

The Great Cartoon Debate

an editorial by Rose Roberto

The Cartoon Debate hurts librarians more than it is helping them. What is the Cartoon Debate? It's often fueled by one of those "there's a shortage of good librarians" articles the local newspaper will print, that gets forwarded on library school and librarian listservs. While it is great to read about our profession getting notice in the media, there are so many stories with that angle that it's getting really old.

Most of the articles include some speculative data as to why people are less drawn to certain types of librarianship, when what is needed is scientific research on the issue. Then instead of merely forwarding the article of interest, 5 or more people start inserting their flippant opinions and the discussion deteriorates into what I like to call the Cartoon Debate.

I call it this because it reminds me of something comical on TV, not meant to be taken seriously, like the beer commercial where one half of the room is chanting "tastes great" while the other half is chanting "less filling." Except in this case the librarians are chanting, "we need more pay" or "we need greater respect." "Tastes Great." "Less Filling." "More Pay." "More respect." "Tastes Great." "Less Filling." "More Pay." "More respect."

Common sense supports both factors of prestige and wealth affecting people seeking employment, but there are probably other socio-economic variables not discussed at all, such as whether choice of librarianship was a primary, secondary, or tertiary career; other income provided by a librarian's family members; librarian's age, gender, expectations in life...or lack of expectations. These other factors are important, too.

Another issue this Cartoon Debate lacks is a broad view of the workforce in general. There is no educated comparison of the burnout rates of other professions. The library profession isn't the only one experiencing a shortage. Other professions such as teachers, nurses, and, believe it or not, lawyers

(average period for practicing law is about 5 years) are also seeking budding professionals to take the helm.

The attitude toward employment and the relationship between employers and employees in the age of globalization has also dramatically changed. The concept of lifetime employment and company loyalty is out the window and most ambitious people know that to get the great promotions, they need to switch jobs every two to four years to get the position they want. Demographics are different, too. People live longer, move around the country more, and they end up changing their careers.

To reduce the complex reasons why there are shortages of librarians to the two arguments, "this is what happens when we disrespect 'library' in favor of 'information'" or "we need to make employers value us with more pay," makes us sound simplistic, ignorant and provincial. While slogans work for selling beer, they don't work for selling our professional image—no matter what we are called—as thorough research professionals with a broad view of the world.

Think twice before judging the masses for making snap judgments without research or bemoaning the junk circulated online. The Great Cartoon Debate shows we do it, too.



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