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Multiple Roles of Academic Librarians

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Abstract

This exploratory research study seeks to investigate the phenomenon of academic librarians working in other paid roles on university campuses in addition to working as librarians. Its purpose is to explore how prevalent this phenomenon might be, to discover what other types of paid positions librarians are engaged in, and to ascertain what the perceived advantages and disadvantages could be of working in dual roles on campus. An online survey was administered and results point out that some academic librarians are engaged in working in multiple roles on campus. Furthermore, a majority of those surveyed saw a number of advantages to such arrangements. Finally, whether the librarians agreed or disagreed with librarians working in dual roles, all respondents seemed to stress the importance of the primacy of librarian work as the major factor in determining whether or not to pursue other paid opportunities on campus. Results point to a need to open a conversation among librarians as to what academic librarian work should constitute both now and in the future.

Introduction

Academic librarians play vital and varied roles in the life of the university, guiding students and faculty at the reference desk, instructing library research sessions, and developing library collections. It is a truism to say that librarians in all sectors of an academic library wear many different hats and provide numerous services to patrons.

Beyond traditional library responsibilities, however, some academic librarians carve out new roles for themselves on campus. These additional responsibilities may be carried out as voluntary activities or through paid employment by other departments on campus.

How widespread is the phenomenon of academic librarians working in other paid positions outside the library on university campuses and what do academic librarians think of this phenomenon? This article reports the results of an exploratory study that seeks to find evidence to begin answering these questions. As such, it is not a definitive study on the state of academic librarians working in other paid positions on university campuses; instead, it seeks to determine if there is evidence of its taking place and what librarians think about it. This study may then offer a basis for future potential in-depth research. The purpose of this study, then, is to begin to examine how prevalent the phenomenon of academic librarians working in other paid positions on campus might be, investigate what types of other roles librarians may be playing, and consider whether engaging in other types of work outside the library may hold perceived advantages or disadvantages for academic librarians.

Because this is an exploratory study, the authors chose to limit their investigation to academic librarians working in the province of Ontario, the arena in which both Justine and Karen work. Justine is a reference librarian and is the subject specialist for Communications, Dramatic Arts, English Language and Literature, Film, Popular Culture, and Interactive Arts and Sciences. Karen is also a reference librarian and is the Instruction Coordinator responsible for orientation and library skills workshops, the subject specialist for Applied Linguistics and German Language and Literature, and the library liaison for the Intensive English Language Program. Both Justine and Karen engage in other paid work activities at the university. Justine is a fitness instructor and teaches aerobics classes to all members of the university community. Karen is an academic writing mentor and gets paid by the Applied Linguistics Department to tutor graduate international students in writing. Both authors therefore bring a very real personal interest to the questions posed above.

Literature Review

The specific phenomenon of academic librarians engaging in paid roles outside their library roles on university campuses appears to have generated no research on its own in the library literature. Some literature does exist, however, on academic librarians participating in the general life of a university through involvement in activities that may take them outside of their daily work in the library.

Some of these studies look at librarian participation in other campus activities as a way to reduce library anxiety on the part of students or as a way to improve librarian contact with teaching faculty. Kasperek, Johnson, Fotta, and Craig, for example, report on the perceived impact librarians involved in theater productions and orchestra activities had on student relationships with the library. The authors found that "...continued involvement with play participants outside the library increased student comfort level both with the library in general and the librarian for their major...[and]

that students are more comfortable with librarians once they have the opportunity to get to know them.” (7) Kinnie similarly found that increased involvement with faculty outside traditional library responsibilities also improved his subject specialty liaison work.

Other studies have look at how academic librarians can extend their influence on campus through collaborative and strategic service activities or through service learning initiatives. At Oxford University, for example, librarians participated in a workshop series on teaching evidence-based medicine in the role of “librarian tutors” which can be seen as an extension of their normal daily activities. Dewey likewise promotes the embedding of academic librarians into as many campus venues as possible as a way of “advancing colleges’ and universities’ strategic priorities through constant collaboration.”(5) And Gamble argues for the recognized presence of academic librarians on university governance committees, faculty unions, clubs and student activities as legitimate modes for providing university service that ought to be valued and rewarded by library administration. Finally, Westney urges librarians to become part of an “engaged university” through embracing the concept of service learning. (200)

Participation in the larger academic community extends from library literature to the literature of higher education. Major notes the importance of a librarian presence in this greater setting:

Group work in committees and task forces is an arena in which many librarians possess superior skills and significant experience. To transfer these skills outside the library, librarians must develop an understanding of the conventions of campus committees, the political importance of certain kinds of activities and decisions to the self-governing system, and a sense of intelligent questions and comments.(735) And Lipka reminds us that many professors already participate in other endeavors outside their teaching roles on university campuses by citing cases of academics who, in addition to teaching undergraduates, also work as semiprofessional football players, firefighters, and as professional musicians.

Although sparse, these studies of librarians and other academics engaged in work outside their traditionally defined occupational roles offer some examples of university employees working in multiple roles. Where this study differs from others cited above is its emphasis on academic librarians working in other paid capacities outside their librarian roles on the same campuses where they are employed as librarians. As such, this study may shed some light on a phenomenon that has not been deeply investigated to date in the library literature.

Methodology

An online survey was administered to academic librarians working at universities in Ontario, Canada in September 2006. The universities chosen were members of OCUL, the Ontario Council of University Libraries. Twenty university libraries are members of this organization (see Appendix A). Five librarians were chosen from each institution. The librarians chosen constitute a purposeful sample. A random sample was not used because the authors wanted the survey to be distributed to academic librarians across a number of different subject specialties and wanted to include both reference and technical services librarians. The one hundred participants were chosen, therefore, based on the positions they held within the library, and were selected from the staff web pages available at all of the member institutions.

The survey instrument consisted of eight multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions (see Appendix B). It was designed to take less than fifteen minutes for participants to complete. Questions included background demographic information (number of years employed as an academic librarian and gender), questions about whether or not the participant engaged in other paid roles on campus, and if so, in what capacity, and if not, why not, and several questions on the participant's thoughts regarding academic librarians engaging in multiple roles on campus (perceived advantages and disadvantages, would the participant engage in other paid work if given the opportunity and if so desired, and would the participant agree that the roles of academic librarians should change to involve teaching and other paid responsibilities).

The survey was designed using an online survey tool and sent out electronically to the one hundred chosen participants. The survey was sent out through an email letter describing the purpose of the survey and inviting the participant to reply. After a week, a second email went out to each participant, either thanking them for participating or giving them another opportunity to do so. Out of one hundred surveys sent, a total of thirty-four were returned for a response rate of 34%. Although seemingly low, this response rate still falls well above the mean response rate reported by Sheehan for email surveys in the year 2000. As such, results from this study may still offer a glimpse into what academic librarians think about the idea of engaging in multiple roles on campus.

Multiple Roles of Academic Librarians

The data collected by the survey instrument was both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data included descriptive statistics on demographic background, nominal data that identified roles that some participants engaged in at their universities, frequency of participation in other paid roles on campus, and interval data from the

Likert scales that attempted to gauge strength of relative perceived advantages and disadvantages of working in other roles. The qualitative data consisted of written feedback to the open-ended questions and included a range of responses as to whether or not the participants felt that engaging in other roles on campus could be conceived of as beneficial or detrimental to their already established librarian identity at the university.

Demographic Information

Background information collected on the participants showed that there was a wide range of experience noted by them. Years of experience as an academic librarian ranged from one year to thirty-seven years, with the mean point being eleven years, and the mode point being five years. What this shows is that most participants were on either end of the experience range: they were either relatively new librarians with one to four years of experience (the heaviest cluster of respondents), or they were quite experienced professionals, with over sixteen years of experience. The middle range, five to fifteen years, was the least represented group in this survey. Perhaps this reflects the demographics of academic librarians in Ontario in general, although it may be interesting to consider the possibility that those librarians who are either new to the profession or else those who are seasoned professionals tend to have the strongest opinions on this topic. While this survey cannot answer that question, it could prove to be an interesting follow-up study in the future.

In terms of gender, twenty-three of the participants identified themselves as female and eleven identified themselves as male. This higher proportion of females to males tends to reflect the library profession as a whole, and as such, may be construed to be somewhat representative of the field of academic librarianship.

Roles Identified by Librarians

The nominal data collected on what roles were held by participants outside their library jobs yielded some interesting information. Twenty four percent of the participants indicated that they did hold another paying role on campus in addition to being a librarian. These roles included: *communications officer for the faculty association, translator, compiler of statistics for StatsCanada, technology centre instructor, president of the faculty association, lecturer, computer science instructor, and community service coordinator.*

Perceptions of Participating in Multiple Roles

In terms of perceived advantages and disadvantages of librarians working in multiple roles on campus, the following results were obtained from the two Likert scales.

Table 1

6. What do you think would be the ADVANTAGES for a librarian to engage in other paid work at a university? Please indicate your agreement below.

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	Response Average
More social exposure at the university	0% (0)	0% (0)	12% (4)	53% (17)	34% (11)	4.22
Increases the visibility of librarians on campus	0% (0)	9% (3)	12% (4)	28% (9)	50% (16)	4.19
Connects the library to other units on campus	0% (0)	6% (2)	19% (6)	41% (13)	34% (11)	4.03
Provides enjoyment, relaxation	0% (0)	3% (1)	53% (17)	25% (8)	19% (6)	3.59
Offers new perspectives on library issues	0% (0)	6% (2)	28% (9)	38% (12)	28% (9)	3.88
Gives a feeling of contributing in two areas	0% (0)	3% (1)	28% (9)	41% (13)	28% (9)	3.94
Provides self-satisfaction	0% (0)	0% (0)	25% (8)	44% (14)	31% (10)	4.06

Table 2

7. What do you think would be the DISADVANTAGES for a librarian to engage in other paid work at a university?

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	Response Average
Takes too much time away from librarian duties	0% (0)	28% (9)	19% (6)	31% (10)	22% (7)	3.47
Takes too much of a physical toll	3% (1)	25% (8)	22% (7)	34% (11)	16% (5)	3.34
Sets a dangerous precedent	25% (8)	28% (9)	41% (13)	6% (2)	0% (0)	2.28
Too much work in general	3% (1)	16% (5)	22% (7)	47% (15)	12% (4)	3.50
Takes too much away from my personal life	3% (1)	16% (5)	12% (4)	50% (16)	19% (6)	3.66
Takes advantage of me	3% (1)	38% (12)	41% (13)	19% (6)	0% (0)	2.75

The strongest advantages perceived by the participants appear to be the factor of more social exposure at the university, followed by increased visibility of librarians on campus. The weakest advantage cited by participants was the provision of enjoyment and relaxation. A possible interpretation of these results may indicate that the majority of participants view engaging in other paid work on campus as an extension of their librarian role. If so, engaging in other work does not then provide a break to participants from their normal daily librarian routine, but becomes important rather as another way to provide additional or extended service in another sphere of university life. This also seems to indicate a strong association by participants of the importance of their defining themselves vocationally as librarians first and foremost.

The disadvantages of working in multiple roles on campus differed from the advantages cited above in that the disadvantages clustered around neutral in the aggregate but were spread out more evenly across the scale in terms of individual responses. Whereas the reasons for advantages fell mainly into the *agree* and *strongly agree* columns, the disadvantages fell more into the two different end zones of the scale, from *strongly disagree* to *agree*, with only the aggregate falling into the middle. This may mean that participants held stronger and more divergent opinions on disadvantages than on advantages. For example, *sets a dangerous precedent* yielded the highest *strongly disagree* rating of 25%, but the majority of participants, 41%, remained neutral, or uncommitted, to that reason. On the other hand, *takes too much work in general* and *takes too much away from my personal life* scored the highest rankings on the disadvantages scale with the majority of participants rating these reasons as *agree*.

The diversity of responses on the disadvantages scale seems to suggest a wide range of perceptions on why academic librarians might not want to participate in multiple roles, in contrast to the advantages scale which seems to show more agreement among participants on why it might be a positive experience. The higher response averages in general on the advantages scale seem to bear this out. As to why this might be the case, perhaps the participants see the disadvantages as arising from a greater number of possible negative scenarios. These scenarios include the both the personal toll it might take on one's private life as well as the energy it could take away from primary library responsibilities. This is in contrast to the greater clustering of reasons around enhanced work life in the advantages chart. So while the advantages may seem to be mainly job related (an extension of being a librarian), the disadvantages may be seen as divided between job related and personal reasons.

The survey question that asked participants if they would engage in multiple roles on campus, given the opportunity and desire to do so, yielded the highest percentage agreement response rate on the survey, that of 80%. This seems to indicate that a substantial majority of the participants would seriously consider engaging in multiple

roles on campus if they could. This finding is interesting because it could open the door to further studies to more deeply consider the question of librarians engaging in other work on campus, and by doing so, may serve to refine just what it means to be an academic librarian in the future.

The last question on the survey that asked participants to agree or disagree with a statement that librarians' future roles should increasingly involve teaching or other paid responsibilities resulted in similarly interesting results. Of the thirty responses received to this question, twenty-two expressed agreement and eight expressed disagreement.

Those participants who agreed with the statement cited such reasons as increased prestige within the university, a positive way to encourage outreach, a logical use of diverse talents already possessed by librarians, and a good basis for the future changing roles of academic librarians:

“Teaching, other than bibliographic instruction, exposes the librarians to a larger audience and improves their standing in the eyes of ‘academics.’”

“As part of the ‘academy’ the work atmosphere should promote collegiality and the encouragement to use your academic and professional skills for the benefit of the academic community.”

“Yes – academic librarians need to outreach into their community to create a sense of greater ‘belonging’ to the community of scholars.”

“I agree because many librarians have additional degrees (beyond a B.A./B.SC and MLIS). At our institution our public services law librarian has a law degree and also teaches in the faculty of law. The same for our head of education library, who has a PhD and teaches in the faculty of education. I think that double positions are becoming more popular.”

“Agree. As the roles of librarians change so do our position within the academic community. Librarians should be viewed as teachers, mentors, facilitators, educators, supervisors, colleagues, etc. These changing role behaviours extend the definition of what it is to be a librarian and contribute to the basic goals of an education institution. I believe that roles as librarians are enhanced being involved with other teaching and paid responsibilities.”

Other forms of agreement were expressed in terms of language that stressed personal agreement, but not general agreement for the whole profession due to a perceived lack of institutional opportunities or support:

“Not necessarily ‘should’ but ‘may, if they want to.’”

“Yes, with the librarian’s approval.”

“Agree to some degree. Current role includes teaching and I do not see this as outside my ‘job description.’”

“It may be at some places, at a small institution like mine not so much.”

“I believe that if a librarian is inclined to do so it should be encouraged. I think it is too much to expect it from the profession in general, however, I also don’t think there’s a strong support system for those that are interested.”

The minority of participants who disagreed with the statement offered reasons that implied that an academic librarian’s workload is already full enough or that it already offers enough opportunities for a variety of work to be conducted:

“I disagree. Personally, I have a very full workload...Paid responsibilities outside the library might suggest that librarians have time on their hands, that their responsibilities are not demanding.”

“When we work full time as librarians we can’t keep up with the demands on us. How could we manage to do another job, as well. Who would do the work we’re not doing? There’s already enough stress on us to work overtime to keep up.”

“...given the amount of effort I go into to improve my own technical skills to perform my own job, and the collaborative efforts I am engaged in with my colleagues both within the library...and outside our particular university...I feel that my time is well spend in activities that both benefit the academy and which give me further opportunities for exposure...”

Whether in agreement or disagreement with the statement, however, what may be worth noting is that all the reasons given for either agreeing or disagreeing seemed to stem from the participants’ views of what being an academic librarian already encompasses. In other words, for those participants who seem to relish the idea of engaging in other types of paid work on campus, having the opportunity and support to do so would appear to make them feel that they would become better librarians by so doing. In contrast, those who disagreed seemed to feel that they either already had enough opportunities to engage in different types of activities in their current librarian positions or they felt that doing so would detract from their current librarian roles. This seems to indicate, once again, that academic librarians define themselves very strongly in terms of what they perceive the role of an academic librarian to be.

Discussion

A strong sense of what it means to be an academic librarian appears to pervade the presence of professional librarianship apparent within this study. These academic librarians see themselves as service providers, as partners with the teaching faculty, and as builders of strong systems and collections. Whether this view of librarianship is also wide enough to encompass other paid work on campus is a question that cannot be completely answered by this survey. What this survey suggests, however, is that the phenomenon of academic librarians working in other paid positions on campus is a real one, and one that is worth further investigation. This survey shows that some academic librarians are engaged in working in other paid positions on campus, that these other positions include such work as serving as lecturers, instructors, translators, and tutors, and that there are perceived professional advantages for engaging in such types of work. Whether or not these other types of work are seen to be extensions of librarianship or detractions from current job responsibilities seems to depend on the individual librarian's view of what being a librarian means and possibly should mean.

The implications of this study reflect this ambivalence. The future role of academic librarians is already a matter of professional concern (Abbott 430). In order for us to have a truly meaningful dialogue on this topic, perhaps we need to consider more carefully what is meant by being a professional librarian now. One way to open such dialogue is to consider the results of this study which indicate that academic librarians do appear to be interested in playing expanded roles on their campuses that may stretch and redefine what it means to be a librarian in the future. While the results of this study cannot be generalized to the whole profession and instead may be contextualized to university libraries in Ontario, nevertheless, they open the door to further investigation of what it means to be an academic librarian.

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Appendix A

What is OCUL?

OCUL is a consortium of twenty university libraries in the province of Ontario. The member libraries cooperate to enhance information services through resource sharing, collective purchasing, document delivery and many other similar activities.

OCUL Member Libraries:

Brock University	Queen's University
Carleton University	Royal Military College
Guelph, University of	Ryerson University
Lakehead University	Toronto, University of
Laurentian University	Trent University
McMaster University	Waterloo, University of
Nipissing University	Western Ontario, University of
Ontario College of Art & Design	Wilfrid Laurier University
Ontario Institute of Technology,	Windsor, University of
University of	York University
Ottawa , University of	

Source: OCUL web site at <http://www.ocul.on.ca/>.

Appendix B – Survey Instrument

Background Demographic Information

1. How many years have you worked as an academic librarian?
2. What is your gender? ___male ___female

Working in Other Roles

3. In addition to being a librarian at your institution, do you engage in any other paid work in any other capacity at your university? For example, as an aerobics instructor, personal trainer, coach, teaching assistant, lecturer, tutor, barista, editor, actor, usher, radio show host, musician, artist, event planner, academic advisor, grant writer, translator, etc. ___yes ___no
4. If yes, could you please take a moment to describe briefly below what type of other work this is?
5. If no, could you please tell us why not? (For example, not interested, no time, had never thought of it, no opportunities, no support, etc.)

Your Thoughts on Librarians Working in Multiple Roles

6. What do you think would be the ADVANTAGES for a librarian to engage in other paid work at a university? Please indicate your agreement below.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
More social exposure at the university					
Increases the visibility of librarians on campus					
Connects the library to other units on campus					
Offers new perspectives on library issues					
Gives a feeling of contributing in two areas					
Provides self-satisfaction					

7. What do you think would be the DISADVANTAGES for a librarian to engage in other paid work at a university?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Takes too much time away from librarian duties					
Takes too much of a physical toll					
Sets a dangerous precedent					
Too much work in general					
Takes too much away from my personal life					
Takes advantage of me					

8. If you had the desire and the opportunity to do so, would you engage in other paid work at our university in addition to being a librarian? ___yes ___no

9. Librarians' roles should increasingly involve teaching and other paid responsibilities within the university. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

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