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590: Local Notes — Tenure for Academic Librarians: Why It Has to Go



by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

Tenure, that long-established practice of granting job security to faculty in higher education, is currently under siege. Already a great many institutions have abandoned the practice; a number of others seriously consider doing so. **Mark Taylor**, chair of the department of religion at **Columbia University**, leads a burgeoning chorus of tenure gainsayers. He and his followers argue that tenure, as we have known it, is largely unsustainable and indefensible. Institutions cannot afford it, and the system makes no sense.¹

Now, I ask you: with such an increasingly vigorous cacophony finding fault with the notion of tenure, should we as academic librarians continue to demand it? That is, should we seek and obtain tenure as full-fledged faculty members? **Herb White**, noted librarian columnist of the 80s and 90s, argued that tenure was a perk and that librarians should always acquire it if they could.² **Michael Gorman**, the former **ALA** President, maintained that librarians with tenure garnered respect and increased productivity.³

Now without joining the chorus of tenure detractors or signing on with the ranks of librarians like **White** and **Gorman** who insist that no librarian should leave home without it, I suggest librarians should get over their love affair with tenure. We should give it up. In the final analysis, it fails to work for us. Even if everyone were singing the praises of tenure and administrators and provosts loved it — which frankly isn't happening and isn't going to happen — I would say the same thing. When you get down to it, the practice of granting librarians tenure ill suits our temperament. It's hostile to our environment, and runs counter to the way we as librarians do our work, the way they tender our services.

Look at it this way: the intrinsic team dimensions of almost all aspects of librarianship stand in stark contrast with the more individualistic orientation and responsibilities of teaching faculty. The difference makes granting the former group tenure an extremely risky proposition. If college and universities offer their librarians this peculiar perk — this seductive job security — they run a very clear danger of lowering their library's actual overall morale and reducing its genuine general effectiveness.

Now before you reject my argument out of hand or write me off as some manipulative library manager, consider for a moment the way teaching faculty work and the way librarians serve. The approach makes all the difference, and it has bearing on the question of tenure. An old combat analogy, if you will, illustrates the variance pointedly.

Most teaching faculty members approach their work like World War II fighter pilots. They will stay in formation if they've orders to do so, but once the real fighting starts, it is every pilot for himself. They are individuals, specialists

who readily bring their own personal skill set — their own unique maneuvers and abilities to the fray. They are a courageous lot to be sure, but decidedly independent. They will defend a beleaguered fellow pilot, just as teaching faculty will work closely with colleagues, but don't ask them to leave off the dogfight for the advantages of some sort of unified action.

Almost all faculty have this kind of fighter-pilot mentality, even though a good many would deny it or fail to describe their work in this way. Much of their teaching and scholarship is individualistic. It is (notwithstanding all of the posturing about collegiality and cross-disciplinary cooperation) often done in the context of rugged isolation.

For librarians, however, our work is different — especially academic librarians. We work independently, to be sure, and sometimes with neither close supervision nor careful scrutiny, but we cherish a collective ethos. That is to say, we are all about teamwork — all about working together for a common and a greater good. Borrowing from the World War II aerial arena, we are the bomber squadron, the tight-flying group intent on its mission and working in rigid formation. We are like that close-knit bomber crew itself, sharing the hazards of our calling in a closely coordinated array of responsibilities.

I grant you, these distinctions between your normal, everyday teaching faculty and your rank and file academic librarians make little difference in the matter of granting tenure. Just as with fighter pilots or with a bomber crew, the effectiveness of teaching faculty and librarians can be evaluated fairly, even though their tasks may differ and their responsibilities vary. No, the real difficulties of librarians with tenure come later.

Tenure, as everyone knows, is for the long haul. It guarantees job security and frees one from the fear of dismissal and the restraints of micromanagement, but therein lies the rub. Guaranteed longevity comes with drawbacks. Assured employment carries disadvantages.

In some cases, tenured individuals skirt their responsibilities. Sometimes they undergo a burn out or they adopt bizarre and destructive behavior.

When such occurs — when a tenured teaching faculty member isn't working out very well and failing in his tasks — provosts, deans, and departmental chairs have a standard array of techniques. More often than not, they marginalize the employee — isolate the individual in a way that keeps his or her burned-out or bizarre behavior from running off majors, stifling the effectiveness of their colleagues, or disheartening their students.

In the case of such dysfunctional, tenured librarians, however, administrators have far fewer options. You cannot effectively marginalize members of a team. They all have to work together collectively, and if a tenured librarian team member carries on unprofessionally, alienates colleagues, or shrugs major areas of responsibility, team morale can plummet, risking the effectiveness of your library and limiting the value of your services.

That is why, when I weigh everything in the balance, I personally oppose tenure for academic librarians — especially in today's fiscal climate. Of course, if you have an institution that grants tenure to its librarians, I wouldn't campaign to end it. It may function very well where you are. Nevertheless, if you don't have tenure where you work, don't let that discourage you. There are advantages to granting tenure to academic librarians, but the risks of that procedure may in the end far out-distance the gains. Because of the team dimensions of librarianship, because of our bomber aerial scenario that closely mirrors the way we actually work as opposed to our more individualistic teaching faculty, tenure for academic librarians is never the best thing.

At the end of the day, librarians and libraries are all about teamwork and about doing whatever it takes to enable that team to serve their library and the people who use it. As academic librarians, this shared commitment to teamwork — this exalted sense of collectivity — may mean that we should readily forgo the status and prestige of tenure altogether. We have to be ready to weigh the risk, and we have to be honest about the disadvantages of the practice. 🍀

Endnotes

1. **Taylor, Mark C.** *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities.* New York: Random House, 2010. See also **Trower, Cathy, A.** "Rethinking Tenure for the Next Generation," *The Chronicle Review/The Academic Life*, LVI(3), B4 (2009) who argues that tenure no longer fits contemporary economic realities.
2. **White, Herb.** *Librarianship—quo Vadis?: Opportunities and Dangers We Face in the New Millennium.* Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 2000, 193.
3. In a classic square off, the respective deans **Mark Herring** of **Winthrop University** and **Michael Gorman** of **California State University of Fresno** duked it out over the issue in *American Libraries* several years back. **Herring** insisted with some persuasiveness that granting librarians tenure at many institutions failed to produce any of the advantages librarians thought. Neither higher wages, increase respect among teaching faculty, nor librarian scholarly output followed in the wake of the practice. **Gorman** countered with equal vigor that granting tenure for librarians did actually produced all three, at least at a good many institutions, although he conceded that the benefits were uneven at best. **Herring, & Gorman**, "Do Librarians with Tenure get More Respect," *American Libraries*, 34, June-July, 2003.