Being a Scholar in a Service Profession: Increasing Expectations for Research and Publication in Academic Libraries

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Abstract:

As academic positions fall under greater scrutiny, librarians pursuing tenure-line positions are asked to produce research and publish at the same rates as other tenure-line campus faculty, and are being held accountable for this in their respective departments.

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Lis Pankl serves as Head of Graduate and Undergraduate Services at the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah. She holds a BA in English, a MA in English, a MS in Library Science, and a PhD in Geography. In keeping with her diverse disciplinary background, Lis works as a liaison to English, Geography, Ethnic Studies, and Education, Culture & Society at the University of Utah. Her research interests include feminist geographies, student success and retention, university engagement, libraries and management, and critical pedagogies.

As pressures mount for university administrators to demonstrate the productivity of their faculty, academic libraries with tenure-line faculty status for librarians are beginning to come under a similar microscope. The financial and operational costs of tenure-line positions in universities are significant, as they include generous benefits, professional and scholarly autonomy, and job security. Thus, as administrators look for areas where these positions can be cut, the library can be a natural target. Although the Master of Library and Information Science is still considered the terminal degree, administrators with limited knowledge of the field may challenge the practice of awarding faculty status to members of the academic community who generally do not have doctorates or PhDs (Walters, 2016). This makes library faculty status vulnerable. Unlike the Master of Fine Arts, which is rarely questioned as a terminal degree, the Master of Library and Information Science is often not perceived as holding a similar weight. Additionally, at most academic libraries, the teaching done by librarians is not credit-bearing, which thereby takes away a powerful and defining role awarded to other faculty, who hold the status *teacher of record* and thus the ability to establish themselves as experts in their fields through influencing future generations (Bolin, 2008).

Despite differences between tenure-line librarians and other tenure-line faculty, however, the biggest hurdle when producing research and publishing is the fundamental service-mindedness of librarians. Librarians are trained throughout their education, and often in their first positions, to put the user or the patron first. In effect, they are told that their job is to answer any question, or address any need, that may arise in the library at any given time. While this attitude generates an environment of excellent customer service, it is not likely to produce the kind of research and publication efforts that require time away from the library, nor encourage the intensive reading and writing that demands a certain amount of solitude. Ironically, asking librarians to put the same amount of effort into their

research and publishing as other tenure-line faculty takes away, for many, their identity as librarians

who are on-hand to help with any need.

Yet, librarians see many benefits to having faculty status at their campuses. In addition to

providing job security, superior benefits, and a higher salary, faculty status enables librarians to

collaborate with other faculty on teaching and research. It also allows participation in faculty

governance, the ability to apply for grants and sabbaticals, and the opportunity to perform their own

research. Consequently, librarians and library administrators are caught in the cross-hairs of university

politics and expectations. To ensure the security of their roles as faculty, librarians and library

administration must find a way to merge their service-oriented mindset with the scholar mind-set.

They must find strategies for carving out time away from either front-line service or the immediate

technical demands on the back-end of the library's operation.

This merging of these identities as service provider *and* scholar demands a strong and

communicative partnership between the library faculty and the library administration. If producing

research and publications is of importance, and if it is the only way to ensure the safe-keeping of

tenure-line faculty status for librarians, then efforts must be made to cover more of the service-

oriented aspects of the library with adjuncts, instructors, and career-line faculty as is done in other

departments on campus.

References

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