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Spotlight

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Ignored Too Long

The Benefits of Managing a Library with a Union, Part II

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At an institution with 230 full-time and 120–140 adjunct unionized faculty, and 110 unionized support staff, library faculty rights have been extensively negotiated. These rights include: a 10-month contract; a promotion and tenure (P&T) process equal to classroom faculty; full eligibility to apply for the faculty travel monies and leaves; and salaries parallel to the classroom faculty, with comparable ranks up to Professor-Librarian.

But with rights come responsibilities, and by sharing faculty responsibilities with their faculty peers, librarians solidify their new status. As faculty, librarians face new accountability; they must document several P&T stages in three traditional areas (teaching, scholarly activity and service to the community or value) and submit that documentation for evaluation by committee. Furthermore, in addition to their regular duties, library faculty agree to serve as “managing partners” of the library enterprise within the university via unionized rights. Library faculty are responsible for informing themselves about issues outside of their job descriptions and are required to take part in library and university committees.

Committee participation is both duty and privilege, and it allows librarians to influence university and library policy. At the university level, for instance, four library faculty have been on the executive committee of the faculty union. Three of them have served as president, and all three, in their positions as vice president, have coordinated the action/strike preparation committee during negotiation years. In addition, library faculty have served on the following university committees: University Assessment, Strategic Planning (three participated, one chaired), and the Middle States Reaccreditation (2 are chairing selected topics committees).

Library faculty are also empowered to lead at the library level. Librarians who serve on academic policy committees find strength in numbers; though library administrators have a voice, they do not make up the majority of the votes. Similarly, librarians enjoy great autonomy in search committees, since the union contract ensures that library faculty have final say in hiring. Furthermore, the library administration and library faculty develop a mutually binding workload plan. This plan ensures that reference, library instruction, and other duties are equally distributed, and that no one librarian works a disproportionate number of days, evenings or weekends. Though library faculty do not directly supervise the support staff, they work closely with them and may give proper notification to the appropriate supervisor, who might be the supervisor of the support staff, the department chair, or, when necessary, the Dean of the University Libraries.

Unions will not solve all problems within the workforce, but unionized library faculty have the power to address problems before resentment and mistrust build within the workplace. Though the work climate is still set by the administration, these union rights also mean having responsibilities beyond pleasing a boss. In order to serve the greater good of the university, a library faculty cannot be hampered by irresponsible or ineffective performance—or management. These protections allow recourse when workflow is not flowing properly and the library faculty have the strength from the contract to protect their ability to perform their responsibilities. When used responsibly, improved performance occurs at all levels. This, however, means not just sitting back and enjoying what has been earned, but continuing to focus on working for the library and university and maintaining overarching responsibility to the work. This can be illustrated by a few examples.

In the first example, a library faculty with the primary responsibility to the library instruction program was hired against the wishes of the then-Director who did not support information literacy or the library instruction program. The Director undermined this program by indefinitely stalling any project. The Director insisted on proofing any communication before it was sent to the English Department. He would delay the communication with debates over grammatical and semantic minutiae—does one capitalize the word “Librarian”?—and the messages were rarely sent. In this environment the library faculty member had to ignore the wishes of “the boss” and instead focus on the needs of the university—fully protected. This administrator was forced to leave soon after, and now the library and English Department faculty communicate directly without issue.

In a second example, a new Dean of Libraries established a reputation for following through on staff and library faculty management issues. But this administrator soon grew lax in enforcing union policy. In the second year, the Dean’s departmental secretary failed to gather orientation materials requested for a new library faculty member, despite having been given one month to do so. When the new library faculty member confronted the secretary, the secretary argued not only that the orientation materials weren’t necessary, the faculty member would not be able to understand them. The union contract guarantees the departmental secretary’s support for all faculty, so the Dean *could* have been grieved in this instance. Instead, the library administration used documentation of the neglected request to hold a meeting, and thus resolved the issue, setting a precedent for future support for library faculty needs.

In the third example, it is a staple of labor practice that members of one bargaining unit generally cannot grieve another, and in this case library faculty must work with the chairperson and Dean when there is a problem in the department. In this instance there was a librarian who did not grow with technological developments. A supervisor had shown this librarian a database, *America: History and Life*, several times. The supervisor had also provided written instructions outlining recent changes to the database. Yet when a history professor asked the librarian to teach a class on this catalog, the librarian refused on the grounds that the search process had changed, providing basic required content of the library instruction session. The professor requested a meeting with the librarian and library administration, the Dean ruled that the librarian must learn to access the database. The Dean’s ruling supported the clear guidelines of both the library policy and the union contract. Without the administration’s intervention, the conflict might have escalated into a grievance with the union.

In sum, unionized library faculty have both rights and responsibilities to the library and its services as a whole, and their sponsoring institution. If the status is meaningful beyond a mere title, then librarians must take the responsibilities and the power they have seriously and utilize them judiciously, and this means going well beyond pleasing “the boss.”

Watch for Part III, “Nightmare Scenario or Fairness in Action?: A Dismissal,” in February 2007 (volume 4, number 2).

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