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COLLEGIALITY MATTERS: HOW DO WE WORK WITH OTHERS?

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Abstract

It is no secret that collegiality matters in academe regardless of the size and type of institution. When it comes to promotion, reappointment and tenure, the invocation of collegiality occurs. Collegiality can mean different things to different people depending on the usage. This paper will examine the issues surrounding collegiality in a library setting, analyze the factors which influence collegiality among academic librarians, and explore the boundaries of collegiality in a higher education setting. The discussion concludes with an overview of research designed to develop a better understanding of how the leadership affects collegiality and, in turn, to identify strategies for the rapidly changing academic library environment which would enhance the ability of academic librarians to remain relevant and vital to the academic community we serve.

Introduction

Collegiality is an important variable that deserves more attention (Edwards 2003) for those who work in higher education: librarians, faculty, administrators and the staff members. Yet, no one from the library and information science (LIS) field has attempted a comprehensive research of collegiality – what it is, how it influences governance collegial decision making, how collegiality is achieved and how a library organization with collegiality may differ from those without it. My objective is to explore how collegiality is manifested, to observe its effects on collegial decision making in a library context of higher education and to analyze influencing factors.

I analyzed the boundaries of collegiality by examining the definition and activities of *collegiality* first; then, I looked at the contradictory and opposing side of collegiality, *bureaucracy*; lastly, I examined the ambiguous and contrary area of *collegial decision making in action*. To further analyze and to distinguish the scope of collegiality, I will review the contrasting side of collegiality and the negativity in the name of collegiality, namely, *congeniality*, which is synonymously used as collegiality, but has a different intention and consequences.

In a 2009 survey on collegiality, 76 percent of the librarians from the Massachusetts State College Association (MSCA), responded that they work in a collegial environment without any explanations; however, the remaining, 24 percent, identified collegiality as an issue. Among the issues mentioned include “in-fighting among the librarians,” “personality issues affect collegiality regularly,” and because academic librarians “do not get along,” problems are created in a library which cause “a low morale” and coworkers “will not speak to others” and the working condition is “demoralizing.” Collegiality in this survey has been understood as being nice or having a pleasant or agreeable demeanor.

“Collegiality issue is rampant, but we seemed to have a hard time acknowledging it”
(Arlene Sievers-Hill 2009 pers. comm.)

Lorenzen noted that discussions of collegiality, if it happens at all, refer primarily to librarians from the reference unit of a library; these studies have been written about collegiality and the barriers briefly in the context of how to work well with coworkers (Lorenzen 2006). By contrast, the higher

education journals are abundant on the topic. In particular, writings by the faculty scholars from the humanities in such journals as *Symploke*, *Change* and *Law Reviews* are filled with scholarly discussions and reflections on collegiality, both in defense of and against the current definition of collegiality in academic journals. In organizational dynamic, management and business literature, the concept of collegiality has been transformed to “teamwork.” Could it be that our collective culture of academic library, which discourages us to talk about the issues which might tarnish our self image, is such that we treat our colleagues with respect and trust? Critical researches (Howze 2003, Mckenzie 2000, Wang and Frank 2000, Fister, et al 2005) started addressing on collegiality and its relationship with collegial management and argued that it is essential that the academic library must have a leader who values collegiality and who takes steps to foster it in order to bring about a more collegial library workplace.

Collegiality Definition

The concept of collegiality may seem familiar to most people in academe, but there are hidden interpretations and diverse effects that may escape a casual examination of the term. Assumed collegiality works in many different ways from cooperative projects to governance committee activities to many other interactions in our lives in higher education. Although collegiality is often linked to being cooperative, pleasant, and ready to lend a helping hand, a more precise definition of collegiality would include “shared power and authority among colleagues,¹” and “cooperative interaction among colleagues².”

The demand of collegiality based on the first definition is quite different from the second definition. The possible problem of following the first is subjective judgment. Through personal interaction, we typically experience so called ‘collegial’ behavior of our colleagues. What is at issue in the ongoing collegiality debate, as surfaced from the MSCA librarian’s survey of 2009, was the concept of “getting along”. If the congenial level or simply getting along is all that is expected, a tendency to conformity and homogeneity can result. There should be a distinction between collegiality and conformity, homogeneity, or congeniality. In a comment posted to the Search Principle Blog in November, 2007, Guistine Dean noted that “It is a common notion in the LIS field that a collegial person doesn’t rock the boat, goes with the flow, and supports prevailing sentiments. A collegial librarian preserves the comfort level of colleagues.” (Dean 2008)

¹ American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Online, 2009

² The Random House Dictionary 2009

Figure 1. The Components of Collegiality

What's collegiality in a library setting?

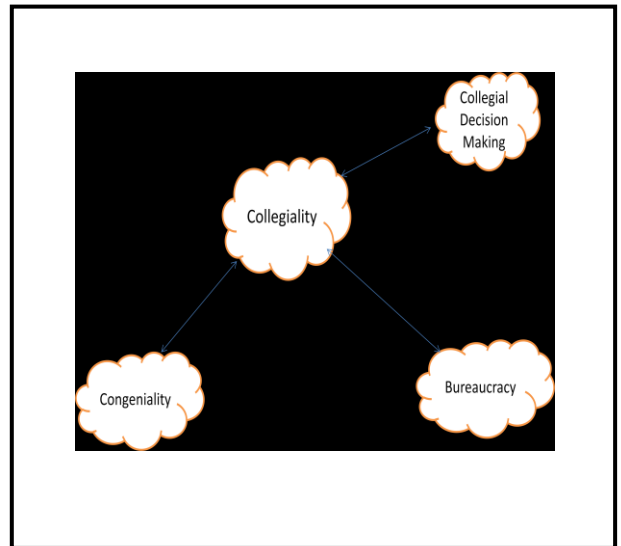
Collegiality is sharing ideas amongst colleagues and shared responsibility among the librarians for pursuit of common goals. Stated differently, collegiality is fundamentally very familiar routines in a working group. The librarians' behavior is influenced primarily by the library administration which further models behaviors for the rest of the library staff. I would like to use the collegiality definition from the American Heritage Dictionary.

In sociological terms, collegiality is the opposite of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is ultimately opposed to collegiality because in a bureaucratic world, order and control are highly valued. The hierarchical control works hand in hand in a bureaucracy whereas collegiality strives to build consensus in decision making, as opposed to maintaining a hierarchical order. Control is accomplished through absolute deference and following authority and adherence to the rules and regulations. If a library organization operates in a collegial

mode, by being non-hierarchical, then open discussions will be permitted. Personal and social relationships among librarians will be evident and the job rank would be less prominent.

Collegiality is a process that helps to create the conditions for principled agreement by allowing all points of view to be aired and considered. Collegiality helps ensure that results are not preordained.³

In our state college system, librarians report to the library director or dean and respect bureaucracy despite membership in the faculty union. Any new library programs will be initiated with the director's endorsement and subsequent services will need the library director and the librarians' collaboration to be effectively carried out to the patrons and campus community. In other words, the endorsement from bureaucracy and collegial collaboration among librarians are somewhat at odds at its best. However, as collegiality applies to individuals holding the same rank or power and sharing responsibilities, librarians share a similar common ground at work. Lorenzen in his article on "Collegiality and the Academic Library" concludes that "collegiality is important due to the interconnected work library staff perform and the complications that varying levels of staff create." (Lorenzen 2006).



James Bess (1988) in his "Collegiality and Bureaucracy in the Modern University" articulates that collegiality consists of three components: culture, decision-making structure, and the process of

³ Collegiality and Judicial decision making, 2003 p. 1645

behaving which is constrained by the first two components. Philip Howze concluded that for a library to establish a cooperative environment, collegiality will need to be articulated in its value statement because collegiality is an organizational value and it must represent common ground which all members of the group can accept to be included into acts of collegiality (Howze 2003)

Collegiality is most frequently mentioned in promotions and tenure reviewing (PTR) processes. As part of governance decision making during PTR, we often compare our colleagues against institutional standards of collegiality: either collegial or uncollegial thereby deserving promotion or tenure status. Among academic librarians, collegiality simply is assumed as an informed citizen in higher education, even though the concept is hardly shared across the board and is often ambiguous. Nevertheless, the invocation of collegiality is often in the context of negative tone or lack thereof as in “Mr. X does not respect collegiality.”

If granting autonomy through tenure is the ultimate representation of academic freedom in academia, the structure of collegial decision making of the PTR process in which we participate is far beyond the world of “getting along well” with co-workers. It moves away from a personal trait toward autonomous decision making responsibility that we share as a powerful, coveted, and empowering governance activity. In other words, the sense of collective responsibility is a critical factor of being in a higher education environment. The power of collegial decision making and its action is part of the intellectual freedom that we all strive for in our academic community, yet the term remains ambiguous at best.

Why Does Collegiality Matter?

In a collegial library organization, the overarching mission of the group is to figure out how to serve the library patrons timely and properly. Every library staff member has a role in delivering service satisfactorily, from student workers to professional librarians to the library leader/administrator. More important than defining individual responsibility is how can the whole organization serve and fulfill the needs of patrons according to the library’s mission statement. What we are looking for is a sound basis for decision making towards optimal service fulfillment. Collegiality is necessary in order to provide coherent library services and programs to our institutional patrons.

Library culture and its organizational structure can either foster or hinder the participatory ideals that contribute to our collegiality, working harmoniously toward common goals. Practical tools that advance communication and teamwork can help provide needed constancy in our ever changing library and information world. On the other hand, difficulty with communication among academics is attributed to the veneer of civility that pervades faculty interactions. In “Overcoming Hollowed Collegiality” Massey and Wilger noted that “Faculty appear unwilling to pursue issues that may be divisive or provoke debate. Unpleasantness is avoided at all costs... this often means that the most crucial issues facing the department are never discussed. Whether this is due to being afraid to look at the issue because of the possible conflict over what should be required or “By not discussing departmental policy, we don’t disagree too much – on the face.” (Massy and Wilger 1994, 39)

More and more, increased interaction between formerly separated library department units is driven by the need for any library to provide a seamless access system for its clients (Reenstjerna 2001). Cooperation and collaboration require a more active response and results in greater benefits to the library organization. During the collegial process, conflicts can arise at times. Conflict is a form of social interaction if it is a non-emotional matter of disagreement among parties who are all working to a common goal, but have different ideas on how to achieve that goal (Jones 1997). Such constructive conflict may contribute to innovation and achievement. (Jankowska & Marshall 2003, 134) The facilitative process can only begin when a librarian realizes the interrelatedness of one's actions or decisions. Librarians, who work in an old industrial model of organizational structure, with its separate functional units and its hierarchical ways of communication, should be aware that social interaction between librarians and any open communication within the library is rare, and if at all, it is inefficient. Lack of social interaction and communication slows academic libraries as effective providers of quality services to the academic community because it detracts from the collegial decision making process and may cause interdepartmental conflicts.

Collegiality matters for librarians to navigate interdepartmental politics. In the library organization where each functional unit works in the "silo" whereby a simple task of putting items on reserve or requests for interlibrary loan activity requires considerable coordination from several library functional units. In this setting, the library's existing hierarchical structure inhibits its workflows; accomplishing a simple and routine task appears to take time from a patron's point of view. Most often, given this organizational structure, the likelihood of interdepartmental cooperation is difficult and needs careful coordination. Thus, library leadership is even more in demand to counteract the existing bureaucracy and its inherent hierarchical barriers of the environment.

In the decision making process of the PTR, the nuances of the personality interplay among peers are subjective, private and hard to quantify in nature. Collegiality matters to librarians and teaching faculty in the peer review process because, as Sandra Rastin's asserts regarding collegiality, "Power is central to collegiality. . . Once collegiality has been accepted as given in an institution, it too can become a power-laden symbol used to achieve goals." Collegiality matters to mitigate potential power struggles and to protect librarians from misuse by favoring librarians with backgrounds, interests, and political and social perspectives similar to one's own (Alger 2001). The potential misuse of the collegial power can also lead to bullying—academic bullying which may result in unjustified harassment in the form of peer review in the interdepartmental relations in a library.

It was my observation, in a library workplace which is operating collegially, that librarians tend to focus on what each one brings to the table in researching and helping library patrons in terms of intelligence, area of strengths and expertise, and diverse backgrounds. For example, my library and faculty colleagues may seek my views drawn from years of experience in the information technology industry prior to coming back to academic libraries. Other librarians will share their areas of expertise in social networking tools. I would share my knowledge of research and citation management tools and style guides with teaching faculty members collegially. The activity of seeking information and giving advice is in the context of collegial relationships in the academe. Collegiality is important to further academic freedom for librarians who struggled to get tenure and to strive to earn it for those librarians who are in tenure-track positions.

Factors Influencing Collegiality

Leaders in library organizations play an important role in enhancing collegiality to serve library goals and institutional patrons effectively. Attitude reflects leadership (Maxwell 2008). By facilitating the value of collegiality across the functional units of the library, the library leader can set the example of how to be collegial. Hammerley-Fletcher emphasized preconditions to collegiality including trust, clearly stated values and supportive colleagues in a higher educational setting (Hammerley-Fletcher 2008). How to foster collegial relations so that they would not deteriorate the workplace dynamics is a function of the leader in an organization, irrespective of size and type for all library organizations. On the other hand, if a library organization continues to operate to maintain the authority and power of the autocrat, the method destroys collegiality as is seen in Machiavelli's advice to the Prince with principles to constrain and disrupt collegiality by maintaining the authority of the sovereign and keeping the peerage distrustful of each other. (Goldstein 1990, 309)

Open Communications

Open communications in a library organization must be preconditioned by trust amongst the library staff. If a librarian is working in a silo environment, when does the librarian have the opportunity to exercise open communication? Ultimately, the library organization is not taking full advantage of librarians as a strategic resource. The use of information technology can promote or prevent open communications which is an essential component of collegiality. Using Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis and Twitter, some library organizations have effectively begun to promote open communications; on the other hand, having new tools alone may not impact collegiality at all. The major hindrance of collegiality stems from a lack of open communications. The library leader needs to facilitate the communication channels that would help the library culture to further the library goals.

Mutual support, respect and trust.

Mutual respect through sharing ideals, knowledge, and problem solving will enable trust amongst colleagues in an open communication environment. Starting a dialogue with librarians on subjects which matter to librarians can be a great jumping off point towards developing open communication.

Several colleagues have raised questions of whether collegiality is a condition. Nancy Cirillo (2005) in her "*Collegiality*" paper asked the question since mutuality of respect is not only an ethic, but a pragmatic instrument of social process. Mutual respect and trust are called as conditions for collegiality because the uncollegial colleague disrupts that process.

Jean Major noted that self-confidence as a librarian plays a significant role in establishing and interacting among members of the academic community where research and scholarship inquiry are central and peers are primary judges of work. Mutual respect for expertise in research and teaching, shared values and a decision making style based on participation and consensus defines collegial relationships (Major 1993). This framework of collegiality is significantly different from the librarian's professionalism. Faculty members value expert knowledge and autonomy

whereas MSCA academic librarians survey results focused on the conforming aspect of our profession. In the absence of respect for the professional expertise and knowledge of teaching faculty, our evaluative PTR review will notice and dwell on interpersonal relations only and not that of interprofessional relations.

Common Goals

The common goals that bind the library organization need to be discussed and articulated explicitly. In the absence of commitment to the common purpose and sense that “we are in this together”, collegiality is a merely hollow concept and thus, reduces us to disliking our colleagues who may oppose the common notion and challenge the status quo.

Whatever the library mission may be, the entire library staff must agree on a foundation for the vision, direction and how to accomplish the goals. In dealing with a lack of common goals, the organization will tend to lower its standards and dwell on interpersonal relations. Does the library champion and support the academic freedom of the community as faculty members do? What’s our compelling direction in the 21st century library? What would be the new librarianship in a digital age? Collegiality expressed as a library organizational value and a plan to achieve collegial decision making for a common library pursuit can be collegial activity and collegial decision making in action.

Conclusion/Discussions

Collegial relations are important both for librarians and teaching faculty members. Collegiality exists in the autonomy of our profession. It consists of shared power and the knowledge and expertise we command. A librarian’s tendency of avoiding conflicts and ill feelings will undoubtedly result in moving from collegial decision making to mere congeniality. If we are more interested in congeniality than collegiality, it will be hard to press building a stronger library organization. In the absence of a discipline specific power base which our teaching faculty may have, librarians’ collegiality is naturally achieved through the work of our common interests: scholarly resources, scholarly communications, research and scholarships, and governance committee work.

Collegiality should not be used in the same breath with congeniality which librarians in all different functional units often cite in surveys and literature. Without referring to the common purpose of our collaborative work, the invocation of collegiality is hollow. In fact, it can be dangerous by focusing on interpersonal relations, as opposed to the interprofessional works. Recognizing the conflicts arise from the hierarchical setting of higher education and the nature of collegiality and its condition mismatch is crucial. Fostering collegiality is a hallmark of good leadership.

What I have focused on here are technical, cultural and library leadership components affecting the workforce of the library units of the library organization and beyond on campus. More study needs to be done in the areas of library organizational structure, library cultural influence, and the environmental setting in which a library operates. The library culture of avoidance and how we typically deal with the occurrence of conflict and opposition undermine true collegiality. Collegiality needs to become a primary value or goal of library organization. But, a library needs help – help from the library administration and the leader.

While I used the available survey data which referred to the meaning of collegiality that is typically associated with congeniality, any future study on the evidence of librarian's collegiality and its outcomes would be beneficial for all academic librarians.

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