



Book Review

Review of *Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses*

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ABSTRACT

Review of Holm, C., Guimaraes, A. & Marcano, N., eds. *Academic librarian burnout: Causes and responses*. Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022.

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As I read *Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses*, Neil Young's popular lyric, "It's better to burn out than fade away" (1979), played on repeat in my mind. In true librarian fashion, I searched for the song, hit play, and went down a research rabbit hole: reading lyrics; looking up pop culture references to the song [e.g. Kurt Cobain quoted the line in his suicide note.]; and watching videos of Neil Young discussing the meaning behind the song. In a 2016 interview, Young spoke about the song, explaining that it was written about rock and roll, not about life in general. He said, "For rock and roll, if that's all you are and that's all you want to do, exploding is not bad, but there's a lot more to life than just rock and roll" (Tyler, 2016). If you, dear reader, replace "rock and roll" with "librarianship," you have stumbled upon one of the themes found in *Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses*. However, since Young's expression "exploding" is a bit casual for our purposes, it is important to note that this book uses the term "burnout" in accordance with the 2020 definition from the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO characterizes burnout with "three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment" (2020).

There are many aspects of librarianship that can lead to burnout. In chapter 13 of *Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses*, author Kantor discusses the societal expectations and pressures placed on librarians when hearing "stories of rock star and superhero librarians" (p. 194). Paraphrasing Bennett et al. (2018), Kantor notes that "becoming a rock star librarian means inviting your job into your life and making it your personality" (p. 195). Then, there are librarians affected by "vocational awe," a concept based on Ettarh's "set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique" which, Ettarh argues, correlates to burnout in librarians (2018). It is worth noting that Ettarh's article is cited by almost one-third of the chapters in this compilation, including the editors' introduction. Kantor emphasizes, "When being a librarian becomes who we are as individuals, it becomes harder to extricate ourselves from our jobs and results in a negative impact on mental health" (p. 195). There is more to life than just ~~rock and roll~~ librarianship. This is just a sampling of the discussion on burnout that is compiled in this book, which presents the reader with a wealth of research, from a variety of perspectives, analyzing the many pressures on librarians that can often lead to burnout and some of the ways to combat it.

Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses shines a spotlight on the systemic issue of burnout in academic libraries. This 399-page collection, comprised of five sections totaling 24 chapters, highlights not only the signs and symptoms of burnout, but also its causes and the means for preventing and treating it. The editors note that:

This book is an invitation to sustain dialogues about burnout in our work environment, to study its nature and causes, and to advance mitigation strategies and preventative

interventions. We invite our readers to take part in the rich scholarly conversations that have informed our understanding of burnout as a syndrome of chronic workplace stress (p. xi).

This book is just the beginning of the conversation, with the goal of starting a dialogue amongst all library workers to ignite the fight against burnout.

Editors Holm, Guimaraes, and Marcano's shared passion for improving library processes and advocating for library employees brings them together in his collection of articles on the issue of burnout in academic libraries. Christina Holm, who is the Teaching & Learning Team Lead, Instruction Coordinator, and Librarian Associate Professor at Kennesaw State University, has a decade of library experience. Ana Guimaraes, the former Director of Collection Development at Kennesaw State University with over 14 years of academic library experience, is an Engagement Librarian with SAGE Publishing, Inc. Nashieli Marcano has over 14 years in academia and is currently Archivist for Digital Collections at Furman University. Together, the three editors compiled a trove of research on academic library employees' burnout, with contributions from authors holding positions as librarians, library directors, coordinators, archivists, managers, and more, from universities, colleges, and community colleges across the United States.

Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses includes a wide range of topics surrounding the idea of burnout within libraries. The editors successfully curated a variety of compelling chapters on the subject and thoughtfully organized them into sections that cover similar aspects of the topic. Included are quantitative, qualitative, and case study methodologies, along with narratives of lived experiences and examples for both emulating and avoiding. Each section's introduction establishes the theme and outlines questions to contemplate while reading, guiding the reader to draw their own conclusions and find aspects of the chapters that are meaningful and relevant to them.

In Section 1, *Reframing Burnout*, the editors introduce the reader to the concept of burnout. Across its five chapters, this section asks the reader to consider library worker characteristics that can cause or contribute to burnout. Chapter 1 reviews the differences among generations of library workers and their approaches to their work, which cause each generation to feel the stress of the job in various ways. The authors mention that more research needs to be done to see how other social aspects, such as race, class, and gender (not just age) affect burnout. This idea of needing additional research in areas such as race and gender is repeated throughout many of the chapters in this book. Chapter 2 analyzes long-term illness and its relationship to burnout, noting that the additional stress brought to work from personal illness puts folks at a higher risk of burnout due to the extra emotional labor and effort needed to be productive and present. When the needs of the workplace come first and the workplace does not accommodate your needs, burnout is likely, especially amongst intersectional individuals who

also deal with issues such as racism and sexism in addition to their illnesses. Chapter 3 looks at feminist library leaders who may experience burnout themselves as they work to enact their feminist values. Working in a slow, kind, thoughtful, and caring way is hard work, adds time, and can be especially difficult when the larger institution does not promote these values. Chapter 4 highlights emotion work as an unquantified aspect of librarians' workload and its effects on burnout, noting that some common solutions for burnout actually complicate it or contribute to it. In Chapter 5, the author discusses the oftentimes muddy distinction between depression and burnout, emphasizing the importance of correctly identifying depression—not mistakenly labeling it as burnout—so that the appropriate intervention is used. This section introduces us to the concepts of burnout and the internal factors that may predispose us to its effects.

Section 2, *Conditions That Promote Burnout*, focuses on some of the outside factors that can affect or exacerbate burnout in library workers, with almost all chapters identifying that leadership needs to take responsibility for helping workers combat burnout. Chapter 6 examines the connection between contingent labor and morale in archivists with temporary positions. Chapter 7 discusses the ways in which transitions and tumultuousness in leadership can lead to burnout, as employees are destabilized by goal switching and the continuous need to justify one's worth as part of the team. In Chapter 8, a connection is made between being a parent and career burnout among librarians. Chapter 9 tackles dysfunctional organizational cultures in libraries, stating that issues such as “generational conflict, salary inequities, lack of representation of women and people of color in leadership positions, and poor leadership (p. 125)” all contribute to burnout. Chapter 10 reviews the ways in which dealing with challenging coworkers adds to burnout and affects well-being, which leads to high turnover and workers wasting time on the job. Chapter 11 covers the Fear of Making Mistakes (FOMM), looking at the ways in which poor treatment and toxic work environments feed FOMM, and taking extra time to avoid mistakes adds to decreased productivity and burnout. Chapter 12 considers the effects of tenure & publishing on tenure-track librarians, realizing that a lack of time to work on publishing during the workday leads to a poor work-life balance. Lastly, Chapter 13, which was briefly mentioned above, looks at professional service expectations. As requirements are vague and unclear, personal time is often used to complete service, and new commitments are often made while still maintaining previous ones. Overall, this section discusses these external factors that add to burnout and calls upon leadership to help alleviate these pressures in various ways, such as supporting and showing compassion to employees, correcting dysfunctional work environments, and expressing clear expectations.

Section 3, *Lived Experiences*, highlights three narratives on burnout experienced by individuals. Chapter 14 discusses the experiences of Black women during the Pandemic. Being a minority with multiple identities can cause Black women to have increased burnout, which was then exacerbated by the pandemic and social climate of early 2020. Again, leadership is called

on to support BIPOC staff and help disrupt the systemic inequality that takes place in libraries. The author of Chapter 15 reviews the literature on librarians with mental illness (MI) and explores the relationship between burnout and MI. Included are suggestions to help prevent burnout and tips for supervisors and colleagues to create inclusive workplaces. Chapter 16 provides an overview of radical empathy and calls upon leaders to employ radical empathy and acts of care to combat burnout by creating a culture of respect, visibility, self-compassion, authenticity, appreciation, listening, support, and more. Throughout the chapters in this section, it is clear that leadership is expected to facilitate these necessary changes to promote inclusivity and belonging in institutional culture.

In Section 4, *Individual Responses to Burnout*, the authors examine ways individuals have managed and mitigated burnout. Chapter 17 outlines action-based, accessible steps for combatting burnout by reframing thoughts, restoring control, and creating change, based on principles from trauma-informed care (TIC) and Constructive Living (CL). Chapter 18 identifies time as the key to regaining work-life balance and suggests tips for managing time to combat burnout, such as scheduling breaks and taking time to decompress after work. Echoing others, this chapter points to library leaders to promote this balance. Chapter 19 goes a step further and addresses what happens when leadership gets burned out. It suggests solutions such as emotional intelligence training and proactively putting plans and procedures in place. Chapter 20 encourages readers to seek help from their unions, emphasizing the need to take collective action against unfair conditions to improve working environments and lessen burnout. This section provides many potential solutions to the problem of burnout.

In Section 5, *Organization Responses to Burnout*, we move beyond the individual to look at ways organizations manage burnout. Chapter 21 reviews organizational culture and different styles of leadership to determine what type is most effective at increasing engagement and empowerment, to combat burnout in libraries. The authors also provide tips for ways that anyone at any level can “lead from the middle,” which I found to be a very welcome and refreshing concept after so many previous chapters pointed to leaders to solve the burnout issue. In Chapter 22, the authors discuss using proper onboarding strategies for new hires to prevent burnout. Chapter 23 focuses on the ambiguity and conflict (which can lead to burnout) that occurs when departments are merged. Leaders are called upon to create a civil atmosphere and add meaning to job duties to combat burnout during these tumultuous times. In Chapter 24, the authors focus on burnout in deans, directors, and other administrators, noting this can often happen when these leaders lack training and ethics education. Ultimately, it is clear that—while leaders play an important role in mitigating and preventing burnout and they have more power to make a more systemic change—the organization as a whole and all employees need to work collaboratively toward this goal.

After closely reading these sections, I found that the greatest strength of *Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses* is that it excels in providing many perspectives and vast coverage on the landscape of burnout in libraries, creating awareness and laying the groundwork for what comes next. The editors successfully compiled chapters that represent an array of voices and lenses through which a variety of viewpoints are shared on this topic. Additionally, this book does not pretend to be what it is not—it does not claim to have all the answers. It provides ideas and suggestions, outlines the various experiences of others, and then challenges its readers to find what works best for them and their situations. The questions at the beginning of each section push readers to dig more deeply, look closely, and think critically about the problem of burnout. The book adeptly demonstrates the issue and then empowers and invites its readers to join the conversation and advocate for the change that needs to happen in academic libraries.

Admittedly, these strengths could also be considered a weakness of the book. While many voices and perspectives were included, the authors themselves mention that there are marginalized voices that are lacking representation here. Additionally, while all of this groundwork has been laid for the work that needs to be done, putting the onus on the reader to get to work, it does leave the reader with a sense of taking on an insurmountable task. This is especially true for those readers in leadership roles. As noted, many of the authors in this compilation point to the leaders to invoke cultural changes for the employees, but is this realistic? Recognizing that academic libraries are part of a larger institution, one can't help but wonder much power these leaders really have to make these changes.

Overall, *Academic Librarian Burnout Causes and Responses* is an expertly crafted collection of work on burnout in librarianship. Collectively, the chapter authors provide a wealth of insight into this systemic situation. Editors Holm, Guimaraes, and Marcano organized the chapters in a thoughtful way, adeptly painting the picture and scaffolding up to the call-to-action for their readers. For new librarians, the book creates awareness of the potential for and prevalence of burnout. It outlines the signs and symptoms of which mid-career librarians should be wary. It reminds late-career librarians to keep an eye on their younger colleagues. And it calls on leadership to use their power to work to prevent burnout and care for their burnt-out employees. As the editors expressed in their introduction:

“We want this book to serve as a call: moving us beyond awareness, shifting our mindsets and helping us envision practices that will advance our shared profession. Above all, this work is not done; we hope that the voices, experiences, and insights not included join this cause” (p. xvi).

So let's heed the call: look for the warning signs and listen for those unspoken voices, because, as Neil Young's 1979 earworm concludes, “There's more to the picture than meets the eye.” It

is time to take a closer look at the big picture of the systemic problem of burnout in our libraries—which this book so skillfully sketches—and do the work.

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