

## Guest Editorial

# Re-Managing the Library

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Library management is a field that inspires strong feelings from across the spectrum of library and university employees, and for good reason. A strong library director can steer the team to create a vibrant and engaging environment for faculty and staff throughout the University, and their strategic direction can help the library thrive as a hub of scholarship and collaboration. Bad management, on the other hand, can create a workplace that breeds hard feelings among staff, and may allow the library to become a dusty and irrelevant campus building. And, of course, there are endless other variations, from managers who try everything innovative they read in the current library literature and lose sight of the library's core competencies, to those who are successful at creating a vital part of the institution but are then resented for successfully advocating on behalf of the library.

One thing that many academic libraries are currently experiencing is not "good" or "bad" management, but the absence—or distance—of leadership entirely. It's become increasingly common for libraries to be led by deans of colleges, or by schools unrelated to librarianship, even on campuses where the library is a unique and discrete university unit. Without degree-granting authority, yet housing faculty and scholars, where does the library belong in higher education's organizational structure? The answer for some universities has been to get creative regarding where the library is placed organizationally, whether putting it within another college, or having the library report to various administrators, such as those related to information technology, academics, research, or student services.

The placement of the library is likely to depend on the type of institution, and how the university sees itself. With luck, the organizational placement enhances a library's stability, opportunities for partnership, and ability to both rely on core competencies of librarianship and make room for innovation.

However, too often we see examples where the library's organizational structure within the university adds not stability, but uncertainty and opacity, to the library's mission and goals. It may be that a dean of a college simply doesn't pay much attention to the library, its services, and its operations. It could be that the unit the library is placed within is not sure what to do with it. For example, a library focused on supporting research efforts might find itself adrift when stationed in Student Services, or a library instrumental in creating an active and encouraging environment for undergraduates may feel stifled by the Office of Research. Furthermore, when the place of the library shifts during campus restructuring, it may lose its own Director or Dean, leading to a situation where libraries are being led by non-librarians.

This is what occurred within my own library, which lost its Director and was subsequently placed under the leadership of a Vice Chancellor. First housed within Student Affairs, and then later within Academic Affairs, the library no longer had the benefit of a daily presence guid-

ing the library's strategic direction, nor its ongoing work. We were lucky that our staff and faculty were hard working and earnest, so the library's operations mostly continued without interruption. Faculty librarians continued to teach instruction sessions; interlibrary loan continued to deliver articles; circulation checked out books. But over three years, the library also managed to lose its way and its identity. Without regular conversations about our work and our role on campus, the library's importance to our institution was diminished. This was not improved by COVID-19 and our extended closure, nor by the loss of several staff members who were not replaced. From 2018 to 2022, the library experienced a complete turnover in both staff and faculty.

By the time I was appointed Interim Director, which was prompted by the departure of the Vice Chancellor to whom we all reported, the value of employing a library director had become clear to both library employees and campus administrators. It helped that we were not the only library in the university system. Our small library is a distinct organizational entity apart from the main libraries on the flagship campus, and we relied on them to provide a measure of stability when it came to a number of backbone services, particularly in technical services and systems. With this relationship in place, we at least had some colleagues we could look to for support, though the realities of working in a health sciences library meant that many of our colleagues were unfamiliar with the nuances and specifics of our work. It left us with a functioning, but increasingly stilted and stultifying, environment.

My arrival in this leadership role did not immediately change the daily realities of the library's work, and the shift was certainly not immediately noticed by the campus at large. Little by little, however, having its own Director had a demonstrable impact, not only on how the library functioned, but how it felt to work there. Without library leadership, collection development had ground to a halt; the confusing and changing realities of the budget were not investigated or discussed with campus administration; the library had been unable to hire for key open positions; staff were left to themselves to identify projects and manage workflows; and the basic logistics of employment, such as requesting PTO or calling out sick, were opaque.

Once I stepped into the role, I prioritized learning more about the state of the library. From conducting a collection inventory, to benchmarking our holdings against subject lists and peer institutions, to simply meeting with staff members weekly (both individually and collectively), I began to understand where we were functioning well, and where we needed to improve. These data-gathering activities informed my conversations with campus administrators. This then allowed me to focus my efforts on righting the organization's structure, funding, and staffing, to communicate these changes to other university library units, and then back to the campus's administration.

None of these experiences were unique to the setting of a small academic health sciences library in the context of a large research university. They were the mundane consequences of uncertain organizational structure, as well as distant leadership that had neither experience or education in libraries, nor the capacity to provide daily management of the facility and its team.. While some of the specifics may vary—for example, a small staff allowed us to rely on one another to ask questions and provide some degree of commiseration, whereas larger settings might develop several different microcosms of staff, each reacting differently based on the existing personalities and professional backgrounds—the same types of failures would likely be seen at any library, whether it be public, academic, medical, large, or small. My library's experience is an example of how a leadership vacuum leads to a lack of innovation, energy,

and clarity for the individuals working in the library. The re-instatement of leadership, first on an interim basis and then ongoing, made a drastic improvement on both our library as a workplace, and the library's role on campus. As we have begun to hire more tenure-track librarians, our relationship with each health sciences college has grown and improved; our new conversations with faculty have demonstrated their need for robust and dedicated library support. Regular meetings with staff have improved clarity regarding everything from job duties to requests for vacation time, and staff members report that they feel more secure and attached to the library because of these changes. One staff member recalled this period as a "hopeful transition," which—while not immediately transformative—did give her optimism and hope for her future at the library.

In talking further with this staff member about the return of a Director to the library, she identified one particularly important change in the workplace: respect. While the workplace did not experience open hostility or unpleasant interpersonal dynamics while director-less, she found that having someone in this role increased her experience of respect, because I could set an intentional tone in the office. Such an outcome does not solely depend on having a leader in the library, of course, but also on the values and actions of that leader. I was careful, during my transition to the role, to do the following: to encourage staff to use their PTO; to make decisions based on how they would affect library operations, rather than arbitrary expectations about "butts in seats;" to solicit feedback and dialog about library services; to nurture relationships with each individual and as a collective group; to start from a place of trust in each staff member; and to actively accept that, while we may not all be experts in all areas, we support one another in our professional development. This approach fostered a culture of respect, and it is an approach that can most easily be carried out by a leader whose job is focused substantially on the day-to-day management of the library, rather than someone whose job includes many non-library functions, or who is focused on a higher conceptual level. Individuals may be able to encourage and support this type of culture from within the staff, but it is exceptionally difficult for a group to set a tone with as much intention and clarity as a Director.

As I stated above, our library is certainly not the only one that has experienced this shift from having a library Director or Dean, to being placed a different campus unit, and thus ending up with distant or absent leadership. There are many ways to structure a university, but I contend that the basic needs of an academic library and its members are best served with present and available leadership that is deeply familiar with the operations of a library. Library leadership can, and should, liaise with many other parts of the institution, be open to innovation related to how a library serves its constituents, and consider new ways of organizing itself based on current and future needs of the institution, but removing a Director/Dean position, as the experience with my library demonstrates, can have the opposite effect. Instead of becoming more innovative or efficient, my library became alternately stuck in former ways of doing things, and occasionally chased after new ideas that didn't align with our core competencies. The basic, traditional hierarchical structure is the more effective way to run an academic library, both in terms of the staff's experience at work, and the outcomes of our operations.

Are there other ways of organizing the library staff that would work even better and eschew the top-down approach? Perhaps, but changes like these need to be carefully considered, and the long-term effects on operations evaluated; furthermore, the decision would need to be

made from the perspective of how to increase the library's success as an organizational unit. Making this type of change in the name of streamlining, for example, rather than evaluating what changes would help the library thrive, is likely to result in similar negative externalities for both the library and, ultimately, the campus or institution.

Our experience in the library proved to be a useful and effective natural experiment. Without intending to, we were able to answer the question: Is management, in and of itself, valuable? For us, the answer is a resounding "yes."