reflect your philosophy? By reminding people of why you are called an SL (or whatever else is used), you are also sharing what you believe in a subtle way.

KEY IDEAS

- » The terms *philosophy*, *mission*, and *vision* are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are different, and you need all three.
- » Your philosophy, mission, and vision will form the basis for your dealings with the educational community and the way you structure the SLP.
- » You are the one responsible for creating relationships with students, teachers, and administrators.
- » You will be required to do some jobs that seem remote from the responsibilities of an SL.
- » Using some creativity, you can align these added tasks with your philosophy and mission.
- » Remembering your priorities will keep you focused during the busiest days.
- » Look for the fun in the wonderful insanity of an incredibly hectic day.
- » Your days will extend beyond contract hours.
- » Share your philosophy, mission, and vision with your volunteers and support staff.
- » Know your roles and yourself in order to present what you do in the best possible way.
- » Be consistent in what you call yourself.
- » Your philosophy and *Empowering Learners* are a behind-the-scenes presence every day.

Notes

1. American Association of School Librarians, *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2009), 12–13.
2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 16.