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Collegiality and the Academic Library

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of collegiality and how it can be applied to academic libraries. This includes a definition of what collegiality is, a review of the library literature which describes how other writers have seen this issue, and a discussion of how collegiality can be applied in libraries. This includes an examination of how faculty in a library and faculty on other parts of campus work differently which makes collegiality more important in the library. It also looks at why collegiality is important in academic libraries where librarians work hand-in-hand with support staff and student employees.

Introduction

"Can't we all just get along?" These were the words Rodney King used in his response to the rioting that struck Los Angeles after police officers who had beaten him were acquitted of charges in 1992. While day-to-day activities in the academic library are not normally of the same significance of those that happened in Los Angeles, the sentiment expressed by Rodney King is often the same. Why do members of the library staff have problems getting along with each other? This paper will examine the importance of collegiality in an academic library and look at some ways it can be applied.

What is Collegiality?

The Tenth Edition of the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1993) defines collegiality as, "the relationship of colleagues" on page 225. Of note, right above this on the same page is the definition of collegial which is, "marked by power or authority vested equally in each of a number of colleagues." A check of several other dictionaries provides almost identical definitions for these two words.

But what exactly does this mean? Collegiality can be interpreted as the state where co-workers in an organization treat each other equally and fairly. However, not all co-workers have the same power and authority as is indicated in the dictionary definition. It would appear than in many cases individuals use the word collegiality to mean that all employees should be treated fairly as human beings regardless of their role in an organization. Different individuals may have different levels of power but everyone is entitled to being treated in a decent and fair manner.

Collegiality can also be interpreted under the stricter definition as provided by the dictionary. In this case, collegiality only applies to individuals holding the same rank or power. In this case, collegiality for a college professor would only be applicable when dealing with other college professors. Collegiality for a secretary would only apply when dealing with other secretaries.

This paper will use the former interpretation of collegiality. That is, it will treat the concept of collegiality as one that applies to all individuals in a library. As such, it will relate the concept to academic library staff to encompass the relationships of librarians, support staff, and student employees amongst members of the same group and in dealing with members of other groups.

Literature Review

The topic of collegiality is not a big one in the library literature. A search of the database Library Literature in June 2005 results in only 16 hits. That is not to say that there are not other articles which deal with issues relating to collegiality. However, only a small number of articles are directly about this topic. Of these, a large number of the articles deal with the idea of collegiality in reference services.

It is not surprising that a lot of the literature on collegiality in libraries deals with reference services. The Reference Desk (and related services) is a time and staff intensive endeavor. In addition, most academic libraries make use of librarians who work in other parts of the library. In addition to regular reference librarians, a variety of subject bibliographers, administrators, and librarians with other duties often assist. Add to this support staff and student employees, and the potential for conflict and misunderstanding becomes significant.

Frank, Levene, and Piehl (1991) appear to be the first to address the idea of collegiality and reference services. They related their experiences at Mankato State University (now known as Minnesota State University, Mankato) working at a Reference Desk. The authors report that job functions in the Reference Department had become isolated from other functions. Individual librarians had a job that they alone did. Other than seeing each other at the Reference Desk there was not any level

of cooperation in the department. Collegiality was introduced by decentralizing tasks, rotating in new employees, and working on cooperative projects such as book weeding.

A more substantive treatment of collegiality and reference services was done by Jones in 1997. She wrote that for collegiality to occur that the staff must, "be aware of one another's strengths to capitalize on them, be willing to learn from one another, trust one another, treat one another with respect and courtesy, and behave ethically." (p. 164). The author then lists several steps that should be taken to achieve this.

Jones noted that creating an environment conductive to effectively working together was an important first step for collegiality. This can include promoting trust, increasing job satisfaction, making sure that everyone is included, and helping librarians with unique strengths use them when appropriate. Most importantly, the supervisor must promote the golden rule. This is probably why part of the title of this 1997 article is "Play Well with Others."

Jones also listed several pitfalls that should be avoided. She wrote that the lack of communication precludes maximum performance in a team. Other problems included competitiveness, emotional conflict (versus non-emotional conflict which is OK), dictatorial supervision, envy and burnout. Finally, a lack of rewards for contributing to a collegial atmosphere can also be problematic as librarians often need positive reinforcement to work collegially if they are not used to working in that way.

Lister (2003) noted many of the same points for collegiality that Jones did. However, she placed more emphasis on collaborative tasks. These included monthly practicums, a reference newsletter, peer-collaboration via double staffing of the Reference Desk, and departmental participation in new staff orientation. Interestingly, she noted that librarians may be more prone to collegiality than members of other professions. She wrote, "The library profession simply does not seem to vie with MBA programs for power-hungry, vertically-rising individuals, and this contributes to many of our library structures being more circular than pyramidal, more participatory than autocratic." (p. 34).

Other methods for achieving collegiality have been put forth as well. King (2003) wrote about a method that fostered collegiality at Oregon State University's Valley Library. In this instance, the reference department decided to implement a cooperative Reference Desk scheduling routine. In most libraries, a single individual makes the Reference Desk schedule. In the Oregon State University model, all members of the reference team contributed to making the schedule each week. Although this could be time consuming, the interaction generated by action of reaching a consensus on the schedule helped bring people together.

There is library literature dealing with collegiality that does not only deal with the Reference Desk. Myers (1991) wrote about how strikes and labor unrest can destroy collegiality in a library. Even though the library administration is rarely responsible for strikes on a campus (there are usually larger umbrella issues that get faculty or support staff to strike having nothing to do with the library), when the strike ends faculty librarians or support staff may hold grudges against each other and with management of the library. This makes it hard to be collegial. Wrote Myers, "There is no winning in striking or being struck. There is anger and cessation of friendships. Some resume later, although altered. Some do not resume. Vitae are updated and mailed in random fashion. We each have lost something: knowledge, money, respect." (p. 170).

Howze (2003) wrote about the increasing number of library jobs advertisements which were requiring that applicants possess a "collegial management style." With some skepticism, Howze explored what exactly he thought collegiality was and why he felt that many librarians placing these advertisements did not truly understand the concept and were using it more as a buzzword. Howze stuck with the dictionary definition of collegiality and understood the concept to mean shared authority. His conclusion was that many librarians were unwilling to assume the responsibility that went with shared authority and that collegial management styles would probably fail in many libraries.

Another way at looking at collegiality is by examining the concept of environmental climate. Eschavarria (2001) argued that as a community of learners, libraries function best when the climate is one of openness and inquiry as this allows people to learn the best. She believed that it was up to library leader's to model behaviors that she thought lead to this open environmental climate. She wrote, "Collegiality facilitates the interchange of ideas, and produces energy and creativity for librarians, library staff and patrons. Such an atmosphere empowers people to work together for the advancement of the library's goals." (p. 24).

Difference in Collegiality between Professors and Librarians

In understanding collegiality in a campus library, it is important to realize that classroom faculty and librarians are in vastly different roles. Although both may be classed and ranked based on the same faculty model of titles (assistant professor, professor, etc.) and pay, collegiality impacts each group differently. This is due to several factors including the expectations of the public and colleagues and in the differences in how their duties are carried out.

To put it simply, everyone expects librarians to "play well with others" as Jones (1997) phrased it. This is not always the case with classroom-based faculty. Most

people like college professors who are easy to talk to and get along with. However, just about everyone is familiar with the stereotypical professor who is knowledgeable, teaches well, has scholarly renown, and also has an ego the size of a small planet. And there is a level of acceptance for that kind of behavior in professors. Students, support staff, other faculty, and higher education administrators are used to dealing with this type of individual.

This is not the case with librarians. No matter how well a librarian performs a job, how many degrees or awards she may have, or how many publications are on her resume, the librarian is expected to have a humble attitude and to be free of any touch of arrogance. Being even the slightest bit egotistical is unacceptable for librarians who are seen in service roles on campus. Patrons, other professionals on campus, and colleagues in the library will not accept it. A classroom faculty member (particularly one with tenure) can be difficult and show an attitude and still be seen as making an effort at collegiality. This is not true with a librarian. Any indication of arrogant or self-serving behavior by a librarian will lead to that person being labeled as not being collegial and marked as being a problem by most people on campus.

The second difference is the vastly different ways that most faculty members carry out their daily duties in contrast to how librarians work each day. The faculty member teaches three or four sections of courses, holds office hours with students, advises graduate students on theses and dissertations, conducts research and writes papers, and attends meetings. With the exception of the meetings, the faculty member has the control of the situation when teaching, advising, and writing. Literally, the only contact that some faculty members have with faculty in their own departments is at departmental meetings and in the hallway. This explains why many faculty members can exhibit non-collegial behaviors and the department is still able to function and carry out most of its duties.

This is simply not true in most academic libraries. The consequences resulting from a lack of collegiality are much more severe due to how most libraries are structured and the way that librarians work in them. No matter what role a librarians performs in the library, the work is rarely entirely self-directed. All aspect of library work (reference assistance, collection development, circulation, cataloging of materials, etc.) is geared towards serving the public. The different aspects of this work all inter-relate and this requires librarians to exhibit collegial behaviors such as consensus building, cooperation, and playing well together. A single librarian acting in a non-collegial manner can derail the work of every department in a library and bring himself to the attention of patrons and other library employees in a negative light fairly quickly. Collegiality is important on all places on campus. However, it is required much more in the library if the librarians are going to perform their roles successfully.

Collegiality in the Library and Differences in Employment Types

Another area that needs to be considered is that most of the people who work in libraries are not librarians. An academic library staff is going to include librarians (split between administrators and "front line" librarians), support staff, and student employees. As the support staff alone outnumber the librarians in most libraries (not to mention the hoards of student employees), collegiality must include all employee types if collegiality is going to exist in a library.

There is also a lot of overlap between the tasks that all three groups perform in a library. Not surprisingly, the more professionally orientated duties are performed by librarians. However, support staff also perform professional tasks sometimes. The student employees perform most of the less desirable work such as book shelving, but they are also among the most visible and the first library employees patrons see. All three groups of employees work at public service desk and to many patrons all employees in a library are librarians. All three groups regularly interact with each other in many of the duties they perform daily.

Resentment is probably most often felt by support staff towards librarians. Many may not feel they are treated professionally by librarians. And this may be with some justification. The support staff member may not possess a Master of Library Science degree or a faculty rank, but she is investing 40 hours a week into a job which is probably her career. She does many of the same tasks that librarians perform. Yet, she is paid less and granted fewer opportunities to make decisions. If she also feels she is being looked down upon or mistreated by librarians, resentment and non-collegial behavior is probably going to follow.

Student employees are less likely to feel this form of resentment. Their employment is transitory and most have no expectations of making a career of working in libraries. They don't expect to be given significant decision making opportunities and are content to perform the tasks assigned to them. However, they can be very sensitive to how they are treated. If they believe they are not appreciated, their performance may suffer which can have a negative impact on the whole library. Ironically, it is often support staff employees, who resent being taken for granted by librarians, who take their own student employees for granted.

Without trying to belabor the obvious, it is crucial for a library staff to work together well. Collegiality must be extended to employees of all three groups not just librarians. Support staff and student employees have just as much right to be treated collegially and they also should be expected to treat other collegially as well. This does not mean that roles of the three groups need to be confused or merged. There are

differences in jobs and expectations. However, all three groups can work together better if there is a common expectation of how to treat each other.

Ideas for Encouraging Collegiality in the Academic Library

As this paper has demonstrated, the expectations for collegiality are different in an academic library that it is on other parts of campus. Further, that collegiality is important due to the interconnected work library staff perform and the complications varying levels of staff creates. How then should library leaders promote collegiality in the academic library? Using the existing library literature on the subject, it is possible to suggest several ways that collegiality could be encouraged in the library.

Frank, Levene, and Piehl (1991) endorsed several ideas that encourage cooperation in a library staff. These included decentralizing tasks, rotating in new employees, and working on cooperative projects such as book weeding. The authors saw these methods as ones to help introduce collegiality in a reference department. There is no reason why these ideas could not be translated library-wide.

For example, it would be possible for a library to involve all departments in the training of new staff. While the employing unit would provide most of the training, the new staff could then rotate to other departments were they would be instructed in the basics of what the unit does and how they rely on people in other parts of the library to get the job done. Although this would be easiest to conduct with librarians and support staff as they are hired less frequently, it could also be done with student employees.

It would also be possible to involve a large portion of the library staff in cooperative tasks as well. There are many areas of library work (catalog maintenance, customer service, collection development) that draw on the expertise of library staff in different departments and of different levels. Perhaps the entire staff could be involved in planning and conducting National Library Week activities. In this scenario, a large group could be brought together representing different parts of the library. As the tasks are broken down, many of the significant and visible roles could be given to support staff and student employees as well as librarians.

Jones (1997) urged library leaders to encourage several ideas to promote collegiality. These included promoting trust, increasing job satisfaction, making sure that everyone is included, and helping librarians with unique strengths use them when appropriate. Again, these recommendations were focused on reference work but it would seem that these would also be applicable to the entire library.

Promoting trust in a library is a difficult task. It is not something that any one administrator can decide to fix one day, have a staff-wide project, and expect that trust has been gained by the library staff. It is something that will have to be worked on. The library leader will have to model it by proving to the staff that he/she is trustworthy. The leader will also have to insist that all library administrators will act in a trustworthy manner which will inspire faith and confidence in them from the library staff.

Library staff unsatisfied with their jobs can cause problems. They are more apt to lash out at others and behave in ways that decrease collegiality. There are several ways to approach this. Can the job of the staff member be changed so that it is more meaningful to the person? Or, could the person be moved to a different position that would give them more satisfaction? With librarians, there is some flexibility in the tasks that can be assigned. If a person can not handle buying chemistry books anymore, they can be shifted to making acquisitions in another area instead. If the librarian wants to teach more and work fewer hours on the Reference Desk, that can be arranged as well. Student employees can also have their tasks altered or be transferred to another library department. Library support staff are probably the hardest to deal with in this regard. Their jobs are bound by tightly written language which dictates what they can and can not do. In addition, it is hard to move them to other positions due to other people being in those roles and the fact different support staff positions have different compensation levels. In these cases, library management would have to work hard to help the employee find ways to find satisfaction with their existing job.

Jones (1997) also noted that a library staff should be instructed in how to engage in conflict resolution in a non-emotional style. This directly ties into the concept of conflict resolution. Both Girard (1995) and Inger (1991) noted that educators are in need of training in conflict resolution. Therefore, it is reasonable to theorize that most library staff members are also in need of training in this area. The library manager is going to need to make sure that his staff gets some training in conflict resolution as they probably lack previous experience with the topic.

By learning how to separate their emotions from conflict, library staff can accept decisions they do not agree with without taking them personally. They can also learn better how to compromise and allow competing interests to gain something from the process. Although Jones (1997) never referenced the idea of conflict resolution in her paper it appears as though this approach would help bring about some of her ideas about working collegially in a library.

Although this was not addressed by the literature cited in this paper, another method which could be used to encourage collegiality is supervisory intervention when

someone is acting in a non-collegial manner. Often, people do not realize their actions are causing disruptions. In these cases, it is incumbent for the supervisor to take a person aside and explain why certain behaviors in the library do not work as well as others.

Many people have learned non-collegial behavior over the course of their lives. Changing it may be hard for many people. They also might be resistant to the idea of change. However, many will alter their behavior if a manager is willing to work with them. Some will not, but it is worth the attempt.

Finally, it may be worthwhile for a library manager to encourage the idea of acting professionally to all library staff. Not everyone who works in a library is a professional librarian. However, all library staff can act professionally. In addition, all library staff can expect to be treated professionally.

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