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From Invisible Labor to Line Items: Budgeting for the Library Work That's Happening Now

OVERVIEW

Your staff de-escalated a crisis this week. They walked someone through a benefits application. They cleaned up a biohazard. They held it together through an interaction that would rattle a social worker. And none of it showed up in your budget request.

There is a fundamental disconnect between what library workers actually do and what gets captured in our metrics, our job descriptions, and our budgets. That disconnect makes libraries harder to fund, harder to staff, and harder to defend.

This session provides library leaders with research-backed strategies for closing that gap. Scholar librarian Fobazi Ettarh's research on "vocational awe" explains how framing librarianship as a sacred calling keeps job duties expanding and wages flat. Public administration researchers Mary Guy and Meredith

Newman's work on emotional labor in public sector jobs reveals why the most demanding skills your staff perform every day don't show up in their pay grades. And Rachel Ivy Clarke's service valuation research at the Syracuse University iSchool offers a practical alternative to the circulation-based metrics that train funders to value your inventory over your workforce.

Together, these frameworks give library leaders the tools to make invisible labor visible — in board reports, in budget requests, and in the language we use to describe and advocate for staff positions.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND

Library directors, HR staff, and others who write board reports, defend budgets, or influence how staff positions are described and classified.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

1. Define invisible labor and vocational awe as structural problems in library operations — and explain how they drive budget vulnerability, staff turnover, and expanding job scope without corresponding compensation.
2. Understand why the numbers most libraries put in front of their boards — like circulation stats and materials budgets — accidentally make it easier to cut staff.

3. Recognize the pattern by which voluntary staff efforts quietly become mandatory job expectations.
4. Apply new tracking categories to your existing systems so your budget requests reflect the skilled labor your staff perform every day.
5. Identify the gap between existing job description language and the skilled emotional labor staff actually perform.

BIO

Sonya Schryer Norris is a third-generation Michigan library worker with over 26 years of experience, including 16 years as a Consultant in Library Development for the Library of Michigan. Since founding Plum Librarian LLC in 2020, she has served as a consultant and trainer to 12 state libraries. Sonya has created 35+ courses on Niche Academy adopted in all 50 states and internationally, and her articles have appeared in *Library Journal*, *Computers in Libraries*, and for Cengage. She presents regularly for organizations including Library 2.0 and state library agencies.