

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Commentary

Carry That Weight

The Journey of an Academic Librarian

Jim Frutchey

Library Services Department, Marywood University

Library staffs, budgets, and services are dwindling without a great outcry from those not directly affiliated with libraries, and a drastically new reality has befallen many of us whether we like it or not. This article is the attempt of one academic librarian to come to terms with the rapidly changing climate in higher education. Sharing my story is a means for me to try to gather and make sense of my thoughts and feelings and then relegate them to the historical record. I am guessing that nearly everyone reading this piece will nod their head at least a time or two. Perhaps, after a time of rehashing the past, we can face the brave new world together.

There is little doubt that the overall state of higher education is currently one of turmoil. Decreasing enrollment, increasing dissatisfaction among multiple constituencies, large-scale employee turnover, and profound budget difficulties have become commonplace. Unfortunately, my place of employment in northeastern Pennsylvania has not been immune to the challenges faced by many of the institutions of higher education in recent years.

As financial obstacles in higher education have grown in recent years, it is understandable for leadership to attempt to be as frugal as possible. However, short-term fixes are not without their consequences. For example, the wholesale reduction and turnover of personnel obviously affects morale, reduces institutional knowledge, and alters the atmosphere of a university.

As a child, I lived a short distance from the College (it became a university in 1997), and I tagged along with my mother while she worked toward her master's degree in English in the 1970s. I also knew a number of friends and family members who attended or worked at the institution. Thus, I was pleased to receive an offer to become a faculty librarian at the University in 2007. I would be able to raise my family where I had grown up, and I would be working in a place of higher education that I felt I knew rather well.

In my view, the University offered a beautiful, sleepy campus with a welcomed curricular affinity for the liberal arts. The people were friendly, and although there was not a reputation for offering lavish salaries, jobs appeared to be stable.

The library portion of my career followed a decade of student affairs positions. For the most part, I enjoyed working with students and staff while overseeing residence halls. It was also beneficial having access to graduate studies with free or reduced tuition. The main drawback with this line of work was the understandable and unavoidable tether to campus. Drunken altercations, fire alarms, and noise complaints inevitably occurred in the wee hours of Saturday and Sunday, and I would be summoned to help.

Having become accustomed to the higher education atmosphere and wishing to have the option to begin a family without needing to tend to late-night college shenanigans (and possibly be required to reside on campus), I decided it was time to leave the world of residence life and head in another direction. I narrowed down my potential paths to doctoral work in American cultural studies and master's studies in library science. Although the content of the cultural studies program promised to be more stimulating to me, I chose the much shorter route to a library science degree and the relatively abundant job possibilities that would follow. Although I would not be traveling down the financial road of Elon Musk, a library degree most likely would afford me an opportunity to live in the area of my choosing while assisting members of a college community with their research in a low-stress work atmosphere.

When I began my time at the University as a research librarian in 2007, there were eight faculty librarians, a robust staff, and a library director. I soon learned that I (along with a colleague who would depart after three years) would be the first librarian required to traverse the tenure track. Although being the trailblazer for librarians and tenure caused significant stress, my original position was straightforward. My main duties included assisting patrons with their research projects, answering brief reference questions, planning for and teaching information literacy sessions, and providing service to the University, the community, and library organizations while attempting to find something interesting to write about to be published in an acceptable journal. From this point, the work-related allostatic load gradually became heavier.

My first major role change occurred in 2011. After four years at the University and two previous jobs with similar responsibilities, I was ready to end my time as a public services librarian and try my hand in the technical services area. When a position opened with the retirement of the book acquisitions librarian, I asked the library director if I could move into that position, and she agreed. The job came with a healthy budget, the fun of poring over reviews of new books, a great deal of interaction with campus faculty, the end of teaching dreaded information literacy classes, and a full-time assistant to help with ordering and receiving additions to the collection.

Next came the departure of the librarian who oversaw the acquisition of non-print physical media (mostly DVDs and CDs). These purchases were beginning to decline at the time, but overseeing them continued to be a time-consuming task with a bit of a learning curve. It made sense for the person who handled book acquisitions to assume this work. Therefore, I did.

At this time, the planning for a new library was well underway. I was not privy to the details of this planning, but I knew it entailed frequent meetings by the library director with University administrators and faculty members, architects, interior designers, engineers, and a library consultant. As fate would have it, the director became terminally ill, and she asked me to try to fill the void. I was somewhat shocked and flattered, and it was impossible to decline the plea. Thus, a whirlwind of activity as the interim library director began. In addition to working on the new library, book purchases continued to be a necessity, personnel issues required solutions, and the overall library budget needed management.

If this were not enough (in October 2012), with an interest and background in history, a desire to please the granters of tenure and promotion, and an apparent masochistic penchant, I volunteered to take on the recently vacated role of university archivist. I naively reasoned that this would be a temporary diversion, a new, full-time archivist would eventually be hired, and I could cherry pick archive-related projects to work on with the new person. As what ended up being my 16-month initial stint as interim library director drew to a close (I would have a second that lasted a year, and I would decline a third), I was able to focus a bit more on my new archive duties, ordering books, and attempting to become more engaged in scholarship and service.

In the ensuing years, as University budgetary woes grew, library positions dwindled, and job responsibilities continued to mount. With the print book budget steadily eroding in recent years, the acquisitions assistant position was eliminated. This person aided me in not only the detailed process of ordering, receiving, and preparing books for cataloging, but also helped me with archival initiatives. These responsibilities have fallen to me for the past three years.

During this time, the division between technical processing and public services gradually became less and less defined as librarian positions became fewer and fewer (from eight librarians plus a director to two librarians including the director for fall 2023). For eight years, my library-related duties focused on and were considered technical processing. During the past three years, I once again have become fully engaged with the public services side of the equation while maintaining my technical services duties. Currently (April 2023), my reference duty time now exceeds my time at the desk when I began at the University as a research librarian. For an added twist, inquiries now may be handled both in the more traditional ways (in-person, phone, email) and via chat, Zoom, and Google Meet.

In the role of archivist for the University, my budget has been eliminated. Since I have not been tackling all the responsibilities of a traditional, full-time archivist, the now former University Librarian recommended the word be removed from my job title. At various times over the past decade, I have been told that I need not worry about the archives, that the archives are not terribly important, and that I should simply do the bare minimum with the collection and its use. In spite of these directives, patrons continue to ask research questions regarding the archives that I need to answer, a multitude of University-related, physical artifacts are sent to me mostly remaining unprocessed, and countless digital-born, potential artifacts unfortunately disappear into the ether.

Issues of role overload and ambiguity affect productivity and professional development while contributing to job burnout. It is difficult to be enthusiastic about a vaguely defined and fluid myriad of roles and responsibilities. For me, mastering and feeling confident with a small number of roles energizes me much more than plugging up the dam with many fingers in an attempt to avoid calamity.

Thus, the conundrum of professional development looms. Finding it necessary to do continually less in-depth, scattered work as a means of offsetting mounting roles and responsibilities makes becoming adept in any area problematic. Aside from the realization that the patron with a direct question comes first in the triage line, it is difficult to ascertain where to place one's focus.

The practice of skimming the surface in many areas for an extended period has other detrimental ramifications. For example, realizing and executing a research agenda is tricky with numerous dispersed responsibilities. This coupled with a recently heightened pressure to increase publishing among the current two tenured faculty librarians (Three librarians have needed to navigate the tenure track in the history of the institution, and this experiment appears to have ended) has led to your reading this somewhat downbeat article. Being a jack-of-all-trades and master of none does not lend itself to a viable research plan.

Issues related to rightsizing (Is this term ever used during times of expansion?) certainly are not the exclusive property of the library. Terms such as buyout, non-reappointment, layoff, and retrenchment have been bandied about on campus too frequently in recent years. To minimize the effects of role overload, especially understandable during periods of rightsizing, it would be helpful to engage in meaningful discussions about vital responsibilities versus those that have little impact on the institution. Many speak of having an overly full plate, but few examine and follow through with what exactly can be safely removed. Without such discussions, the law of diminishing returns eventually comes into play as roles and responsibilities mount, and havoc can be wreaked on one's psyche.

Yes, evolution is natural and unavoidable, and the importance of the bottom line needs to be recognized. I hope that while accepting these truths, careful consideration is also being paid to the well-being of the individuals (in the library and across campus) who allow the institution to function and sustain the core identity of the University that has developed over the past century. Presently, it seems possible that a point will be reached (following wave upon wave of attrition, reorganization, and budget reductions) where the few remaining people who grasp the essence of the institution will realize they do not recognize the entity that remains. The balancing act between identity and survival is a delicate one. It is my hope that the University will emerge from the present difficulties with at least a modicum of its tradition, compassion, quirkiness, and charm intact.

As for the library specifically, my general story is not unique. Staff and budget reductions and disillusionment are occurring throughout the education system, and the volume of traditional library services has been waning for years. Three symbolic examples of the apparent decline in the importance of the physical library have occurred at my institution in recent years. Library leadership has been banished from the administrative suite in the Learning Commons (the building housing the library), library personnel from what served as and was intended to be the technical processing area, and books from the shelves to uninviting steel bins retrieved by a finicky money pit also known as an automated storage and retrieval system. Perhaps it will become a self-fulfilling prophesy that continually making due with less (while GPAs continue to inflate) and finding it necessary to compromise services provides ‘proof’ that the library is not the academic bastion it once was.

Writing this autoethnographic-style piece has had a cathartic effect on me. Dredging up my latent feelings turned out to be a time-consuming and challenging process. However, it was helpful to organize my thoughts and present them in a hopefully coherent manner to an audience who can commiserate. I suppose it is natural to lament the perceived positive aspects of the past while in the midst of a rapidly changing present and an uncertain future. Many places of education and their libraries are enduring a time of upheaval (I am glad that I am not required to make the difficult administrative decisions that have become increasingly necessary), and I need to come to grips with the reality of my being a generalist librarian for the foreseeable future. Although my yearning to specialize in an area of librarianship I enjoy does not seem possible at this time, it is difficult to predict what the future has in store. Regardless, I think it is fair to say that we are not in Kansas anymore.