Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Who Cares? The Invisible Work of Our Most Visible Librarians

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ABSTRACT

As many in the field of teaching know, student support can sometimes extend beyond the purely academic into the personal and emotional. This phenomenon may be a natural part of pedagogies focused on holistic student support, but it can also have effects on the professionals that perform this kind of care work. This article draws on the personal experiences of one early-career librarian to examine the relationship between social-emotional labor and the largely feminized field of librarianship. It also draws on language from recent instruction librarian job postings to make recommendations about where research in this area may be needed.

KEYWORDS

care work, library instruction, student support, feminization

For the past year and a half, as I have been working toward my MSLS, I've also been working in my university's Writing Center. Writing Centers are often associated with academic libraries, as they are sometimes housed within them. Writing Centers and libraries are also pedagogically linked in ways that sometimes go unnoticed. We work one-on-one with students in research consultation-style appointments, and we deliver workshops to small groups. We host large events (often in conjunction with librarians) to support students through difficult times in the semester. As an aspiring instruction librarian, some of my most valuable teaching skills have come from writing coaching, including my approach to holistic student support.

"Holistic student support" might sound like a vague, academic buzzword, but those of us in public-facing roles know that serving learners involves a lot more than research help and workshops. For example, in one memorable session, I was working with a student who seemed quiet and disconnected. When I asked her questions about her paper, she would shake her head or whisper a few words in response. I finally asked her if anything was the matter. She looked me in the eye for the first time and said, "I just got broken up with." This student was not the first to invite me into the sphere of her personal life, nor was she the last. I often hear about unfair professors and disappointing application results; my colleagues and I trade stories about students who are too panicked or anxious about assignments to focus during appointments. Even though these kinds of situations can be intense, they have helped me develop a sense of what "holistic student support" really looks like: flexibility, empathetic listening, and a degree of emotional support.

Then there are the appointments that are not as easy for me to fold and set aside. Since I read a lot of student writing, it's not uncommon for me to encounter a searing personal essay about experiences with racism, family hardships, and other forms of deep trauma. While students don't usually get upset during these appointments—often, they have already wrestled with the complex feelings of sharing these experiences, and they tend to set clear boundaries— this type of appointment is one of the most difficult for me. It can be hard to tuck away my own feelings and to focus on the writing, especially when these topics touch my own life. It can be hard to measure the appropriate reaction that will acknowledge the student's courage without derailing the appointment. These times of confession are when I feel most like the librarian-as-priest critiqued in Ettarh's "Vocational Awe in Librarianship" (2018). While I feel honored by students' trust and vulnerability, I am also conscious of the way that these confessions suck away much of the energy that I usually have for teaching.

This is not to say that personal support is too difficult or unworthy of our time. In fact, I argue that this level of trust is a necessary part of effective teaching. I believe, as Mintz recently wrote, that part of higher education's mission is to "instill a sense of purpose and direction, impart ethical and cross-cultural awareness, inculcate emotional intelligence, and implant the capacity for self-reflection that we associate with a mature adult" (Mintz, 2022). We should be supporting students holistically as people, and part of that is addressing their social and

emotional needs. To draw from Symphony Bruce's "Teaching with Care," "If students are to receive the education they deserve, institutions must do better to create environments where students are valued and find a sense of belonging. All schools and departments on campus are responsible for this work, including the library" (Bruce, 2020). To her point, our situation in academia prompts us to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations that students may be exploring for the first time. As one student recently said to me during an appointment, "We're supposed to talk about [race in college]—that's normal here." If higher education is going to position itself as a place to talk about identities and differences, we need to have the infrastructure to support those conversations—specifically, we need skilled, empathetic librarians. In fact, this pedagogical philosophy may apply even more to the kind of informal teaching that librarians (and writing coaches) do since we "often work outside of the power structures of the traditional student-teacher relationship" (Bruce, 2020).

Social-Emotional Labor, Gender, and Experience

While this kind of holistic support is clearly important, my impression is that it is unequally distributed among librarians. There are likely several factors that impact how often librarians are supporting students on personal and emotional levels, but two that interest me are identity and professional experience. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), about 80% of librarians identify as women. This is no surprise given the history of our field, where libraries have been overwhelmingly staffed by white women (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). The historical feminization of our field (and, thus, the association of library and care work) can be partially attributed to the racialized stereotype that white women approach work with "sensitivity, kindness, sympathy, and delicacy" as well as "hospitality and warmth" and "the ability…to be maternal" (Schlesselman-Tarango, p. 674). This stereotype also often applies to women of color, who have historically taken on the greatest share of care work, including settings outside of libraries (Poo & Moonsammy, 2021). Though some of these qualities can create important connections with learners—teaching based in care ethics, for example, might employ sensitivity, kindness, and empathy (Bruce, 2020)—their association with women means that students may be more likely to bring sensitive problems to female-presenting librarians. Similarly, librarians of color have expressed feeling pressure to take on more service activities to ensure that students with marginalized identities have an understanding adult to talk to (Anantachai & Chesley, 2018). Even though this call to service is not limited to female-identifying librarians (and, in fact, was attributed more to racial identity rather than gender), it is likely impacted by the vast majority of women in the field overall (Anantachai & Chesley, 2018). It is not surprising, then, that students may be more inclined to share personal information with librarians who present as women. It is also worth noting that, because women and early career librarians occupy so many of the public-facing roles in libraries (Eva et al., 2021), they are more likely to interact with students in general and are therefore more likely to take on a greater share of personal and emotional support.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are several forms of "care work," in a broad sense, that seem to affect women-identifying librarians most often. The classic example, emotional labor, is narrowly used to describe the way service employees manage their own emotions in a way that is outwardly "appropriate" for their workplace (Hochschild, 1979). Certainly, this form of labor is present in the library (Shuler & Morgan, 2013), particularly for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) librarians, who must navigate racist institutional structures and dominant culture expectations in addition to interpersonal interactions (Porter et al., 2018). But even as emotional labor plays a role in the kind of work I have described so far, it does not fully encompass it. Instead, the process of helping manage other people's emotions as well as your own might be called social-emotional labor, which touches on the relational aspect of this type of work. Social-emotional labor describes the kind of care work that teaching professionals do to fulfill learners' emotional needs while also managing their own feelings, such as what instruction librarians might do in one-on-one research consultations.

It is important to be clear about this kind of work because it is, in fact, work. And though it is necessary work, we also need to be realistic about its effects. One well-known impact of care work in general is "compassion fatigue," which "affects those who enter the helping professions, including librarianship, precisely because these are the people most likely to put themselves in the place of others, to feel compassion and empathy for those they help" (Katopol, 2015). This is also sometimes called the "burden of care," which refers to the "physical, emotional, and social toll experienced by family caregivers (usually women) over an extended period of time" (Anantachai & Chesley, 2018). This kind of fatigue can lead to burnout, "a high level of stress and exhaustion, often linked to overwhelming professional pressures but spilling over into private life as well," which drives people to leave the field (Dixon, 2022). I can confirm from personal experience that this kind of work, while important, is taxing. If we want to protect early career librarians from burning out, we need to acknowledge and appreciate this work (Shuler & Morgan, 2013) while being realistic about the toll it can take on us.

One way to acknowledge and appreciate this work is through its compensation. Despite the fact that, in at least one study, researchers found "higher incidences of burnout among female respondents, particularly those between ages 35 and 44," (Dixon, 2022), there is also data to support that "males at every level [of the academic library] make significantly more, both statistically and in terms of lost wages during the course of a career, than their female colleagues" (Howard et al., 2020). This mismatch of work and compensation would suggest that social-emotional labor, and care work in general, is not formally compensated as work. This likely connects to the stereotype that the skills required for social-emotional labor are inherent to women and therefore not actual, practiced skills worthy of compensation.

As long as we think of empathetic listening and holistic student support as gendered "qualities" rather than skills that require training, we do a great disservice to our students.

Acknowledging social-emotional labor as a professional skill is essential for mitigating the harm that is sometimes caused by untrained librarians. Thoughtful and supportive interactions with librarians may bring students into the library, but negative interactions will drive students away. As a white librarian, I am particularly conscious of the harm white professionals can cause when this kind of work is done poorly. As Bruce notes,

> While librarians should strive to be authentically caring and relational in their interactions with students, the interaction can do more harm than good if students have marginalizing and racist experiences. Because of the overt power structures students navigate throughout their academic experience, students of color may be guarded or even less likely to seek assistance from librarians (Bruce, 2020).

This reality speaks to the role of intersectional identities in care work (Crenshaw, 1991) in two key ways: first, how the assumption that well-intentioned librarians can holistically support students without any training creates the potential for harm, and second, the way that "color-blind 'professionalism'" actually suppresses the skilled care work of people of color (Porter et al., 2018). The assumption that the innate quality of friendliness, or general good intentions, is a sufficient professional skill for care work erases the other dimensions of support that students with marginalized identities may need, such as an acknowledgement of racial battle fatigue (Porter et al., 2018). A reliance on the "innate qualities" indicative of a caring professional, which are established by white cultural norms, can end up isolating and/or harming both students of color and librarians. Thus, it is a necessity for social-emotional labor to be formally regarded as part of librarianship—if not to prompt formal training, then at least to help validate the experiences of students and librarians who may feel marginalized or harmed by their interactions with white library employees.

Expectations on the Job Market

As a female-presenting, early career librarian, I have already felt some of the effects of working in a student support role. Though I get a lot of fulfillment from working with students, and though I plan to continue on the path of library instruction, I am conscious that this kind of work can be exhausting, especially when some of the most difficult parts go unacknowledged. So, to help address some of my worries about burnout, and to get a better sense of how social-emotional labor factors into library instruction jobs, I created a spreadsheet of job listings that align with my professional interests.

My search focused on early career jobs where the primary duty is library instruction. After searching some of the popular library job boards, including INALJ and the ALA JobLIST, I ended up with a chart of 24 listings posted in September and October 2022 from across the U.S. The most common titles on the chart include "Research and Instruction Librarian," "Teaching and Outreach Librarian," and "Learning Engagement Librarian." Some other variations include "Information Literacy Librarian," "Student Success Librarian," or a particular subject liaison.

While these titles imply some additional duties, I included them because of their descriptions' focus on teaching and undergraduate student support. The greatest geographic representation of these listings is from the Northeast (29%), followed by the West (25%), the Southeast (25%), the Midwest (13%), and the Southwest (8%). This distribution is likely due to how colleges and universities are clustered in the U.S. Along with this geographic diversity is some diversity in the type of institution; 50% are from private colleges or universities; 46% are from four-year public universities, and one (4%) is from a community college. This is not to say that my informal sample is representative of the field; I only hope to show that the trends I noticed are not limited to one region or type of institution.

Table 1

Job Listing Code Examples

	Indicators of Social-emotional labor	Indicators of intended audience	Indicators of nontraditional scheduling	Crossover with DEIA language
Example from listing	"Excellent communication skills, both verbal and written, along with skills associated with listening, negotiating, compromising, and adapting."	"…professional or graduate student experience will be considered;" "…ability to learn new technologies with ease."	"Flexibility to work occasional nights or weekends."	"We are looking for a bright and friendly individual that celebrates diversity and inclusive excellence."

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Note: 24 job posts from September and October 2022 were examined.

The first thing that stood out to me was the general absence of language explicitly describing social-emotional labor. Many of the posts infrequently use descriptors associated with care work—"friendly," "supportive," "flexible," "responsive," "approachable"—with these terms appearing only once or twice per job ad. Often, they were connected with qualifications that show up in most job ads, such as "excellent interpersonal skills" and the ability to "work collaboratively" or "communicate effectively." Perhaps there is an argument to be made that some elements of social-emotional labor are covered by these qualifications; however, from my

experience, these descriptions feel inadequate for the actual skills needed to do that work well. It seems more likely to me that this language is a product of the job advertisement genre.

A more interesting trend was the overlap between the intended audience of these posts and the language that suggested who the ideal candidate might be. It was clear that these posts were geared toward early career librarians; many of them ask for "two years" of experience working in an "academic library setting," which happens to be the length of many library science master's programs (American Library Association, 2008). Some are even clearer about their intention to hire recent graduates, including phrases like "Graduate student experience will be considered" and "Newly degreed librarians…encouraged to apply." Though this language is helpful for identifying jobs appropriate for an early career librarian, it also turned my attention to the ways these jobs code for candidates who are younger, who may have more energy for the profession, and who are willing to do more work just to get their careers started. For instance, one of these jobs asks for candidates with the "Ability, interest, and willingness to assume additional and/or new responsibilities." Perhaps this was intended to code for "flexible" candidates (a term I also associate with social-emotional labor), but it also reads as an indicator of job creep, the "'slow and subtle expansion of job duties' which is not recognized by supervisors or the organization" (Ettarh, 2018). Job creep, also known as "responsibility creep," contributes to a position's ambiguity by adding responsibilities and gradually increasing the workload, two frustrations specifically expressed by library instruction coordinators (Douglas & Gadsby, 2017). Similarly, another job's qualification begins with the appealing sentence, "This position offers an opportunity for the right person…to grow in the position," indicating an opening for an early career librarian. Then, it smoothly transitions to the qualifier that the position will "*evolve* based on their experience, skills and knowledge" (emphasis mine). Statements like these represent the expectation that early career librarians must do more and say "yes" to more work to prove themselves as committed members of the field—a phenomenon already documented by other early career librarians feeling the precarity of their position in the field (Lacey, 2019). Of course, having energy or being "energetic"—a term that can be coded for youth and ableism—is also helpful for doing social-emotional labor, which tends to be taxing.

Another hint that these jobs may be intended for librarians with the energy for social-emotional labor are the lists of assigned duties of these positions, which often include disclaimers about extended schedules and nontraditional work hours. Several of these posts request the "ability to work occasional evenings and weekends" or note that the "schedule varies depending on the overall workload within the academic year." On one hand, these evening and weekend hours may be a necessary part of supporting students. In my experience working the Sunday shift at the Writing Center, I've seen how appreciative students are for services that accommodate their schedules. Presumably, this is the justification for these nontraditional hours; it is an effort to give students as much opportunity as possible to seek help, particularly at the times when they're likely to be doing schoolwork. If this is the reasoning, then it's not hard

to see how these nontraditional schedules start to involve social-emotional labor—they are about supporting students as people, whenever they are ready to seek that support. In this way, these extended hours—which seem to be common across these early career library instruction positions—may be contributing to the burnout of new professionals through both the unpredictable scheduling and the nature of the work itself.

The final, perhaps most significant, trend I noted in these listings was the close partnership between language that might indicate social-emotional labor and statements referencing diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives. I suspect this is partially because both practices involve exercises of empathy and the development of similar skills. For instance, one job asked candidates to "Demonstrate a commitment to diversity by creating learning environments that are welcoming, accessible, and inclusive for all students." I listed this qualification as something that included descriptors of care work because of the phrase, "creating learning environments that are welcoming," which, especially on its own, sounds like this institution is seeking someone who is "friendly," and "warm," who has a "public service attitude" (to borrow language from other posts). Without the opening phrase, "Demonstrate a commitment to diversity," which signals an intended alignment with DEIA (at face value, at least), this qualification would be one of the more explicit descriptions of social-emotional labor: "[Create] learning environments that are welcoming, accessible, and inclusive for all students."

Another possibility for the link between these two types of language could be a suggestion of who is expected to be doing both kinds of work: women of color. As I have mentioned, there is a long history of women of color in care work (Poo & Moonsammy, 2021). There is also evidence that early career positions focused on DEIA work are one of the tools that the predominantly white library field uses to recruit women of color (Garrison, 2020). This relationship between the work advertised in these posts and their intended audience is important to note because, while women of color may face similar frustrations to those of white women in dealing with the stressors of social-emotional labor, they may also face greater obstacles in having their experiences validated; as Brown et. al. (2018) cites in Accapadi, "The White woman's reality is visible, acknowledged, and legitimized because of her tears, while a woman of color's reality, like her struggle, is invisible, overlooked, and pathologized based on the operating 'standard of humanity'." Whether these two kinds of work are intentionally paired or not, this relationship feels important to point out in support of the work of Chou and Pho (2018), among many others, which establishes that BIPOC women librarians do a disproportionate amount of social-emotional labor and that such labor is especially taxing.

Conclusion

As an early career librarian, I am both excited to support students on their academic journeys and wary of the demands I may have to meet in my professional life. In my

conversations with other women entering the library field—and, indeed, women in other areas of academia—they often acknowledge the expectation that social-emotional labor will be part of their job, and they already know it's not something listed in job ads. One colleague went as far as to say that it may be missing because "it's not part of the job for everyone." These informal observations and my colleagues' collective feelings indicate an opportunity for further research on this topic. Anecdotal evidence and related studies (Matteson et al., 2015) lead me to believe that women librarians, specifically those in instruction, are quietly doing social-emotional labor as part of their jobs. It is essential to have data that support this phenomenon so that it will be acknowledged—and compensated—as a formal professional duty.

In the meantime, I am conscious of how I will need to balance care for others and care for myself, as well as the necessity of acknowledging the invisible work of my colleagues. For this, I turn to the work of Gilligan and Pettersen, who developed the idea of "mature care," where "the center of attention is the interaction between the carer and the person being cared for" and "involves as much concern for oneself as for others" (Hem & Pettersen, 2011). This principle keeps me mindful of the fact that the longer I take care of myself, the longer I will be able to serve the needs of others.

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