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Alan Bernstein

Valdosta State University, abernste@valdosta.edu

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Academic Librarians and Faculty Status: Mountain, Molehill or Mesa

by Alan Bernstein

The academic librarian plays an important role in the overall mission of any university (Bell, 2000; Farber, 1999; Guskin, Stoffle, & Boisse, 1979/1980). This role is both overt in the day-to-day involvement between librarian and students and faculty in the institution as well as subtle in the librarian's continual awareness of changes in available resources and technologies to aid the campus community (Cardina & Wicks, 2004; MacAdam, 2000). Though the academic librarian, clearly, is a vital member of the university community, his or her organizational classification in the hierarchy of the institution can be murky, and this murkiness may have effects, both understated and profound, on the librarian's attitude, motivation, and outlook regarding his or her chosen profession (Hill, 1994; Julien & Given, 2002/2003).

This paper will be a brief examination of the literature pertinent to academic librarian classification vis-a-vis job satisfaction, sense of worth and place, and commitment both to the librarian profession and to the educative mission of the librarian's academic institution. At the conclusion, some personal observations will be offered.

Issues regarding classification status for academic librarians have made fodder for scholarly articles, books, and theses for a long time. A quick glance through the literature reveals a decidedly higher percentage of authors favoring some form of faculty classification for academic librarians (with corresponding pay and benefits). However, there are a number of alternative positions rationally and eloquently expressed in the myriad of topical journal articles as well. At the farther end of the spectrum, there are strong judgments expressed by some in the profession (a celebrated example is forthcoming) that faculty status is clearly counterintuitive, counterproductive, and ought to be particularly avoided at all academic institutions (e.g., Cronin, 2001; Kingma & McCombs, 1995). Some interesting studies and opinion pieces have been written

on how personality traits coupled with status affect academic librarians' motivation and general job satisfaction (pertinent examples include Hegg, 1985/1986; Leckie & Brett, 1999; Williamson, Pemberton, & Lounsbury, 2005).

As college and university attendance dramatically rose in the 1960s and early 1970s, the need for more librarians in these schools grew as well. The substantial increase in academic librarians joining the employ of many colleges and universities during this period led to revisions and innovations in the ways these librarians came to be classified. These revisions and innovations, in sometimes stark contrast to the traditional classifying of academic librarians as glorified staff, led to a profusion of articles and other scholarly works on the subject – a profusion that continues to present day. The subject of classification for academic librarians remains a mainstay theme in many respected library journals.

The subject and debate regarding how librarians are (or should be) classified in the academic institution date back well over a hundred years. The traditional academic librarian role as a technician and book-shelver was challenged as far back as the late 19th century when H. A. Sawtelle (1878) wrote of the inspiring work libraries did in guiding college students in their reading and use of library resources. Famed Harvard librarian Justin Winsor spoke of the vital role the librarian and library play in the academic community, "To fulfill its rightful destiny, the library should become the central agency of our college methods, and not remain a subordinate one, which it is too often" (Circulars of Information, 1880, p.7). Nearly 50 years later, writing on the state of the academic librarian, George Works (1927) echoed the same sentiments when he wrote, "too many faculty members and administrative officers are prone to think of the library staff, aside from the titular librarian [director], as

persons who are discharging responsibilities essentially clerical in nature" (p. 80).

Though the issues existing between librarians and teaching faculty – essentially, the origins of librarian dissatisfaction with their classification status – have their roots back to the time of librarians first being granted licensure as professionals in their field (Marchant, 1969), it was the boon of enrolled students in higher education in the 1960s that saw the problem burst into greater prominence. Arthur McAnally (1971) discussed, in some detail, the problems academic librarians faced in trying to garner professional status, respect and compensation in the community of teaching faculty. Some of the specific obstructions to professionalism McAnally cited included the generally low status of the library profession, the autocracy of many library directors, many state boards of education (dating back to the 1940s) opposing and refusing recognition of librarians as faculty, the lack of support by the American Library Association, and the pervasive attitude of university faculty, dismissing librarians as merely academic support staff (pp. 20-23).

From the early 1970s until today, there have been over 100 articles in peer-reviewed academic journals on the subject of classification status and academic librarians.

The predominant view in these articles is that academic librarians ought to be classified, remunerated, and respected in the same manner as their compatriots teaching in classrooms around the campus. There are some notable exceptions. Blaise Cronin (2001), in a famous editorial piece entitled "The Mother of all Myths," extolled the irrelevancies and dangers of academic librarians being granted faculty status, claiming, "[t]enure and the paraphernalia of the academic calling have nothing to do with the praxis of librarianship" (p. 144). Later in the same editorial, he writes, "the obsession with status merely detracts from customer service and weakens the profession's public image" (p. 144).

Regarding classification, the academic librarian can find himself or herself in one of several modes. There are colleges and universities that classify librarians the same as teaching faculty with all concomitant rights, privileges, and remunerations. This is extremely rare, though. At best, librarians so classified usually cannot expect the 10-month contracts of most teaching faculty and must work the more common 12-month term. Nevertheless, librarians classified in this way enjoy promotion and tenure opportunities, serve on faculty senates and committees, have access to faculty development grants and sabbatical leave, and are paid a salary equitable to their teaching colleagues.



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Many institutions classify their librarians in a somewhat quasi-faculty status. Often, they are not titled as professor, associate professor, and so on; may or may not have tenure opportunity; and have limited access to other “perks” such as faculty development monies and sabbatical leaves. Though their level of institutional equality and respect may be, arguably, lower, librarians so classified often do not have the associated pressures of publications or conference presentations akin to their teaching colleagues.

Based on a 1980s survey, over 75 percent of American colleges and universities classify their librarians as faculty (in one form or another), the other 25 percent classifying librarians in some support staff modality (DeBoer, K. & Culotta, W., 1987). Many schools group librarians with administrative staff, similar in substance to how an assistant registrar, athletic coach, or health center nurse might be classified. There is no opportunity for academic promotion, tenure, or involvement with university governance, but pay and (nonfaculty-related) benefits are, generally, equitable. Why is faculty status advantageous? Or, is it not advantageous at all?

The plethora of articles on academic librarians and classification status and the breadth of research that has been done tend to support the contentions that faculty status increases librarians’ opportunities for positional advancement and better pay. These, naturally, are the concrete, palpable end results of a desired classification. The preeminent psychological components of faculty classification may be less overt than the material factors mentioned above but are no less significant: namely, the increase in general motivation and initiative, the greater sense of commitment both to the institution and the library profession, and the facilitating of a higher level of involvement with the educative mission of both the library, specifically, and the college or university, generally. Simply put, “equal status” to teaching faculty has vast material and embedded rewards (Buschman, 1989; Feldman & Sciammarella, 2000; Kilpatrick, 1982).

An important corollary to classification status and librarian satisfaction is how the academic librarian is involved in the educative mission of his or her institution, both overtly and perceived. Are there connections between a librarian’s involvement with the educative mission of his or her institution and job satisfaction, motivation, or commitment to professional development and permanence in the library? There is some existing literature on the topic of academic librarians and involvement in institutional educative mission (examples include Badke, 2005; Bell, 2000; Farber, 1999; Guskin, Stoffle, & Boisse, 1979/80; Leckie & Fullerton, 1999;

Meringolo, 2006; Owusu-Ansah, 2001; Wilkinson, 2000) but little analysis of how this involvement correlates to overall job satisfaction and motivation level. This is a fertile area for further research as I would contend that, indeed, it is the inherent involvement that academic librarians (whether they be in public, technical or computer services) have with the educative mission of their institution that not merely helps propel better performance but pedagogically fuses them with their classroom teaching colleagues.

The constituent of authors who speak out against classifying academic librarians as faculty frankly regard such status as either counterintuitive to the roles academic librarians are educated, hired, and trained to fulfill or find such status problematic, for it includes levels of commitment to research and professional presentations beyond that which these librarians should be expected to execute. Fred Batt (1985) saw faculty status as more of a liability than an asset, more of a hindrance than a help. Though Batt contended that some academic librarian positions might be suitable for faculty classification,

[F]aculty status should not be considered for positions such as cataloging, acquisitions, or circulation librarians. Although these jobs constitute important work, nothing in them even remotely approximates what one would consider a higher education faculty member. (p. 119)

Ultimately, the preponderance of literature indicates that academic librarians fall into one of three groups:

- (1) They desire to be classified as faculty because it is both philosophically, as well as pragmatically, appropriate given their role in promoting and participating in the educative mission of the college or university. This is, clearly, the majority opinion.
- (2) They desire *not* to be classified as faculty if it means having to jump through the hoops of publication and presentation in order to get promoted or tenured. This view has a smaller, but particularly vocal, following.
- (3) They do not care how they are classified so long as their pay and benefits are equitable geo-economically with their professional peers. Research indicates this to be the least chosen option, yet there is strong anecdotal evidence for its popularity.

The classification status of the academic librarian is clearly not a molehill. The continuing appearance of the issue in library journals over the last 30 years is testimony to its persistent interest and importance both philosophically and pragmatically in the hearts and minds of many librarians. The issue, though, need not be considered a mountain either. If there is administrative recognition of the both conspicuous and intrinsic role that academic

librarians play (*all* academic librarians, not just the public service corps that interacts directly with students) in helping fulfill the educative mission of the institution, classification issues, generally, and respect/remuneration issues specifically, might become extinct or, at least, moot. The path to such recognition and reclassification (for those academic librarians not presently faculty-classified including those who fear it due to unsuitable tenure and promotion procedures) lies in revamping antiquated or inappropriate policies and procedures surrounding academic faculty.

A master's degree in library science (or equivalent) is the terminal degree for a librarian's professional status. Having a second (subject) master's is nice but not necessary. Having a doctorate in library science is useful, and sometimes obligatory, for assuming higher-level administrative positions in some academic libraries but still is not necessary to be regarded as a professional librarian.

There are other academic fields where a master's degree is usually regarded as sufficiently "terminal" to allow teaching. Examples of such disciplines often include nursing, dance, art, and "professional" areas such as

medicine and law. The point is this: lack of a doctorate is not preclusion to faculty status.

I believe that faculty classification for academic librarians is not merely appropriate but obligatory. A cursory glance through promotion and tenure procedures at a sampling of various state colleges and universities shows that flexibility is becoming the norm. The reality is that what history professors do, what communication arts professors do, or what kinesiology professors do may not compartmentalize to a one-size-fits-all schemata when assessing one's worth to the college or university. And so it is with academic librarians. Their contribution to the educative mission of the institution may, arguably, trump any given arts and science or business school or college of education professor. Academic librarians are fundamental members of the pedagogical team. It is inherent in their training and implicit in their performance. The issue of academic libraries and faculty status is not a pseudo-problem, (i.e., a molehill), but it should not be viewed as an insurmountable mountain either. ►►

Alan Bernstein is circulation manager of the Odom Library at Valdosta State University.

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