



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Organizational Behavior and New Librarians

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ABSTRACT

Learning about organizational culture and behavior sets the foundation to navigate an institution as a new employee. In the following column, two faculty librarians from SUNY Geneseo share their experiences as new faculty and their reflections on organizational behavior, exploring how concepts from that field helped them to learn about their new institution and to grow as librarians.

KEYWORDS

organizational behavior, onboarding, faculty

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Organizational Behavior and New Librarians

This column grew out of a prior work by Alan Witt (2021), published in the BRASS Academic newsletter, which took principles from the field of organizational behavior and applied them to the process of learning a new job. Organizational Behavior is a wide field of study, but the core insight it provides for any new employee in an organization is that the structures and rules of said organization are produced and implemented by people, and are not immutable laws of nature. Additionally, whatever the rules, regulations, and organizational charts say on paper, there is a thriving shadow organization of customs, unofficial authorities, mavens, and influences that also drives people's actions.

The goal of this column is to show how this knowledge can work in practice, by relating the experiences of a newer librarian in the field and then tying them to that core concept. It would also relate a few other strategies that are useful for navigating in a new environment and planning out an intentional investigation of specific aspects of your new organization.

Positionality Statements

Alessandra Otero Ramos

It is important to discuss my identities and intersectionalities so the reader can have a close understanding of my experience at Geneseo. I am a native Spanish speaker who identifies as Puerto Rican. I was born and raised in a lower-class household in Puerto Rico, and I am a first-generation college student. I recognize that my identities shape how I see the world and how I relate to colleagues and students, especially those groups with whom I share some of my identities. I also acknowledge how some of my identities hold privilege. For example, I am white, non-disabled, and a college-educated cisgender woman. These singularities inform how I do my job and how I understand Geneseo's institutional culture. They also imply the limitations I have dealt with since my inception as a SUNY Geneseo employee in March 2019. The most notable was having to teach in a second language, English, and to adapt to a new culture. It is important to note that I have been working at this institution for five years now, I have passed my third renewal review, and have been promoted to associate librarian as well.

Alan Witt

I am a white, cisgender, 6-foot tall, gay male with about 11 years as a full academic librarian, seven of which were at Geneseo. I passed my tenure review and have been promoted to the rank of Librarian. I am the liaison librarian for two larger departments (History and the School of Business), and also supervise two research instruction interns per semester. Additionally, I am currently the chapter president at Geneseo for the union representing faculty and staff (UUP). My position of relative privilege shapes and at times obscures my understanding of the challenges my colleagues face. My overall portfolio of identities and duties also molds my perception of the institution and the environment I work within.

Our Organizational Context

Milne Library serves SUNY (State University of New York) Geneseo, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York. The library is temporarily located in Fraser Hall, as the larger Milne library building was closed for renovations with a projected reopening date sometime within the 2024-2025 academic year. The library is its own department within the college, led by a library director with a series of department heads directly beneath him that run each individual section of the library. All department heads are tenure-track faculty or professionals with a track to permanency, and all employees of the library apart from the director are part of the bargaining unit for either one of two unions, UUP and CSEA.

The current organizational structure of the library positions the library director with a leadership team of department heads who work to chart a course for the library. On a practical day-to-day level, department heads run their departments with a good amount of autonomy, although the library director sets the overall strategy, has final say, and will weigh in on specific operational matters if they potentially have larger organizational effects. Faculty set and run their own day-to-day schedules and projects, with varying degrees of autonomy depending on the internal department and what projects that department is tackling. Professionals have performance plans that govern their overall responsibilities, but in practical terms they have a similar degree of autonomy in deciding how to accomplish them. Other types of employees are managed directly.

What We Didn't Know When We Started Out

Alessandra:

When I started working as an academic librarian in 2012, there were many things I did not know about the academic library culture in terms of the work environment, professional development, and scholarship. Common sense did play a role in figuring out how I should navigate the organizational culture of the workplaces I worked at. However, I now think that if I knew more about organizational behavior concepts before, I would have been more intentional and strategic in the way I developed my professional experience working at higher education institutions.

For me, to talk about what organizational behavior looks like in practice it is essential to state the difference between organizational culture and organizational behavior. According to Crail (2023), "Organizational culture refers to qualities of the workplace itself that influence its employees, whereas organizational behavior refers to the resulting behavior of the people within it." If "organizational behavior is the resulting behavior of the people within the organization based on the culture they're immersed in," (Crail, 2023) then there is a lot I did not know when I started out as a faculty librarian at SUNY Geneseo. To begin with, I did my MIS studies at the University of Puerto Rico, and right after my graduation I got my first library job at that same

institution. Right off the bat, the organizational culture I experienced during the first years of my career is different from the one I'm experiencing now.

In terms of organizational behavior, when I started out working as a librarian, the things I did not know about were: the changing nature of institutional policies, human resources processes, and how to negotiate salary. Understanding the different components within an institution (e.g., departments, committees) and how they intersect with one another was a major thing for me to digest. My experience has taught me that learning these will be done at your own pace and by trial and error. However, it would be helpful if these topics were addressed by MIS, MLS, and MLIS graduate programs.

Alan:

I began my job hunt with the goal of finding a single, full-time academic library position that would allow me to maintain my standard of living; at the time I was working two jobs at 60 total hours per week in order to pay the rent, and the time crunch was unsustainable for me. Salary and cost of living were huge elements for me, and it was frustrating that a lot of libraries were not posting salary ranges in the job descriptions. Geneseo, by contrast, had a defined salary structure that they posted, and offered a unionized position with the option for pensions and tenure.

At that point, I had studied organizational behavior and acquired some tools from library school around motivation. Herzberg's theory of Motivators and Hygiene elements were very useful in figuring out what I needed in a job. In the theory, Motivators are elements of a job that positively inspire higher levels of engagement, and Hygiene elements do not affect motivation until they drop below a set threshold (Albuali, 2022, pp. 2-3). The former includes advancement prospects and recognition, while the latter includes salary, the general work environment, and conditions such as cleanliness or temperature. I used these concepts to evaluate whether this new workplace would be a good environment to work in. My Motivator was the possibility for advancement, but I was more focused on the Hygiene factors due to my work situation at that time. I confirmed that the salary of the new job would pay for my living expenses and fit my overall lifestyle, and that the working and managerial environment was not abusive. All of these elements led me to quickly accept the position, as both Motivators and Hygiene elements were perfectly aligned with what I was looking for.

Alessandra:

For me, the process of getting a job offer and accepting it was very informative of how transparent the organization can be with the salary and compensation topics. In my experience, the organization usually does not tell you about salary negotiations, non-financial perks, and bonuses. According to Bones (2023), "70 percent of managers expect this back-and-forth before their offers are accepted but few actually tell candidates that they are free to haggle over job

terms.” Employers expect you to know how much money they have available for new hires, but if you do not ask, you will never know.

I learned about these topics due to serendipity; while job hunting for a position in the United States, I found several articles about salary that helped me to understand how hiring processes work and that demystified the idea that the employer is doing you a favor by hiring you. Instead, the employer needs you and you have the expertise and skills to negotiate a salary appropriate to what you can bring to the table. I learned about sign-on bonuses and relocation packages from these articles and applied them to the process of accepting the job at Geneseo. This was important information to have at hand when considering a job offer.

After accepting the job, one of the challenges I confronted at SUNY Geneseo was becoming a faculty member. When I joined SUNY Geneseo’s library, I had seven years of experience as a liaison librarian in special collections and academic libraries. These prior positions were not tenure track, nor faculty positions. They focused on providing the services already established, and little was talked about developing a scholarship agenda. Also, they provided little room to develop your own projects. Consequently, the scholarship and tenure aspects of a faculty librarian position was the scariest part for me. Having a scholarly agenda, writing a self-evaluation, or having a diversity statement and a positionality statement were completely new to me.

Contrary to the process of accepting the job, the colleagues of my department were supportive throughout my first years. They explained to me the procedures in place to fulfill the criteria for evaluation and provided me with feedback when I had to put together my renewal and promotion packets.

Alan:

As with my colleague, the biggest transition was becoming a faculty member. In my previous job, I was a managed employee with my agenda largely set for me by supervisors, with no research responsibilities, and some autonomy in scheduling research instruction sessions. At the start of my new position, I had no idea how to set up a research agenda or what to focus on. More importantly, I had not figured out exactly what I wanted to accomplish in the position, apart from attaining continuing appointment (tenure). To help with that uncertainty, I turned to my knowledge of organizational behavior to try to figure out what to do next.

Specifically, McClelland’s acquired needs theory helped me to build goals. This theory outlines three major needs that drive individuals: achievement (characterized by accomplishment and creation), affiliation (characterized by respect and affirmation from either coworkers or managers), and power (characterized by the capacity to influence and or control your work environment) (Dunn & Moore, 2022, p. 81). I had previously identified my primary motivation as power, in the sense of knowing the rules of an organization and being able to work to effect positive change by using those rules effectively. Knowing my motivations set my longer-

term agenda, which was learning how the organization worked with the goal of identifying the levers necessary for change. Knowing my motivators (per Herzberg's theory) also helped me to figure out what I wanted: advancement and promotion. That led me to focus on scholarship with the end goal of publishing and presenting.

Figuring out what to focus my scholarship on was more difficult, but our department had an excellent tradition of mutual support in developing scholarship, through defined targets for different levels of promotions, tenure, and renewals, and through informal but frequent mentorship to new librarians to help them develop their direction. From an organizational standpoint, building structures and traditions that assist new employees helps greatly with retention and success, and it is always worthwhile to think both about what a given tradition is intended to accomplish and exactly how it achieves those goals. Not having a publish or perish barrier while expecting presentations as an acceptable alternative to publication allowed us to get on our feet while contributing to the profession.

Fix the Lack of Knowledge: Investigating the Organization

Alessandra:

For me, the process of investigating the organization and how to learn to be faculty was non-linear. It manifested as a series of happenings that sometimes intersected. To investigate, I started by consulting my job description and the library's policies and procedures on how to be a faculty librarian. While learning about the policies and procedures, I also started conversations with the veteran colleagues on how they built up their faculty path. Though each of our liaison areas are different, I learned that there were similarities in the way each of us performed as faculty librarians—such as teaching, presenting at conferences, and publishing scholarly or popular articles.

I found the conversations with colleagues and teaching faculty from my liaison areas the most helpful because they showed me how to carry on with my teaching responsibilities and scholarly agenda in a sustainable way. From them I learned the importance of developing my own projects without mimicking what my colleagues were doing. This behavior diversifies the way the research instruction librarians interpret what it is to be faculty. For example, teaching faculty have protected research time. Faculty librarians do not. In theory, faculty librarians are allowed to go on sabbatical; none of my colleagues have done so. According to the policies, I can do it, but the organizational behavior of the department proves the opposite.

Alan:

One of the primary insights I got from studying organizational behavior was that organizations are created and maintained by people, and that given enough time and effort they can be changed. Sometimes the personal costs of that change are insurmountable, but that knowledge is still useful.

Part of my initial process in trying to learn about my new organization was getting to know people, talking with people about the job, and starting to build up a picture of what was possible to achieve. At the time, we did not have a good institutional understanding of the rules and procedures around continuing appointments, nor the secret rules and procedures passed down by other librarians. As I talked with colleagues, I started to build a sense of what I wanted out of work: a workplace where I had control of my time, projects, an opportunity to effect positive change, and freedom from micromanaging. This was a very different set of possibilities from my prior, managed position, but as I tried new things, I added them to my internal catalog of workplace elements to strive for.

As I built up my knowledge about what I wanted, I also began trying to learn more about the rules of the institution. This was harder than it sounds; our college is governed by a union contract, policies of the board of trustees, policies of the college, and state policies for government workers. The first step was locating all of these documents, realizing that they all applied to me, and using them to research whenever a question cropped up. One major discovery was that very few people in the organization knew all the rules, and that knowledge was a form of power.

Apply the Knowledge: Identifying the Possibilities for Change

Alessandra:

Through participation in library committees and the college senate I have learned the ways of the college culture and how to make changes. An example was the formation of the library's IDEA committee through which the Library Statement of Solidarity on DEIA was stated (Milne Library, 2021). After five years, I have not completely figured out how to navigate the system because the system keeps changing. For instance, in my time serving on the library's Committee of Term Renewal and Promotion, I have witnessed two substantial revisions of the guidelines for promotion.

Alan:

A major realization after learning the workplace policies was realizing they could be changed. As a department, we researched requirements for continuing appointments and how to change them, which required conversations with the provost's office and the library director. We found that our department controlled our own requirements, and then we changed them, collaborating with the provost's office to write those new guidelines into their materials. This facilitated promotions for many of our faculty (including myself) and made it easier for newer faculty to plan for advancement.

That sort of change can be accomplished from the grassroots, but organizational change often requires deeper knowledge and access to the decision-making process. I was elected to the executive board of our local union and used that platform to learn more about the contractual

lines and ways the university worked behind the scenes. This knowledge has enabled me to see what could be changed easily, what would be difficult, and what was impossible, which has allowed me to spend my energy more constructively.

Conclusions and Takeaways

Having knowledge of concepts of motivation and organizational structure was a huge help in not feeling overwhelmed in our jobs. That knowledge gave us the tools to actively research the procedures and culture of our organization when we joined up. In particular, knowing the differences between culture vs. behavior (unwritten vs. written rules) helped us to avoid pitfalls and to plan our careers. Ultimately, these tools have helped us to improve our library and to work to change our institution for the better.

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