"You're One of Us": The Impact of Propinquity on a Liaison Librarian's Professional Identity

Afra Bolefski

University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

Abstract: This column explores the impact of propinquity on a librarian's sense of belonging and professional identity through a first-hand account.

Like many Academic Librarians, I am a Liaison Librarian "embedded" or physically located

within the building of the faculty I support. In my case, the business school is the faculty and is also the

edifice that encompasses a number of departments, including a small library where I work[1] . I have

found that this propinquity, or physical proximity to the faculty, staff and students, has played a

significant role in shaping my professional identity as perceived by my patrons, primarily faculty and

staff. I have been accepted, in a sense, as "one of them." On a personal note, I too have been influenced

by this propinquity where my own perception of "belonging", i.e. where I feel I belong, has been not so

attached to the Library (library system as an entity) as with my patron base, the business school.

However, this "connection" has not come without its challenges. Before I delve into this issue in greater

detail, I would like to first consider two distinct professional identities I've had in previous librarian

roles and what led me to my present situation.

I worked in special libraries as a Business/Law Librarian prior to joining academia. In special

libraries, your patrons are typically the employees that work within the corporation or firm. In my

experience, they ranged from business consultants and lawyers to administrative assistants and clerks,

and everything in between. I would often work alongside these different groups on projects or

accounts but my primary purpose was to provide tangible research output to lawyers or business

consultants that they could, in turn, bill to their clients. I generally occupied office space down the hall

from senior partners but this propinquity did not have an influence on my sense of belonging to these

elite groups. Who's to say if it wasn't due to the sheer size of the firms themselves often spanning

several floors of an office tower, the obvious difference in roles and rank or the fact that I was a fairly

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[1] The "Management Library" is one of 10 libraries on campus at the University of Manitoba with a current staff complement of 5.

novice librarian, but I never truly identified with my patrons as I did with those that played a supportive role, like myself. Whatever the reason was, when looking back I can say that my professional identity wasn't attached so much to my job title as it was to my role, or more specifically, the supportive role I played to those bringing in clients. This all began to change once I entered into the academic landscape.

Transitioning into academic libraries came with a marked difference in how I perceived myself and my role. Rather than sharing space with different work groups, I operated out of the main library. This change in culture and environment allowed me to be fully immersed in a library environment. My peers in the offices next to me were other liaison librarians and my patrons were the faculty, students and staff at the business school in the adjacent building. After a few months, I began to perceive a sense of belonging to the library. This is not to say that strong professional relationships were not required to be built with faculty, conversely, I was fortunate to build ties with the school – comprised mainly from networking at school events or faculty meeting – which led to new initiatives both inside and outside of the classroom. Yet, in retrospect, these faculty-librarian dynamics were confined to my supportive role as librarian and the services that corresponded with it. It could be argued that due in large part to the strong professional relationships with my peers as well as the focused library-like needs of the business school, that my professional identity was based on how I perceived my purpose in relation to my patrons and thus my role as Librarian.

It would be remiss of me not to include the notion that some may argue working in a unionized environment played a contributing role in my sense of belonging. Granted, Librarians and Faculty share the same collective agreement, which includes similar benefits. However, I did not have faculty

status then nor do I at present. Furthermore, working in a unionized environment has not played a role in shaping my own professional identity at any post-secondary institution in which I've worked.

Interestingly, transferring to my current post-secondary institution brought about additional changes in self-perception, which I had not experienced to that point. As a result of being physically located inside the business school, I was able to get a sense of the inner-workings of the school, not typically found through planned faculty meetings or classroom instruction. Additionally, ad hoc encounters with staff and administrators, planned and unplanned lunches with faculty members, and invites (later on) to off-campus events allowed me to develop even stronger ties with the school. This experience was not dissimilar to what I encountered as a library staff member, however, the physical isolation from the larger libraries on campus and a lack of system-wide library events did not afford the same opportunities to create meaningful, equivalent connections. Further, many of the "perks" or conveniences of being a larger library such as large staff meetings, more service support, etc., were not available in a satellite library. This is not to say I didn't do my part to connect with the larger library system. Nevertheless, my sense of belonging eventually shifted towards the people in the space I occupied, primarily the faculty and staff. They treated me as one of their own thus affording me opportunities that pushed beyond the boundaries of the liaison role. A few examples of note include being asked to facilitate and organize a faculty-led finance competition for students and representing the business school as a judge for a national case competition. I finally felt the same when I was relocated in an office alongside faculty after the library closed for renovations. Rather than be transferred to another library as the rest of the library staff was, the school found me a new "home" for nearly a year. My patrons became my peers. Even now, I still feel this sense of belonging.

This shift in my personal sense of belonging, and also in being treated like a member of the business school, has come with a sense of loyalty, one which may more aptly be described as a personal motivation to represent the needs of the school. This "loyalty" does not in itself present an obstacle, such as when dealing with other academic departments. However, when conflicting demands arise with the library, therein lies the challenge: dueling loyalties.

Consider the following scenario: your library offers services and spaces inclusive to all faculty, students, and staff (as well as members of the public). The faculty or school you support, however, strongly believe this policy conflicts with the needs of its own students. More pointedly, the faculty have identified specific spaces in your library to become exclusive for the use of their students. The school now approaches their kin looking for change. You are viewed as "one of them": their trusted advocate to voice their needs to library administration. How do you approach this dilemma? Could this be a conflict of interest? If this describes you or your situation then who takes precedence, the school or the library? During my time, I have been involved in similar situations. On one hand, my affinity to the school gives me an appreciation for the unique needs not fully understood by library administrators. At times, however, the needs of the school may not be in the best interests of the library and has led to a conflict of interest. Situations like this are not unique in institutions that have close faculty-liaison ties. Fortunately, as liaisons we have administrators who make the final call, yet that does not remove the fact that we are often caught "in the middle" between the conflicting demands of our patrons and our employer. Even after the verdict is in, there is an urge or desire to explain the decision to the other side. So how does one reconcile this conflict? Perhaps one way is to take a step back and look at the bigger picture; what is the ultimate good? Having the advantage of

knowing the inner workings of the faculty and the employer will play into negotiating a reasonable solution, such as a compromise.

Looking back, I see how my sense of belonging and in turn my professional identity, has been framed by my propinquity to colleagues and patrons. Although feeling a sense of belonging to one's patrons is advantageous for a liaison librarian and definitely results in many unique opportunities to participate in "out of scope" liaison work, it also comes with its own unique challenges: balancing the needs of the patron and employer when dealing with situations that contest library policy. Managing these dueling loyalties will have implications that must not be overlooked, however, having insight into the real priorities of your patron and employer can work to the advantage of not only you, the librarian, but all who look to you for the best way to champion their cause.