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## The Importance of Being Earnest: A Librarian's Approach to Academic Leadership

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# The importance of being earnest: A librarian's approach to academic leadership

by Susan G. Broome

## Abstract

When accepting universitywide leadership roles, academic librarians bring skills in partnering, administration and sharing information that can build trust, lead to informed decisions, promote good will and strengthen the organization. Service in this capacity requires an understanding of and an appreciation for the community that resides within the institution.

## Introduction

In taking leadership positions, it is important to me to act with integrity, strengthen the organization and leave an uncluttered path for those who follow me. A recent reading of Hugh Hecló's *On Thinking Institutionally* and Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story of Success* has led me to consider some of the influences that guided my two years of service as chair of the House of Delegates, a representative body of faculty members from 11 schools and colleges and the University Libraries at Mercer University.

Both books emphasize community, Gladwell's pointing to the importance of opportunity and legacy with a strong emphasis on the amount of time and passion that must be invested for one to finally experience success. Who you are, where you have come from and the company you keep are as important as the sometimes-extraordinary occasions that open up for leadership. There must be both autonomy and complexity, engagement of the mind and the imagination, and a connection between effort and rewards to develop a meaningful purpose in life. A willingness to make sacrifices and live with expectation gives evidence of the value we place in individuals, causes and institutions. Our commitment to clear communication requires a multiplicity of forms — encouraging, calming, giving commands, cajoling, negotiating, and sharing

information — all of which indicate the respect with which we relate to those individuals who make up our communities.

Having grown up on the campus of a small private college and then spending much of my professional career at a larger private university, I have benefited from intellectual stimulation, a sense of community and an understanding of investing in both individuals and an institution. I developed a personal work ethic that values being consistent, responsible, thoughtful, trustworthy and fair. In the same environment, I learned to think independently, contribute toward larger purposes and respect diversity.

The writings of Hugh Hecló embrace the community bound up in institutions. This community exists because it was developed and valued in the past and then entrusted to the next generation. It is inherited and bequeathed, not with a sense of obligation by those within it, but with accountability, personal initiative and sacrifice. Individuals will fail the institution if they think and act without regard for the purposes it represents. They may have a healthy distrust of policies to follow or goals set before them, yet a strong institution will offer space for open-mindedness, doubt, judgment and inquiry. Institutions will fail us; however, living without expectations would be even more grievous. Duty and loyalty should not be lightly entrusted, but there can be satisfaction in being attentive to meaning in the world as part of an institutional community.

By nature, there is tension in the academic community between individualism and the institution. We revel in the thought processes, we value academic freedom, and we search for research materials to expand the minds of

students whom we actively engage in learning. Yet we must be accountable, and there are administrative necessities to allow for each of these activities. It is within the communities of institutions and professional organizations that I have found my voice. My focus has been on the description of and access to primary materials held in the archives and on the acquisition and cataloging of print and online resources within a complex university environment. My faculty status resides in the Division of Library Services.

With responsibility for providing technical services to libraries on two main campuses and four regional centers, I train others to balance the needs of all programs, all students and faculty, all campuses, all of the time. When I was elected chair of the House of Delegates, an advisory group to the president established by the university's board of trustees, I was conscious of the reputation librarians have as being impartial and cooperative. I was also well aware of my own affinity for administrative, technical and organizational work, and I believed my experience would serve the university well. My past had already brought me to several conclusions regarding leadership in an academic environment.

- Inclusiveness and partnering build trust, respect and a diverse community.
- Sharing information allows for better understanding of issues and more informed decisions.
- Acting as a representative with a strong sense of responsibility promotes good will.
- Strengthening an organization and its members leads to greater accountability.

The methods by which the House affirmed these principles under a librarian's leadership will follow.

### **Inclusiveness and Partnering**

Even within the University Libraries, serving a myriad of programs across several campuses, there are perceived inequities of resources and personnel. Despite being hypersensitive about providing equal service whenever possible, it is easy to slip and appear insensitive. Collaboration is ingrained in me, and being objective and fair is part of my nature; yet it takes a conscious effort to involve all parties.

It is with this admission that I asked the executive committee to make a basic change in the House's meetings. For several years, they had been planned at

two locations on the main campuses with a telephone hookup. Having been on the "other" end of telephone conferences, I knew what was missed in such an arrangement. We scheduled two face-to-face meetings each year at a central location, an equal sacrifice to all who could attend, and attempted to hear from everyone who wanted input in the more frequent conference calls.

Inclusiveness meant choosing members to fill committee rosters with the various academic programs and all locations in mind. It meant requesting inclusive language in the Faculty Handbook on behalf of the library faculty, substituting the phrase "schools and colleges" with "academic units." Likewise a statement was added saying that every effort would be made "to rotate the chair-elect position among different academic units."

Partnership was a major factor in planning meetings in advance with guests whose knowledge and responsibilities were of importance to a majority of the group and would prompt active discussion. In preparation for newly established, full-House, semiannual meetings with the university president, the executive committee sought questions on a broad spectrum of subjects to submit to the president prior to his attendance.

### **Sharing Information**

Effective dissemination of information is related to partnering, and who better than a librarian could begin conducting e-mail discussions for all delegates, alternates and ex-officio administrators? Deans were appreciative of the information they were privy to as the House deliberated issues such as the place of research in the university, academic attire for students, tuition waivers, Web publishing, international student admissions, religious observances, part-time faculty appointments, environmental responsibility, communication curriculum, e-mail usage and athletics. The subject lines of all e-mails related to House business began with "HoD" to make it easier for the receivers to locate them, and several news items were included in each e-mail to keep the total amount of correspondence in check.

A benefit of being the chair of the House is participating in numbers of campuswide meetings, and I consciously "participated" instead of only "attending." Those faculty and administrators who were present at meetings of the Academic Council, University Planning Council and the Educational Policy Committee of the board of trustees, to name a few, were eager to hear reports from the House of Delegates and engage in conversation about issues of importance to the faculty at large.

On the arrival of a new president, the University Planning Council began a comprehensive 10-year strategic plan. As the representative of the House, I was appointed to the metrics committee, charged with determining how the university would gauge its progress in meeting new standards. Budgets would be tied to these measures, and part of my role was to ensure that all faculties were considered during our deliberations and consulted when their input was needed.

### Acting as a Representative

The chair of the House has a unique opportunity to represent the faculty throughout the university as an active participant in meetings and, occasionally, to the larger community through events and public media. On behalf of the House, I was involved in early conversations with the university's new president and vice president for administration and finance. In the first month of the president's tenure, I met with him personally and shared House documents that outlined what the faculties were thinking and how it compared with priorities recently set by the board of trustees. Later in the year, again as a representative of the House, I was involved in a nationwide search for the next provost. This was not a time to

hold back! Full engagement is only possible through careful study of related issues and a willingness to be the public face of an organization.

Similarly, I became the face of the library faculty to those with whom I met and worked. It was a role that gave me the opportunity to make others aware of library faculty responsibilities, areas of service, requirements for promotion, and expectations for involvement in scholarly activities. It made me more intentional in reminding my colleagues of the same role they play in every day-to-day encounter with faculty, students and administrators. I was keenly aware that I represented my dean, in particular, as well as my staff colleagues, many of whom were "picking up the pieces" while I was out of my office with House business. The visibility of the House through my involvement in these activities — as a librarian — promoted good will for both the House and the University Libraries.

### Strengthening the Organization

Attendance at House meetings and involvement of delegates in deliberations often depend on the issues at hand or the guests invited to discussions. Strengthening

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**EXCELLENCE BEYOND EXPECTATIONS**

meant working with the executive committee on an ambitious agenda for all scheduled meetings from the first time it met, and delegates gained energy with this strong sense of direction. Open debate on academic issues allowed participation by the newest to the longest-tenured faculty delegates.

Strengthening also meant studying how, when and for what term delegates and alternates were selected each year and determining if the roster were full. For continuity, it seemed best to lengthen terms from two to three years. With some difficulties in filling positions of officers, it also made sense to ask the executive committee to serve as the nominating committee.

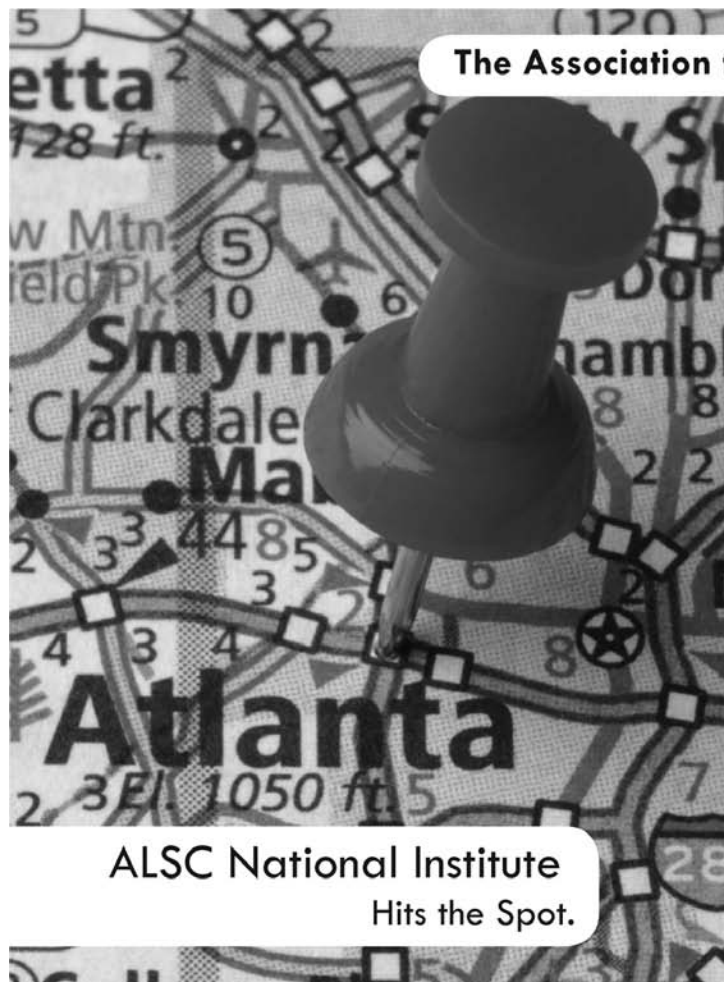
In response to increased attention to student and faculty research, the provost's office called for assistance from the House's standing research committee and from House-nominated members on new committees. Provisions for those committees were outlined in the Faculty Handbook with guidelines for appointing members from across the campuses. These members will

be accountable to their own faculty as they weigh issues related to funding of research initiatives, and there is high incentive to be an active participant in these discussions.

### **Strengthening Rights and Responsibilities of Faculty**

Bylaws are never very interesting reading unless one is a first-year faculty member (and perhaps not even then)! However, they are of supreme importance in ensuring that faculty rights are upheld and that formal grievances proceed in a fair and timely manner. It is in attempting to adhere to bylaws during a grievance hearing that weaknesses in those bylaws can become most apparent.

The House considered it imperative to review this section of the Faculty Handbook following each such proceeding, and it benefited from naming the same members to the second review committee that it had on the first. The process was complicated and involved a great deal of collaboration among committee members representing several academic units. Advocating for faculty rights meant preserving the confidentiality of the grievances



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while communicating with key participants and working with the university counsel's office to make recommendations to the House, and ultimately to the president, for revisions.

These included replacing the word "promptly" with specific numbers of working days and specifying that hearings take place on the campus of the grieving faculty member. In addition, the revisions clarified the fact that a personal lawyer may advise the grievant but not actively participate in the hearing (this is an academic proceeding, not a legal one) and required a list of witnesses with varying viewpoints prior to the hearing. The bylaws now call for the grievance committee to produce written findings of fact for each allegation to submit to the provost. They also provide support for the committee chair during the grievance process by involving the House's executive committee as an advisory body in making decisions.

In calling for this review, the House gave full attention to faculty rights, learned from past experiences and enhanced a document that should be respected for its objectivity and integrity. Distinctions between tenured and nontenured faculty were sharpened, and faculty benefited by studying the contents of the Handbook that is the most accurate statement of their rights and corresponding responsibilities.

### Conclusion

Since the House is largely made up of teaching faculty, and since I was relatively new to the House when I was elected, it would have been easy to second-guess my ability to tackle the issues that would arise over the next two years. Certainly there were times when I felt a bit inadequate for the task, yet by staying in close contact with the executive committee, I realized I was not alone in thinking that there were no easy answers! The confidence I had in being able to fulfill my responsibilities was born of a strong belief that there is a place at the table of any organization for everyone. Each of us has unique strengths, and with some persistence of our own and the cooperation of others, we can determine our roles.

One of the most important things I learned during my tenure as chair was the value of a fully engaged delegate. Though I appreciated the trust that members put in me, it was of little benefit when decisions were difficult and determined by a majority vote. Those who took the time and made the effort to understand the issues set before us became accountable by making their own judgments instead of depending on others. They made use of independent thinking and affirmed the future of the

organization at the same time. As representatives of their own faculties, they were being faithful to their purpose and nurturing a process that has already been passed to new leaders.

Malcolm Gladwell reminds us of potential, whether from legacy or opportunity, that can lead to some measure of success, either individually or as represented by a group. Hugh Heclo speaks of gratitude in being involved in meaningful work, of respecting the game in which we play and of giving our best efforts with little thought of receiving. Life is too complex to be lived as an individual, and I believe there is value in investing in select organizations that work toward the benefit of others. There will be many more members than chairs of organizations, but members can be leaders in their own right. Integrity, responsibility, depth, initiative — I hoped to bring each of these qualities to the office I accepted. Yet in the process, I came to a clearer understanding that leadership through membership, active membership, can be a high calling. ▶▶

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