Keeping the Light On: Academic Librarians and Burnout

Jason D. Phillips
Laura Pitts
Jessica Riedmueller
Joanna Warren

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln
Part of the Information Literacy Commons, Scholarly Communication Commons, and the Scholarly Publishing Commons
Keeping the Light On: Academic Librarians and Burnout

Jason D. Phillips\textsuperscript{a} (jason.phillips@ucf.edu), Laura Pitts\textsuperscript{b} (lepitts@jsu.edu), Jessica Riedmueller\textsuperscript{c} (jriedmueller@uca.edu), and Joanna Warren\textsuperscript{c} (jewing@uca.edu)

\textsuperscript{a}University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA, \textsuperscript{b}Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama, USA, \textsuperscript{c}University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas, USA

**ABSTRACT**

There is substantial research about sources of burnout among academic librarians; however, very little addresses the impact of the local environment. Responding to regional and institutional shifts while still trying to uphold the values of librarianship such as providing confidential and free access to information can quickly lead to mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion, classic symptoms of burnout. A panel discussion was presented at the Arkansas Library Association (ArLA) / Southeast Library Association (SELA) Joint Conference, on Saturday, October 14, 2023. Academic librarians from different Southern states discussed their local environments, their libraries’ responses to recent events, and their strategies for working through burnout. Some of the aspirational outcomes from the discussion were: recognition that burnout is a common experience; how to find ways to serve patrons despite fluctuating hurdles; and understanding how personal burnout can impact the entire library organization. This article is a summation of the panelists’ discussion.

**KEYWORDS**

Academic Librarians; Burnout; Quiet Quit; Pandemic; Censorship

**INTRODUCTION**

Although burnout has long been a common experience among workers, many additional triggers for the condition have emerged in recent years, including political and social unrest, financial instability, and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. An article from the American Psychological Association’s “2022 Trends-Report” announced “Burnout and stress are everywhere” and cited their 2021 study of 1,501 U.S. workers which found that 79% had experienced work-related stress in the previous month and nearly a third (32%) reported “emotional exhaustion” (Abramson, 2022). Academic librarians have not been immune to these experiences. Starting in summer 2023, a group of library faculty at a mid-sized Southeastern university began to brainstorm about a research project to determine the sources of burnout among academic librarians, how it has affected them and their work, what they are doing to address these feelings, and what support is being or should be provided by their institutions and professional organizations. The theme for the 2023 joint Arkansas Library Association/Southeastern Library Association Conference, “Libraries: Shining a Light in the Darkness,” seemed like a perfect opportunity to begin this discussion with a diverse regional audience. A regional call for participants resulted in panelists from three Southeastern states. This paper is a summary of the resulting conference session, “Keeping the light on: Academic librarians and burnout,” held on October 14, 2023. It includes the original questions addressed by the panelists along with a summary of their responses.

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

*The profession seems on the verge of a precipice. Burn-out, the pandemic, and the political environment are all contributing to feelings of quiet quitting, leaving for new employment opportunities, or people leaving the profession. Have you experienced feelings or the desire to quiet quit, seek new employment, or leave the profession altogether?*
Panelist 1:
I was experiencing feelings of profound burnout in 2021 and left my former position after nearly 9 years of employment.

As librarians, it is an unspoken part of our profession that we give 110% of ourselves to our jobs because we believe in the work we are doing. We feel called to help others. But by 2021, I was quiet quitting at work: doing just enough to get by but no longer pushing myself to excel or take on new projects. I was coping with debilitating anxiety brought on by my burnout. I knew it was time to go. I started to search for new employment and accepted a position at another university.

The change in the workplace environment has had a powerfully restorative effect for me and I feel like I have “the wind in my sails” again.

Panelist 2:
My burnout experience has been mixed between both the public library profession and entry into the academic library profession. At times I feel that, simply because of when the pandemic hit and started to lessen, my entire burnout experience was right in the middle of making personal choices to change my work-life balance and finally take care of my own mental health.

During 2019, before the pandemic hit and while I was still working as a public librarian, I was asked by my district representative at the state library service to consider talking about “anything” that I would want at a regional meeting of library directors. I remember walking into the breakroom and realizing that I didn’t really have anything I wanted to talk about or share - which was very odd because speaking to a group of fellow librarians and encouraging them is one of my favorite parts of my job. In fact, the only thing I wanted to talk to these librarians about was burnout. I recognized then that I was doing a lot of work, being asked to make a lot of decisions, and having the weight of my library on my shoulders while feeling little to no support from others. I knew it was time to leave, even when I knew that it would mean I would have to leave comfort to gain clarity. When I finally made the decision to walk away from a directorship in public libraries after 9 years, it was mixed with a lot of personal apprehension, simply because the feelings of burnout were over-exhausting and impacting my sleep, mental health, and overall life enjoyment.

I came into the academic world with a sort of burnout hangover, on edge and worried constantly about what the next requirement or request in the library would do to trigger those feelings.

While no library adventure comes without its set of moments, so to speak, I can say that taking that leap and just trusting that it was time to take care of me over my career has really been the best thing.

Panelist 3:
My experience with burnout has manifested differently. If I had to categorize what’s been happening, I would say it falls under the umbrella of quiet quitting, but unintentionally. I have experienced mostly cognitive issues including inability to concentrate, heightened anxiety, indifference, and time management problems. With the exception of anxiety—which had been successfully managed for over ten years—I have never experienced these problems before.

I do not want to leave the profession, but sometimes I do feel like I’m not being a “good” librarian. I don’t know that anyone else would say that, but it’s often how I feel.

What role did the pandemic play in your feelings of burnout? Were you experiencing burnout before the pandemic, and what was the source of that burnout?

Panelist 1:
I was feeling some burnout before the pandemic. My previous institution is a public regional university with an understaffed library, so I carried a heavy load of responsibilities in the library on top of active campus outreach and service.

Anemic pay raises did not keep up with healthcare contributions, changes in prescription cover-
age, or increasing retirement contributions. I started to adjunct teach in 2020 to help make ends meet by the end. The stress of financial insecurity that stagnant salaries create starts to eat away at your attention at work and it was mine.

The pandemic upended my work/life balance. I worked remotely from March – December 2020 and no longer had the separation from work that a drive home brings. I often found myself working as late as 9:00 or 10:00pm. We had so much work to do to support the pivot to online learning. For example, our previous library website would not support embedding Springshare’s LibChat product on the homepage, so we built a new website... with a two-week turnaround. The pandemic accelerated feelings of burnout and as a former colleague put it: My fumes are running on fumes.

Panelist 2:
While my burnout started before the pandemic, I think the events of the pandemic, especially the role that public libraries were asked to play at the time, heightened it. While a public library director, trying to make sure staff were safe, your own family was safe, and that the patrons you would see each day were safe, while having to balance the echoes of library boards, city officials, or other people with “opinions” in general really escalated the anxiety of the role. My source of burnout was a complete feeling of the lack of support and understanding about library services and the role they play from other people. There was also a level of expectation that I had built for my community regarding the library and when the pandemic hit and that expectation level changed, even dwindled, I felt there was little to no compassion for the state of the world and how we were all trying to just survive and navigate it.

When I left the public library world and entered the academic world, I realized that some of my new colleagues were coming off of similar situations, but that they were fortunate enough to have been in a place with support, not only with people in their departments but others across the campus. I have since seen that when I feel overwhelmed with something, my colleagues are willing to listen, lend an ear or coffee and just take care of each other.

Panelist 3:
There was certainly a lot going on before the pandemic, but I don’t think I was experiencing burnout. There was pressure, particularly because my tenure review year was coming up, but nothing I would have named as burnout. In fact, I wouldn’t say I began experiencing burnout symptoms until later in the pandemic or after it was “over.”

At the beginning, there was so much to do. We first had to figure out how to be a library while not being in the library. Then we had to figure out how to serve our community when they couldn’t come in the building or weren’t on campus. Then we had to figure out how to deal with folks returning to campus. And even though pretty much every other library was going through these exact experiences, it was a time when we couldn’t really get together and commiserate.

However, referencing my particular burnout symptoms, I do attribute those to the pandemic. Like many, I had relatives pass away from COVID-19, and the atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and isolation took a toll on my mental and physical well-being. I also had COVID-19 myself—thankfully after being vaccinated—and while I’ve not been diagnosed with long COVID-19, I do wonder if some of my cognitive issues could be attributed to the virus.

What factors external to the library (institutional, political environment, etc.) are a source of your burn-out?

Panelist 1:
When the pandemic started, my previous university was coping with declining enrollment. The financial impact of the pandemic left the university scrambling to shore up its finances, and at one point, the library was facing a mid-year budget cut of $50,000. Then in November 2020 the university experienced the loss of a major source of funding when voters rejected an extension of a local ¼ cent sales tax. This created a feeling of job insecurity. (The financial situation has only worsened and now whole
Like many universities, there was pressure by the administration to “return to normal” as soon as possible. To this end, employees returned to work in June 2020. I continued working remotely until December due to underlying health conditions until all employees were ordered to return in January 2021. This process was callously and unevenly handled, and greatly demoralized employees concerned about the health and safety of themselves and their families before the widespread release of vaccines. If the pandemic was an exam, then many university administrators would not receive a passing grade. The pandemic and financial stresses put on display other causes of burnout such as: toxic administrators, lip service to shared governance, the absence of transparency and communication from the university administration, and poor treatment of employees.

**Panelist 2:**
There is a lot of concern in general in my home state about library services, regardless if it's public, academic, or school. The current state of situations happening with book challenges, conversations from state legislation, and what this means for each type of library is certainly something that all library workers have in their mind in one way or another.

When my current academic library sent out an email to ask about reconsideration of materials policy, I was very shocked to think that even an academic library would need to have that policy in place “just in case”. When I think about my future, and the types of library careers I might want to have, I have to realize that each type of library is being challenged differently, but that these concerns with book challenges, censorship are not going away. This external factor is very overwhelming to me, as I wonder what my role can be for the future of this profession. I also am concerned about how the various movers and shakers within a university will be open to understanding these issues and how they could potentially impact library services.

**Panelist 3:**
I’ll say first that I think my institution has tried to balance what’s best for the university and what’s best for its people. There has been significant pressure to “return to normal,” but there was acknowledgement that “normal” would be different. However, that still meant that budgets were cut, positions went unfilled, and we all had to do significantly more with quite a bit less.

Additionally, there is an increasing amount of hostility towards libraries and librarians in my home state. Much of this is aimed at school and public libraries, and it’s hard to watch it happen. The state library community is not large which means that the librarians who are being threatened and fired are our friends and respected colleagues.

**Do you have any strategies for managing burnout?**

**Panelist 1:**
Learning from my past experiences, I had an opportunity to start fresh with my new job. I strive to have a better work/life balance and put some guardrails in place for this. I do a better job of “leaving work at work” by actively pursuing other leisure activities and interests. I try to stick to working just 40 hours a week, but I am a supervisor, so I read and respond to time-sensitive emails. I also only take on new projects as I can feasibly manage them to avoid feeling overburdened.

I will never be that librarian who accrues too much annual leave and finds themselves in danger of losing it. I take time off from work, even if it is just for staycations. When I am out of the office, I do not check my email and I delegate my supervisory responsibilities.

Having a flexible and hybrid work schedule was a major factor of why I accepted the job offer. It has been life-changing for me and greatly aided in avoiding burnout. I work remotely on Mondays and Tuesdays, which I jokingly call my “soft entry into the week.” I can focus on “big thinking” tasks on these days, like working on reports or research that working in an office with the accompanying distractions.
can interrupt. I schedule appointments on these days and work around them. I feel like I can effectively manage and organize my time.

Panelist 2:

It took me a long time to get to this point, but having a work/life balance in place that you hold yourself accountable to is important. I have made it a point to not carry work home with me anymore. Emails can wait until morning and they can certainly wait until Monday morning. I take time for a lunch break, even if it is 30 minutes, and sometimes, when the weather’s nice I take that lunch break outside. I’ve also set a schedule for what is feasible to get to in one week of work versus one day of work. I no longer have multiple tabs on my computer open, trying to write this grant or answer this problem or write this article. Instead, I take each day one at a time, one task at a time, one problem at a time. I am also comfortable to say no to projects or requests that are just not part of what I can do. By putting these barriers in place, I feel like I respect myself more than I did in previous positions. I finally feel like what I bring to the table is worth something and it is my responsibility to protect that worth internally by setting boundaries for what I will and will not do outside of my work hours or feasible workday ability.

Panelist 3:

Therapy; talking to your doctor if you have specific symptoms that may be improved with medication—anxiety, depression, etc. I do believe that self-care practices can help, and reevaluating your work-life balance may be part of the process, but therapy has been a way for me to help rediscover meaning in my job, or at least what makes it meaningful for me. It’s also helped me see that my cognitive issues are not personal failures. I also think giving time to something that’s just for you is useful. Sometimes it might just be a quick podcast. I particularly like listening to long, soothing sound mixes on YouTube or visiting a website called Window Swap where you can look out someone else’s window. It’s quite soothing, and I often have it up at work.

What would you like your institution to do to help manage burnout?

Panelist 1:

A former supervisor of mine passed on to me a good habit: Soon after starting a new job, I schedule appointments to meet one-on-one with all the librarians in the library to learn about them and their role in the library organization. During these one-on-ones at my new library, I picked up on some burnout among my colleagues.

Working with three other librarians, including a library administrator, we formed a taskforce to assess the state of burnout among the library faculty. In summer 2022, we deployed a Qualtrics survey to ascertain how many faculty are experiencing burnout and to what degree. Then another taskforce member and I conducted one-on-one meetings with those willing to speak with us. The results of this effort were anonymized and submitted in a report to the library faculty and administration in November 2022.

We presented findings of sources of library faculty satisfaction such as: good working relationships, autonomy, job stability, and flexibility. Then, we presented potential areas of improvement or concern such as: more transparent, clear communication; clearer expectations; better workloads – remove low-hanging fruit; and fill vacancies more quickly. This is an ongoing process. The library faculty discussed the report at a meeting in October 2023 and there is more discussion and work to come. I hope we can focus on the reasons why people like to work at my library while also making progress toward remedying the causes of burnout, to the best degree possible.

My recommendation is for libraries to offer a similar process for their librarians and for their staff. I also recommend a faculty-led taskforce approach that also includes an administrator. Administrators should listen to feedback without getting defensive. Librarians and staff should ap-
proach the process with realistic expectations that some changes take time, some things cannot be changed, and this is not an opportunity to only vent. Both parties should approach this process professionally and respectfully.

**Panelist 2:**

I think it all starts by recognizing that burnout is a real thing and that mental health needs of employees are something to not just talk about. With this in mind I think better communication on issues that are pertinent to the facility are important. I also think checking in on employees, not just a “howdy” but a real check-in, which can better develop a feeling of trust, so that when burnout happens, a faculty/staff member feels confident and comfortable laying those cards on the table. Burnout can make a person feel vulnerable, and at times make someone feel less than or as if they are a disappointment. I know for myself personally when I have spoken about my burnout and what has led to it, it has made me extremely nervous and overanxious, worried that talking about what has led to this will impact my relationships at work or my job. It’s important that institutions are willing to engage in these tough conversations to help employees get to the bottom of their need to recharge or change a routine. It’s also imperative that management are receptive to listening to these discussions and take them to heart without feeling attacked or exposed. Sometimes just talking through an issue and having a little bit longer of a lunch break or taking a mental health hour and leaving early can be the difference in productivity from one day to the next.

**Panelist 3:**

As I’ve mentioned previously, I do think my university does a better job at helping its employees than others. We have access to an employee assistance program. I’m sure administration knows that faculty are feeling symptoms of burnout, but it would be nice to have an acknowledgment that some of the decisions they make contribute to burnout. We have been asked and continue to be asked to do more with fewer resources and stagnant compensation. Oftentimes it feels like the answer to the unasked question of, “How are you going to help us work through this burnout,” is to add some sort of employee engagement program, which is just another thing to add to the list of things we already have to do.

I would like for our institution to look into strategies that truly lead to a balanced work life. Remote workdays are great unless you work in an essential campus building that has to be open when other offices on campus are closed, or you have to create a different schedule so everyone gets a remote work day, or some of your staff are unable to do their jobs from home. Then it just starts feeling like lip service.

**Are there any resources you recommend for managing burnout?**

**Panelist 1:**

I want to give a specific acknowledgement to one of my collaborators in the Faculty Burnout Taskforce, Lily Dubach. She met with a consultant and suggested that our one-on-one discussions with the library faculty take on the form of a “stay interview.” According to Robert P. Finnegan (2012), a stay interview is “a structured discussion a leader conducts with an individual employee to learn specific actions the leader can take to strengthen the employee’s engagement and retention with the organization” (p. 5). Even if your library does not form a taskforce, encourage your administrators to conduct stay interviews with your librarians and staff to try to get ahead of issues before they result in employee turnover.

**Panelist 2:**

I have a long two-hour commute to work and a two-hour commute back. That being said, I spend a lot of time listening to books or podcasts about a variety of subjects. I really enjoy the podcasts “Fried. The Burnout Podcast” with Cait Donovan and “Burnout” with Connor Franta. I think being able to hear that I am not alone in this burnout situation is important, but also hearing other experts in a va-
riety of disciplines talk about ways I can manage my own burnout or help others is a game changer.

Panelist 3:
I’m far from an expert in this area. I suppose if you’re struggling with your purpose, Simon Sinek’s book *Find Your Why* could be a valuable resource. ACRL also published a book called *Academic Librarian Burnout: Causes and Responses*. I’ve only read a few articles so far, but they seem very good.

CONCLUSION
It can sometimes feel like we are suffering on our own when experiencing feelings of burnout. However, in coming together for this panel presentation we have discovered that regardless of our different geographic locations, we are all experiencing variations of the same feelings. Increasing work demands, the challenges and changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing political environments are just a few of the factors that can lead to expressions of burnout such as quiet quitting. It is important for both individuals to feel comfortable expressing these feelings of burnout to coworkers and administration and for administrators to implement proactive measures to support their employees through stressful and challenging times. Addressing burnout symptoms through therapy, using sick and vacation leave, taking advantage of flexible work schedules, establishing work-life balance, and developing a new hobby or engaging in activities that you enjoy when you are away from work are all good methods of addressing feelings of burnout. Find some strategies that work for you and share them with others. Burnout is real, but together we can cope with it and learn to “keep the light on” to move forward.

REFERENCES