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Shin Freedman
Framingham State University, sfreedman@framingham.edu

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Questions about Academic Librarians: Factors Influencing Our Academic Identity

Shin Freedman, Head, Acquisitions and Serials Departments, Framingham State University Library

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a comparative survey inquiry into professional identity, views on faculty and tenure status, career advancement opportunities, and personnel status of 196 academic librarians and library administrators in the New England area. This research reveals that 45% of the respondents have some kind of faculty status which is comprised of faculty and tenure status (24%); tenure status (11%) and faculty status only (9%). Sixty-five percent do not have tenure status and 55% have professional status. Attitudes toward research and scholarship were divided into “encouraged” and “not encouraged at all” across all academic statuses of institutional variances. This research concludes that the personnel status of academic librarians and library administrator’s perspective on faculty and tenure status (from many of the influencing factors,) set the most prominent tone for the professional identity of librarians and expectations of the academia.

Introduction

Faculty status and tenure for academic librarians has been a contentious issue for many decades in the US. The identity of librarians is often misunderstood by our peers on campus and creates confusion and even ill feelings. Despite the fact that over 42% of academic librarians in the US have faculty status and tenure, the daily reality is divided: librarians versus teaching faculty; librarians versus administrators. How does this divide help our desire to serve the academic community and pursue our own scholarly research?

Academic identity is demonstrated and our professional roles are performed according to the conditions of our academic employment status, much like our counterparts in classroom teaching. Is much needed collegial and administrative support for academic librarians dependent on our personnel status? When our employment status varies, how are we ensuring our needed administrative support? Who ultimately speaks for and looks out for academic librarians on campus?

In a rapidly changing academic library environment with the advent of Internet and digital media, the roles of libraries and librarians are in transition. By 2015, almost half of the currently working librarians are expected to retire (Lynch, 2005) and new librarians will join the workforce. Is our professional identity changing as

well? Does a librarian with faculty and tenure status fit in academe better, and how well is the quality of the membership in our institution supported? For new librarians with long and successful careers ahead of them, this structural understanding is critical to success in promotion and tenure for academic librarians. Are midcareer librarians who are concerned about how to contribute to their parent institution thinking about career promotional aspect, and being promoted accordingly? Firm understanding is necessary to consolidate and promote librarians’ objectives. For near retirement librarians, how can we capture their experience, legacy, and institutional knowledge to carry forward to the newer generation librarians? Regardless of which stage of their career lifecycles, this study finding provides improved knowledge about the critical interplay of professional identities, role performance, and employment status.

According to the LIS Wiki site there are four categories of appointment status: librarians with faculty status only (AL1); librarians with full faculty and tenure status (AL2); librarians with tenure status only, no faculty status (AL3); and lastly, librarians with professional status only, neither faculty status, nor tenure (AL4). The author identifies “Dual Track” status, one category in which librarians have the option to choose from faculty status or professional Status. Throughout the study, the author used appointment status, personnel status, and employment status

interchangeably, as these terms pertain to academic librarians' salary, position, and rank in our institution.

Literature Review

In a literature review on the subject, the issue of misunderstanding our identity and librarianship itself goes back over 100 years. Sawtell (1878) articulated the intellectual role of librarianship and libraries in academic and proposed faculty status for librarians in 1878 in his assertion, "Librarianship ought not to be annexed to a professorship, but be a professorship itself." For the last 40 years, scholarly debates over the faculty status and tenure issues for and against have appeared in the library and information science literature. Considering the importance of the aspect of career promotion and continuing employment status of tenure throughout the academic career of an academic librarian, librarians have longed for and sought recognition comparable to their counterparts of teaching faculty in academia.

Freedman and Dursi (2011) described in their historical research on faculty and tenure status of academic librarians for over 20 years that "The range of tenure status reported from 20% to 68% is a direct result of the sample size, type of libraries within Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and sample characteristics of the study group applied." Park and Riggs (1993) surveyed research libraries in 1989 and reported that 20% of academic librarians have tenure status, and 56% of comprehensive universities have tenure and 80% have faculty status. Darby and Weatherford's (2002) survey of the Alabama academic librarians reported 86% of all Alabama academic librarians have tenure. Lowry's (2006) survey for doctoral granting ARL found that 37% have tenure status. Bolin's 2008 research on ARL universities revealed that 68% of land grant libraries have tenure status while Lee's 2008 survey reported 44% of ARL libraries granted tenure. Gilman's 2008 study reported that, of the 664 doctorate holding librarians, slightly more than 37% indicated that they hold tenure-track status.

The library director, dean, and the vice president of academic affairs also play extremely important roles either to enhance or to hinder our drive to achieve and to maintain a desirable professional identity whether it is faculty status and tenure or professional status. The collective comments from library administrators/scholars such as Cronin (2001), Schneider (2010), McKenzie (2010), and Kingma and McCombs (1995) include that academic librarianship should be concerned with "service" "librarians are not teaching faculty," and "opportunity costs of faculty status for academic librarians." Clearly, some library administrators play an adversarial role by not supporting librarians' professional identity for faculty status.

Key Findings

1. The educational background of the respondents shows that they are well educated: 13% are doctoral degree holders; 47% have a second masters' degree, besides the required Master's degree in Library and Information Sciences 49%. Overall, AL4 librarians have more advanced degrees beyond the MLS, followed by AL2 librarians, and AL3 librarians. AL1 I ranked the last.
2. The majority (55%) of the participants have professional status. Faculty and tenure status (24%) was second to professional status. 11 percent had Tenure status only; 9% had Faculty status only. In addition, 3% of the total indicated having a dual status option, Faculty and Tenure status or Professional Status.
3. According to the 2011 *ACRL Standards for Faculty Status for Academic Librarians*, librarians with Faculty status means librarians having both faculty status with tenure eligibility, and it strongly endorsed the distinction grouping of four, as shown in this study. For this reason, I have initially grouped together Professional Status versus Faculty Status and Tenure (FST) which includes all three groups. The research identified 43% have faculty status of some sort; 56% have professional status in the New England

area. (Professional status is considered to have neither faculty status nor tenure status and is given to academic librarians both at private and public institutions.)

4. On Professional Identity of Academic Librarians, the most frequently cited professional identities among academic librarians are "Reference Librarian" (34%), "Instruction Librarian" (20%), "Librarians with academic discipline responsibilities" (16%), and "the Library Administrator including Dean, Director, Assistant and Associate director" (17%). The other category comprised of 19% included Digital Services Librarian, Scholarly Communication Librarian, Digital Initiatives Librarians, etc.
5. The academic librarian participants (n = 196) responded to this open-ended question, "How do you identify what you do to family members or others who are not familiar with the academic librarianship?" Themes emerged and demonstrated some underlying anxiety about the librarian's professional identity. There were two different identifications: one describes what a librarian is and the other what a librarian does. The language used is: I work with, I help, I buy, or purchase books; I manage, I provide research assistance, I decide what books to purchase; I support, I teach or instruct faculty and students...I coordinate.
6. On Professional Identity comparison between Library Administrators and Academic librarians, the Library Administrators' perception (n = 34) of their identities were strong and evident as their professional identification as library administrator; furthermore, they identified the major roles focusing on these five areas: library administration (91%), outreach activities (62%), library staff education (62%), innovation (62%), and budget and business management (58%). On the other hand, academic librarians' professional identity was in the clustered area of reference, library

instruction and teaching, collection development/management, subject specialty, outreach activities, and research and scholarship.

7. Both librarians and the administrators expressed strong support for career development activities from the library and the institution across all academic statuses in the survey. A consistently higher percent (over 85%) acknowledged active support of professional development activities for librarians. Despite strong professional activities support, the question on career advancement opportunities indicated 42% of the respondents strongly disagree or somewhat disagree and 27% with neutral response. Only library administrators agreed by 53% that there is much career advancement opportunity.
8. Views on FST by library administrators and academic librarians were intriguing. Twenty-seven percent of library administrators have FST, only 10% have tenure, and library administrators expressed much higher level of support "against" librarian's tenure status compared to that of faculty status. Academic librarians showed the importance of having FST, especially from the academic librarians with professional status.
9. The most frequently cited reasons for attending professional conferences in the order of frequency include Learning Opportunities and Continuing Education (32), Networking Opportunities (32), followed by encouragement by mentors, colleagues, library administrators and the institutions. Other cited reasons are self-motivated and career advancement and improvement opportunities.
10. Out of nine attributes of FST, the three most important attributes for Faculty Status and Tenure are: academic freedom (85%), participation in faculty governance structure (75%) and salary and benefits

compatibility (72%). The two least important conditions identified were tenure and professional responsibilities only.

Discussions and Conclusion

The discrepancies between library administrators and academic librarians on their career outlook may be attributed to library administrators' higher educational background and much longer employment experience. Not every academic librarian aspires to be in the library administration even though they know that there is a clear option for career advancement in Library Administration. Some librarians do not want to work at institutions that have faculty and tenure status to avoid the promotion and tenure process with peer reviews. These factors may contribute to the lack of career flexibility and movement for academic librarians.

The contrasting views on faculty status and tenure by library administrators and academic librarians were intriguing. By examining the library administrator support of 42% for faculty status of academic librarians (23% of tenure status) even though their own academic status is much lower:

27% have faculty status and only 10% of tenure status.

Academic librarians' views on specific attributes of the faculty status and tenure (FST) revealed that FST is important for three reasons: (1) the ability to exercise academic freedom, (2) librarian's participation in the governance structure along with teaching faculty members, and (3) salary and benefit compatibility. Considering that the majority of respondents are AL4 librarians who have neither faculty status nor tenure, the above response of these three attributes of FST are especially notable. Irrespective of academic librarian's employment status, all librarians supported academic freedom and participation in the institutional structure to have their voice heard in academia.

The attitudes toward research requirements generated unexpected results. Research is encouraged twice as much at AL4 institutions than in AL2 with FST and four times more than in AL1 and AL3. Research is required 2.5 times more in AL2 libraries than in AL1 libraries. In this context, librarians employed at older, research-intensive, doctoral-granting institutions appear to be encouraged to do research more than librarians from FST institutions.

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