

Finding Their Own Way: A Phenomenological Study of Academic Librarians' Experiences with Tenure

Jolene Cole*

This article examines the advantages and disadvantages of the tenure system in academic libraries and the perceptions of tenured and tenure-track librarians regarding their professional identities in relation to tenure. Utilizing the participants' descriptions of their professional experiences, the study aims to (a) critically examine the advantages and disadvantages of the tenure system and (b) understand how the status of tenure impacts librarians' professional identities within their respective institutions.

Introduction

Universities across the country are reporting internal and external threats to tenure (Craft et al., 2016; Greenwald, 2019; Pettit, 2022). As higher education stakeholders debate the value of tenure and what it means to be a tenured professor, one group of faculty is less frequently considered as part of the conversation: academic librarians. Academic librarians often do not fit the mold of traditional teaching faculty. They typically work 12-month contracts, have set schedules, may not be eligible for sabbaticals or other research opportunities on campus, and may not be eligible to participate in shared governance. At some institutions, librarians do not hold faculty status, let alone tenure. In 2008, Bolin noted that among land-grant universities, 42% of academic librarians had "professorial" status, 28% held other ranks with tenure, 10% held other ranks without tenure, and 28% were considered non-faculty (staff). Increasingly, some institutions are actively eliminating librarians' faculty status, along with tenure. For example, Texas A&M University recently announced that librarians had two options: "[to] either remain as faculty and seek a new department to hold their tenure and tenure-track status or convert ... to staff, [a process which would revoke] their tenure and tenure-track status" (MacLaurin, 2022, para. 10). This process would also place libraries within a "service unit," rather than as part of the research community. As a result, 53 librarians converted to staff in the reorganization with only 24 librarians maintaining tenure by joining other departments on campus (Moody, 2022).

Library faculty have struggled for decades to define their roles in an ever-changing higher education landscape. As evidenced by the changes at Texas A&M University, on-campus librarians are frequently considered as part of student support services, rather than as aligned

* Jolene Cole, Ed.D. is University Librarian at University of North Carolina School of the Arts, email: colej@uncsa.edu ©2026 Jolene Cole, Attribution-NonCommercial (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) CC BY-NC.

with research and teaching faculty. In some institutions, library faculty are not part of the shared governance process and lack the opportunity to have research sabbaticals. This lack of consensus about the role of librarians in academia may be the greatest hurdle to tenure (Dunn, 2013). Nevertheless, few studies have examined how librarians perceive their professional roles in relation to tenure.

Concerning the issue of professional identity, Bosseau and Martin (1995) termed librarianship an “accidental profession,” a profession full of individuals who “discovered it while detouring from some other planned career” (p. 198). As a result, librarians often feel “invisible, overlooked, and underestimated,” particularly in academia (Preer, 2006, p. 489). This lack of a stable identity is compounded by a promotion and tenure process that has been designed for faculty in other disciplines. Most academic literature has focused on such issues as the personnel status of librarians and overall institutional quality (Bolger & Smith, 2006), overall job satisfaction (Horenstein, 1993), and the debate on faculty status for academic librarians (Applegate, 1993; Fleming-May & Douglass, 2014; Nolan, 2004). Hence, the scholarly literature related to faculty status for librarians is ample, but literature focused specifically on the topics of tenure and academic librarianship is rather limited. This gap in our understanding is especially problematic at a moment when librarians are being compelled to give up their identities as faculty and are often the first group to relinquish tenured status.

Literature Review

Over the last century, higher education institutions developed a variety of statuses for academic librarians. Attempting formalize expectations, the ACRL formally established the “Standards for Faculty Status for College and University Librarians” in 1971. The standards underwent various revisions throughout the decades, with the last revision approved in April 2021. The current standards include eight recommended conditions for faculty status for librarians (Joint Committee on College Library Problems, 2006):

1. Faculty librarians perform professional responsibilities.
2. College and university librarians should adopt an academic form of shared governance similar in manner and structure to other faculties on the campus.
3. All library faculty should have comparable compensation and contracts as non-library faculty.
4. Library faculty should be promoted in rank based on their professional proficiency and effectiveness and be covered by a state tenure policy.
5. Library faculty should have comparable access to professional development and research/scholarship funds.
6. Faculty librarians are entitled to the protection of academic freedom.
7. Dismissal or termination of an appointment may be made by the institution for just cause and through academic due process.
8. Faculty librarians should have access to the same grievance/appeals process as other faculty which include a list of grievable issues, procedures to be completed within specified time limits, safeguards against reprisal by the institution, and abuse of the procedures by the grievant (para. 8).

These conditions are best-case scenarios for academic librarians; however, few institutions manage to implement all eight conditions (Hosburgh, 2011). Bolin (2008) has shown an

attempt to add a description and categorization to librarian status at American land-grant universities. Bolin (2008) categorized librarians into four typologies:

- a. Professorial
- b. Other ranks with tenure
- c. Other ranks without tenure
- d. Non-faculty (staff) (p. 22)

Bolin noted that 80% of librarians at land-grant institutions were faculty members, with 68% of that population on the tenure track system. Nevertheless, Bolin reports that a “strong model of faculty status is pervasive” in the land-grant universities, possibly more so than in other academic institutions (p. 227). This ambiguity among statuses can often lead to confusion among university administrators and outside faculty. Institutions may even see the inconsistency of status within one institution, as some librarians may start positions on the tenure track while others will start with just faculty status or no faculty status.

In 1940 the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) released the “Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,” which called for the endorsement of tenure for academic librarians. The statement was followed shortly by the American Library Association, which officially endorsed tenure for academic librarians in 1946. In 1971 the membership of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) adopted the “Standards for Faculty Status for College and University Librarians.” A joint committee prepared a 1972 statement on “College Library Problems,” which consisted of committee members from the ACRL, the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU]), and the AAUP. The joint statement spoke to the vital component academic libraries play in higher education and officially promoted faculty status for librarians. However, not all institutions chose to follow these recommendations.

Despite these endorsements by the AAUP and ACRL, many universities have begun to curtail the number of tenure appointments for librarians. In 2013, the University of Virginia (UVA) transitioned its librarians from faculty to staff. According to Ridley (2018), the UVA library administration “no longer viewed librarians as distinct from other library staff positions with advanced qualifications and not sufficiently aligned with faculty to support academic (faculty) status” (p. 4). Other universities such as Alamo Community College, East Carolina University, and Mt. Hood Community College have all considered, attempted to, or successfully eliminated faculty status for their librarians (Dunn, 2013). Librarians interviewed from these institutions questioned the need for the status change. The librarians felt overall devalued and frustrated. University faculty senates also opposed the change in status of their library faculty (Dunn, 2013). Unfortunately, even with these reservations librarians faced the elimination of tenure.

The Professional Identities of Academic Librarians in Higher Education

The professional identity of academic librarians seems to be in a constant state of flux. Coker et al. (2010) grappled with the issue of professional identity, noting that “the modern profession of academic librarianship ... is still in the midst of birthing pangs and need of clear direction and definition” (p. 407). According to Garcia and Barbour (2018), professional identity can serve as a “powerful resource” for individuals. Individuals who possess a strong notion of professional identity can more easily manage workplace frustrations and stress of the job. Unfortunately, the identity of an academic librarian can be hard to define due to the stereotypes that prevail in the popular culture of librarians. These stereotypes and misconceptions follow

librarians into classrooms and among the teaching faculty of their institutions. Even teaching faculty familiar with academic librarians' work will still ask library colleagues "if they enjoy the ability to read books all day" or some other variation of this misconception. It is a harsh reality that, although librarianship has continued to change and form a unique discipline, professors and university administrators still do not perceive librarians as "true teachers" (Reale, 2018). Scholars in librarianship, such as Reale (2018), acknowledge that even among librarians, current library faculty may not consider themselves teachers or part of the core of instruction on campus. Reale goes on to raise concern for the term "faculty librarian," which "in and of itself is a confusing term because it implies that librarians are not *part* of faculty but instead exist solely *for* faculty" (p. 2). Griffin (2013) suggests that much of this confusion stems from the fact that "the work carried on in academic libraries tends to be invisible ... and much of what is visible ... is clerical in nature and infrequently performed by librarians" (Oberg et al., 1989, p. 215). When everyone behind the desk in a library is considered a librarian, the fundamental role of librarians can become blurred and easily questioned.

The professional identity of the academic librarian is covered only by a few studies (Antonesa, 2007; Freedman, 2014; Gonzalez-Smith et al., 2014; Sare & Bales, 2014; Deitering et al., 2017). Reale argues that this is because librarians allow others to define who we are as a profession rather than reaching a consensus among librarians themselves. Reale shared that, although they tried not to care about others' perceptions of their work, it affected their identity and confidence, especially as young, professional librarians. Developing a professional librarian identity has been hampered by internal structures, including library administrators who do not support certain types of identity, such as faculty status among librarians. One example of this lack of library administrative support is the opinion piece by Blasé Cronin (2001), previous dean and professor of information science at Indiana University, Bloomington. Entitled "Mother of All Myths," Cronin frames the idea of faculty status as "cringe" worthy and argues that librarians are professional employees there to serve the university, nothing more. Commenting on library faculty research and scholarship, Cronin argues that librarian research "does, on occasion, invite the quiet mockery of the professorate" (p. 144). The lack of library administrative support is supported by Freedman (2014), who found that library administrators and librarians held very different views regarding faculty status and tenure. Freedman's study found library administrators to be "neutral" or "against" tenure and faculty status, while librarians marked these items "extremely important" or "very important."

Others argue that the LIS profession is changing so rapidly, as well as expanding its boundaries, that professional identity is even harder to achieve for LIS professionals (Fraser-Arnott, 2019b). According to Fraser-Arnott (2019a), the changing nature of job responsibilities and LIS graduates serving outside the traditional library may even be considered a threat to professional identity as librarians have rarely seen their identities outside the context of the library. Fraser-Arnott states that professional identity changes as one moves through their career trajectory and is not limited to those early in their career. Individuals experience professional growth, engage in professional development, and have unique socialization situations, and these experiences all lead to changes in one's professional identity. Unfortunately, these experiences can lead to conflicting professional identities. As individuals interact with members of their professional community who differ or interact with external individuals who hold certain stereotypes and misconceptions, these conflicting ideas can influence the development of one's professional identity.

Purpose and Methodology

This study explored the topics of academic librarianship and tenure by presenting and analyzing the lived experiences of tenured academic librarians within a public university system in the southeast United States. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Georgia, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. It is also worth noting that this study does not intend to answer the ongoing debate of whether tenure is appropriate for academic librarians. Rather, this study aimed to use tenure-track and tenured academic librarians' descriptions of their professional experiences as a lens to (a) critically examine the advantages and disadvantages of the tenure system and (b) understand how the status of tenure impacts librarians' professional identities within their institution. Two research questions follow from this perspective:

- How do tenure-track/tenured academic librarians describe the benefits and disadvantages of tenure in their professional field?
- How do tenure-track/tenured librarians perceive their professional identities within their university and professional community?

Within the university system at the center of this study, more than 90% of institutions offer faculty status for their librarians, whereas approximately only 12% of institutions offer faculty status with tenure for academic librarians. The university system is home to more than five Research 1 and Research 2 institutions (following the Carnegie Classification System). In total, 14 academic librarians participated in one-hour long one-on-one interviews from across the university system. These interviews included three library faculty currently on the tenure track and 11 library faculty who already obtained tenure. Participants worked in all areas of academic librarianship including access services, technical services, and instruction and reference departments. Coding of the interviews primarily consisted of a mix of in vivo coding and a set of pre-determined attribute codes interrelated to identity. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were used throughout the study, ensuring confidentiality and privacy in the reporting of findings. Once all data were collected, another analysis of the findings occurred, and the results were subject to additional edits and revisions. Themes developed out of the analysis of interviews and prior research.

To establish trustworthiness, the study followed the four techniques set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To establish credibility and confirmability, the study triangulated data through multiple data collection methods, including interviews and fieldnotes. Triangulation allows the case to be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives. If triangulation of the data can confirm or disprove the data collection, the results can have greater credibility and confirmability (Johnson et al., 2020). However, triangulation within this study is not necessarily to cross-validate results but, rather, to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon. This approach is congruent with a social constructivist epistemology that views knowledge as situated within society and jointly constructed through individual interactions. As Gergen (1997) argues, many realities can exist at the same time, and individuals create their own meaning through social interactions, relationships, and experiences. These realities are therefore constantly in flux, and individual's social interactions continuously frame and influence individual realities, including how individuals interpret their own identities. The social constructivist approach aligns nicely with the conceptual framework of sensemaking in which "individuals' interpretations of the environment give the environment structure and purpose, which in turn affect

individuals' mental scripts of reality" (Suspitsyna, 2013, p. 1353). Therefore, in evaluating the data for this study, the researcher needed to consider the possibility that as participants make sense of their tenure experience, their social identities (i.e., the identity that society gives) and participants' personal identities (the identity individuals hold in their own mind) may have been in conflict (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

Credibility was also established by utilizing a member checking process so that the participant's experiences were accurately captured and represented. According to Johnson et al. (2020), member checking is a common standard of rigor that enables participants to verify the accuracy of the transcription and that the transcript accurately represents the participant's beliefs and intent. The above verification checks ensure the validity of the overall study.

Lastly, to establish transferability, the study implemented thick description. According to Creswell (2013), thick description "allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study" (p. 252). Connections and shared characteristics are described using rich descriptions and inter-connected details and themes.

Findings

Findings were grouped into four major themes: (a) the perceived benefits of tenure for academic librarians, (b) the perceived disadvantages of tenure for academic librarians, (c) the professional identity of academic librarians on the tenure track, and (d) the obstacles related to the tenure process for academic librarians. The themes illuminated within the study highlight the diverse experiences of the tenure process for academic librarians, revealing its merits, shortcomings, and challenges. Codes associated with each of these themes are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Summary of Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Perceived Benefits of Tenure for Academic Librarians	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional Focus and a Sense of Fulfillment 2. Higher Pay 3. Validation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. External Validation b. Internal Validation 4. Job Security 5. Academic Freedom
Perceived Disadvantages of Tenure for Academic Librarians	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Limited Academic Freedom 2. Additional Responsibilities 3. All the Requirements, Few Perks
Professional Identity of Academic Librarians on the Tenure Track	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Greater Involvement in Professional Activities 2. Limited Understanding of Tenure 3. Questioning the Importance of Tenure
Obstacles Related to the Tenure Process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Subjective Standards 2. Burnout 3. Outside Commitments 4. Lack of Respect 5. Lack of Organizational Support 6. Lack of Professional Preparation in MLIS Programs

The study revealed that academic librarians perceived several benefits and disadvantages to the tenure process. All participants articulated some level of benefits mixed with what they considered the disadvantages of tenure, while very few participants felt overwhelmingly negative or positive about the tenure process.

Discussion

Discussion of Theme 1: Perceived Benefits of Tenure for Academic Librarians

As the participants reflected on their time on the tenure track, the following beneficial themes emerged: (a) gives focus and a sense of fulfillment; (b) higher pay; (c) validation; (d) job security; (e) and academic freedom, specifically the ability to pursue their passions.

A common view among interviewees was that the tenure process gave participants the opportunity to focus on their overall career goals. As librarians progressed through the tenure process, they planned their career paths to meet the guidelines of tenure and promotion. This extra professional focus was considered a benefit of the tenure process that may not exist in academic libraries and institutions where tenure is not an option.

Another recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense among interviewees that the awarding of tenure gave participants a sense of fulfillment. When asked whether they felt they had the necessary skill set for tenure, Ben responded,

I got tenure and all and then I think that I did actually do work that was, you know, valid for receiving tenure. I'm proud of what I've done. I think I take a little bit of pride in that I have, you know, gone through and become a you know, a full professor and gone through the tenure process.

Tenure serves as a milestone for many academics; even those who were not fond of the process felt that tenure offered a crowning moment or at the very least a sense of accomplishment. Although guidelines for tenure and promotion varied among institutions, participants recognized the added benefit of planning out how to meet the needed qualifications such as librarianship, academic achievement, and service to the profession.

In addition, participants considered higher pay part of the advantages of tenure for academic librarians. Typically, librarians, like most tenure-track professors, are eligible for tenure and promotion at the same time; therefore, librarians attribute the bump in pay as part of the tenure process even though the bump in pay is attached to promotion and not necessarily due to tenure. Participants perceived the bump in pay due to promotion and tenure as a benefit because it recognized their increasing expertise and contributions to the institution over time. It also helped to compensate for the additional work and responsibilities that came with tenure, such as research and service activities. Additionally, a higher salary provided financial stability and security for the librarian and their family, which can be especially important during economic uncertainty or budget cuts.

Several interviewees mentioned that validation is an advantage of the tenure process for academic librarians. The feeling of being recognized for work and being respected by faculty members who have gone through the same academic rigor was mentioned by many participants. Some interviewees felt that it gave them a sense of being part of the whole university. This enhanced sense of being a part of the university community was described as having

"street cred." Others hoped that it gave librarians more weight with academic faculty. While a few participants enjoyed the prestige that came with being tenured faculty, others noted that academic librarians who are also tenured faculty are considered slightly different from traditional academic faculty but still receive respect for their instructional and research work.

In addition, there was a sense amongst interviewees that job security was a major benefit to the awarding of tenure for academic librarians. Without being specifically prompted on job security, 13 of the 15 interviewees expressed how important it was to their tenure experience and professional perception. For example, Ava said, "it was great to get tenure, because again, it's like ... I have it. And, you know, their reductions of force or anything like that. I'm not on the chopping block ... I'm safe, you know, knock on wood." Ava goes on to add, "I guess I'm very happy. I'm tenured. Because obviously you need it if you want to keep the job. I do like the security aspect." Another interviewee, Ben, alluded to the notion of budget cuts and the threat of job losses: "I think maybe the good thing perhaps about tenure track is, is maybe a little bit more of a protected position in terms of when budget cuts hit." Mazie added that job security eased the professional anxiety for individuals who are not "big risk [takers]":

Then just personally, you know, the security is really important to me, I'm not a big risk taker. You know, I guess it was kind of a risk to take a tenure track job to begin with. But beyond that, I'm not a big risk taker. So, it's nice not having to worry from year to year about whether I'll have a job or not.

Academic librarians who do not secure tenure may face the risk of job loss due to the competitive nature of the profession, as tenure offers job security and long-term career prospects within the academic institution. Without tenure, librarians may be more susceptible to budget cuts and restructuring efforts that prioritize tenured faculty positions, making their positions vulnerable to elimination or downsizing.

Early in its existence, the AAUP developed an official statement on academic freedom within higher education. The statement, first drafted in 1915, was known as the "Declaration of Principles." The statement has since been edited and reconfirmed in additional statements, including the update known as the "Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure" (AAUP, 1940). This document states that "freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth" and that "academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and the student to freedom in learning" (para. 2).

When participants were asked about their own definition of academic freedom, they spoke specifically to a number of benefits of academic freedom including (a) freedom to question authority in top-down organizational environments, (b) freedom to publish, (c) freedom to teach, (d) freedom to pursue institutional committee work, (e) freedom to suggest resources, and (f) freedom to pursue professional passions. Participants acknowledged that academic freedom provided them a sense of feeling relatively unrestricted in terms of publishing and pursuing research topics of their choosing. When it comes to expressing negative opinions or criticisms of the administration, however, there is a degree of caution or reluctance. This may indicate a dread of potential repercussions or a desire to maintain a positive relationship with the administration, emphasizing the delicate balance between academic freedom and maintaining a harmonious working environment within the institution. With regard to academic freedom and teaching, Tia concluded,

I think academic freedom should be that you can teach how you want to teach, that ... you can incorporate topics that might be a little controversial as long as you're still like focused on the student learning outcomes. And that you can research and write about things that maybe are not in alignment with the local, state, and national politics. And as long as your scholarship is sound, and you know ... you're communicating clearly that you have the freedom to do that, and to express those ideas without fear of repercussions.

Sara alluded to the notion that academic freedom allowed her to pursue committee work at the institution that could be perceived as highly political:

Right now, we're kind of spearheading a project, me and an English professor, where we're talking about land and labor acknowledgments and trying to get one at [my institution], since we're a land-grant institution ... We're currently just in the very beginning stages, and we haven't faced any pushback. But I foresee a lot of uncomfortable conversations in the future surrounding this idea. And it's absolutely a project I never would have undertaken last year, like when I didn't have tenure yet. So, I do feel like tenure does give us a chance to take on more audacious projects, I guess that we wouldn't be able to consider otherwise, especially like, you know, the political climate in [my institution] is pretty touchy.

Several participants also indicated that the essence of academic freedom allowed them to pursue professional passions and research topics that were within their areas of expertise but might be in underexplored fields of research and teaching.

Participants noted the unique opportunity that tenure provides to pursue individual interests and passions. The participants highlighted different aspects of academic freedom, including autonomy in publishing and conversing with the administration, the ability to teach and research controversial topics, and the freedom to develop collections that may be controversial. While some participants believed that academic freedom is inherent in the nature of the librarian profession, others questioned whether tenure is necessary to protect it. An understanding and appreciation of these advantages can provide valuable insights into the experiences and motivations of academic librarians seeking tenure and contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the significance of tenure in the ever-changing higher education landscape.

Discussion of Theme 2: Perceived Disadvantages of Tenure for Academic Librarians

Theme 2 highlighted the negative aspects of tenure that participants witnessed, concentrating on three major concerns: limited academic freedom, the burden of additional responsibilities, and the many requirements of tenure with few benefits.

Two divergent and often conflicting discourses emerged regarding academic freedom. On the one hand, the librarians in this study felt tenure offered them the protection of academic freedom. On the other hand, many reported being skeptical of the efficacy of the protection that tenure could provide due to the top-down nature of their institutional and state environments.

The topic of academic freedom among academic librarians was discussed in the interviews, with some participants expressing skepticism or outright criticism of the extent to which

tenure provides protection. Some interviewees were cautious in their responses, acknowledging political realities that limit their ability to speak out, while others were more critical. One participant stated that academic freedom is no longer guaranteed, and another felt that they could not fully express themselves without fear of consequences.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees were particularly critical of the additional requirements tenure added to the daily plate of academic librarians. Interviewees expressed concerns about the time and energy needed to meet tenure criteria, such as publishing research, engaging in scholarly activities, and serving on committees. These often came at the expense of other essential responsibilities like providing quality services to library users, staying updated with emerging technologies, and collaborating with faculty and students. The sentiment of the interviewees highlighted the challenges and tension that tenure expectations can impose on the daily responsibilities and work-life balance of academic librarians. Emma, in particular, was concerned with the amount of required work the tenure process can add to already full plates:

It's a lot of extra work, even outside of your general 40 hours that you do here ... I've got to be very, very mindful of my time, just because I've got a lot going on. And I'm not even talking about personally, I'm just talking about professionally, like at work, when I come to work, I've got various things that I need to do. And then also extra responsibilities.

Frequently, librarians are expected to engage in research and scholarly endeavors, such as publishing articles, presenting at conferences, and contributing to professional publications. Librarians on the tenure track are also encouraged to actively pursue professional development opportunities to enhance their expertise and remain up to date on evolving trends and technologies in the field. Attending workshops and training programs or pursuing advanced degrees or certifications may also be required, depending on the institution. Within their institution, librarians are frequently expected to serve on various committees or task forces. Participating in governance bodies, contributing to strategic planning, or representing the library's interests in campus-wide initiatives are examples of how this can be accomplished. These additional responsibilities require significant time and effort, often alongside the core duties of providing library services, supporting research and teaching, and assisting library users. These examples illustrate how the pursuit of tenure introduces additional demands and responsibilities that can place additional stress and strain on academic librarians who are already engaged in a variety of essential tasks related to supporting teaching, research, and the overall operation of the library.

The majority of participants also reported the need to jump through hoops to achieve tenure while receiving few of the traditional perks of academic tenure. Other academic faculty tend to have a great deal of flexibility in their daily work schedules and are traditionally not maintaining active service points for students. However, academic librarians do not traditionally build in time to dedicate to research and scholarship because of the daily duties of the job, like keeping the library open. Although the reality of the situation may be very different for academic faculty, it is obvious that academic librarians perceive this disconnect as an issue facing the library profession. Multiple participants expressed the opinion that academic librarians must "jump through hoops" in addition to fulfilling their regular job responsibilities to obtain tenure. Rather than being able to define their own professional identity, the participants felt they had to prove themselves based on external standards. They acknowledged the necessity of demonstrating

their ability to navigate the expectations but also emphasized the significant effort and burden required to meet these requirements, emphasizing the arduous nature of the tenure journey.

The additional requirements of tenure were seen as a headache, a lot of work, and just a line for a CV. Some librarians desire to be “just librarians.” Tenure is not the end goal for them; they do not see research as a part of what it means to be a librarian. However, other participants argued that research is essential for librarians and that they should have the option to pursue tenure if they choose to.

Discussion of Theme 3: Professional Identity of Academic Librarians on the Tenure Track

Research question 2 asked the following: How do tenure-track/tenured librarians perceive their professional identities within their university and professional communities? Participants' responses to professional identity included (a) greater involvement in professional activities, (b) limited understanding of tenure, and (c) questioning the importance of tenure.

Despite the fact that librarians might not always fit the traditional profile of teaching faculty, their scholarly activities are equally important and influential. Each participant spoke at length about their scholarly contributions and support of teaching. They all conducted research, contributed to academic publications and journals, and/or presented their findings at conferences. Participants researched and investigated topics such as information literacy, collection development, and information management, producing new knowledge and advancing library and information science.

Academic librarians' scholarly pursuits are comparable to those of traditional faculty because they conduct original research, contribute to scholarly discourse, collaborate with faculty, and partake actively in professional development. Their expertise and contributions enhance the scholarly endeavors of the academic community, thereby supporting faculty and students' research and information requirements. Recognizing and valuing the scholarly activities of academic librarians strengthens their position within the institution and acknowledges their integral role in advancing knowledge and supporting higher education's overall mission.

Another persistent problem that develops as academic librarians move into tenure-track positions is their incomplete knowledge of the nuances and requirements surrounding the tenure process. Although librarians have an essential understanding of information resources, research assistance, and information literacy, it is possible that they do not know enough about tenure. For example, when asked if they sought out a tenure track position after graduation, Lucas replied, “No, it actually wasn’t a big concern for me, I wasn’t really that familiar with what it meant or the importance of it.” In addition, James also admitted to not understanding all the options for academic librarian employment:

So no, I didn’t exactly know what the options were. And I sort of just took a job that came along. That was at the right spot, which would have been at [a small private university], which was not tenure track.

This knowledge gap may make it difficult for them to manage the tenure track, which may jeopardize their prospects of getting tenure and have a detrimental influence on their overall career trajectory.

Academic librarians frequently join the tenure track with a strong dedication to their field and the desire to make a difference in the scholarly world. Yet numerous participants felt that they stumbled into the tenure role. They ended up finding that the specifications and complexities of the tenure process were very different from anything they had previously seen in their professional careers. The distinct qualities and expectations inherent to librarianship may not have been sufficiently communicated or appreciated, even though librarians may have watched their faculty colleagues going through the tenure process.

Participants spoke to their doubts about whether tenure was a worthwhile process for academic libraries. The librarians wondered whether the traditional tenure model may not be compatible with the changing nature of librarianship, which places a greater emphasis on collaboration, technology integration, and information literacy instruction. The limited availability of tenure-track positions in the field of librarianship is another factor. As the number of tenure-track positions decreases and job insecurity increases, some librarians question the value of pursuing tenure in the face of uncertain prospects. The participants seemed to prioritize professional development, employment satisfaction, and work-life balance over the demanding and time-consuming tenure process.

Additionally, the effect of tenure on the daily work and autonomy of academic librarians should be considered. The tenure process may introduce additional administrative burdens, such as preparing extensive portfolios and meeting stringent research expectations, which can divert time and energy away from core library duties. Overall, these factors caused some academic librarians in the study to question the significance of tenure and suggest that libraries seek alternative models of evaluation and professional recognition that are more aligned with the changing roles and requirements of librarianship in the 21st century.

Discussion of Theme 4: Obstacles Related to the Tenure Process

Additional themes emerged from the interviews that were interrelated to each of the research questions. The main emerging theme concerned the concept of perceived obstacles which library faculty see as part of the overall tenure process. Six detailed themes emerged from the interviews regarding obstacles academic librarians face on the tenure track: (a) subjective standards, (b) burnout, (c) outside commitments, (d) lack of respect, (e) lack or organizational support, and (f) lack of professional preparation in MLIS programs.

The path to tenure is not without obstacles, and librarians may face a range of challenges throughout the process. These obstacles include the subjective nature of tenure evaluations, leading to inconsistencies and bias. Additionally, the pressure to meet tenure requirements can contribute to burnout, and librarians who do not fit the traditional mold of academic scholarship may struggle to demonstrate their value. There were also some suggestions that outside commitments contributed to the stress of the tenure process. These concerns are not necessarily specific to academic librarians but to academia in general; however, librarians are not immune to these concerns. Despite the challenges, academic librarians continue to take on multiple responsibilities, such as scheduling and running library instruction programs, which can make finding time to meet tenure requirements challenging.

Another recurrent obstacle in the interviews was a sense among interviewees that academic librarians do not fit the mold of traditional faculty. Interviewees repeatedly shared examples of traditional faculty being surprised to know librarians are tenure-track faculty. Other participants overwhelmingly felt a sense of being different and sometimes struggled to articulate their

worth to their institutional faculty colleagues. Some participants shared that faculty sometimes need clarification about why librarians are considered faculty and what they do to deserve to be faculty. The participants felt that most outside faculty need to be made aware of academic librarians' tenure track status and that there is a misunderstanding or lack of understanding of what librarians do. While academic librarians must follow the same promotion and tenure guidelines as traditional faculty, some faculty may not respect or recognize the importance of librarians' jobs. Some academic librarians even feel the pressure to be like conventional faculty but struggle with being categorized as staff by outside colleagues. These perceptions provide a picture of how academic librarians perceive their position in academia and how others perceive it.

Furthermore, budget threats can make it challenging to maintain the necessary support and resources for staffing, research and publishing. At the same time, a lack of support from colleagues and administration can also hinder progress toward tenure. These obstacles can be daunting, but with awareness and strategic planning, librarians can navigate them successfully and achieve their professional goals.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings was the realization of how little tenure, as a tenet of scholarly life, and the tenure process was discussed in MLIS programs. This lack of discussion resulted in some participants demonstrating a limited understanding of the tenure process, even as they applied to tenure-track positions within academic libraries. For example, Brooke stated, "I don't even remember talking (about tenure) because I took a class about academic librarianship. But I don't even remember talking about the tenure process in that class. But maybe we did but I don't have any memory of it."

Noah recalled a similar experience to Brooke's:

I don't think we prepare ourselves well for that academic process. And I don't know if that's because at least ... the program I was in, was very generic. And most of the people that came out of there went on to be school media specialists. So not many of those folks at all went on to be academic librarians. So, we didn't talk about tenure, the tenure process, or how any of that worked.

Saunders (2015) states, "as transformations occur in the field, it is incumbent on schools of library and information science (LIS) to ensure that they are developing curricula that are responsive to current needs of the profession and that effectively prepare graduates to be successful in the workplace."

MLIS programs must effectively prepare and socialize graduate students to meet institutional and disciplinary expectations for academic librarianship. These programs play a crucial role in shaping the future professionals of the field by providing them with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to excel in their roles. Overall, professional preparation and socialization within MLIS programs are crucial for producing competent and self-assured academic librarians who can adapt to the changing requirements of their institutions and achieve tenure with limited issues. However, the interviewees of the study overwhelmingly felt unprepared leaving their MLIS programs and entering tenure-track positions. One of the least surprising findings from the interviews was that participants were highly self-conscious about how they were perceived on campus, a theme that aligned with the existing literature on librarian identity.

Even interviewees who took classes on academic librarianship did not recall discussing the role tenure would play for those that enter the world of higher education. It is worth

noting that the broader implications of this finding could be limited due to the specific group of graduate programs in which these participants attended, or even the years in which they attended their programs. However, little can be found in the literature regarding these conversations or lack thereof within MLIS programs. Additional research is needed to better understand whether MLIS programs could stand to improve their preparation of academic librarians entering tenure-track positions.

Conclusion

This study's findings have three main implications for academic librarianship. First, the identified benefits of tenure for academic librarians, such as the ability to focus library faculty efforts, higher pay, validation, job security, and academic freedom, demonstrate the significance of the tenure system in fostering librarians' career paths and contributions to the field. These insights can inform discussions and policies concerning the role of tenure in academic libraries, highlighting its importance beyond simply receiving faculty status.

Second, the perceived disadvantages of tenure identified in this study—such as limited academic freedom, additional responsibilities, and the burden of additional requirements with few benefits—pose important issues for academic librarians and administrators. Understanding these obstacles can aid institutions in addressing potential problems with their tenure processes, such as by providing more precise guidelines, enhancing support systems, and reassessing the balance between requirements and rewards.

Third, this study casts light on the need for ongoing conversations regarding tenure and the changing expectations and responsibilities of academic librarians in a higher education landscape that is constantly evolving. The investigation of the professional identity of academic librarians on the tenure track provides insight into their distinctive experiences and challenges. The presence of imposter syndrome, questions regarding the significance of tenure, and the need for librarians to forge their own path contribute to a deeper comprehension of the complexities of professional identity formation in this context. This knowledge can inform professional development initiatives and mentoring programs, thereby assisting librarians in navigating the tenure process and fostering a sense of belonging and confidence in their professional positions.

It is recommended that academic libraries and institutions promote open and ongoing conversations about the role of tenure in librarianship to capitalize on this study's findings. In addition, professional development programs and mentorship initiatives should be implemented to support librarians on the tenure track, addressing challenges associated with professional identity, imposter syndrome, and the unique requirements of tenure. In addition, academic libraries and institutions can foster professional development and contribute to the advancement of the field by understanding and addressing the perceptions, challenges, and needs of academic librarians on the tenure track.

In conclusion, the decline in tenured positions and the evolving perspectives on their value in higher education have raised significant concerns regarding the future of tenure. While these discussions predominantly center on traditional teaching faculty, academic librarians should be more frequently addressed. Academic librarians need help defining their roles in the changing higher education landscape. Rather than being acknowledged for their contributions to research and instruction, librarians are sometimes relegated to student support services. This lack of agreement on the function of academic librarians is a significant barrier to their pursuit of tenure. Ideally, this study contributed to our understanding of the difficulties and nuances academic librarians confront in their pursuit of tenure.

Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol for Tenure-Track Librarians

1. Briefly describe your educational background (e.g., when you received your degree, how long you have worked at your current institution, and how long you have worked in an academic library setting).
2. How do you identify and introduce yourself on campus?
 - a. What are your primary job responsibilities?
3. Why did you choose to enroll in a Master of Library and Information Sciences (MLIS) program?
4. Do you believe an MLIS is sufficient preparation for the tenure process? Why, or why not?
5. Did you seek a tenure-track position after completing your MLIS?
6. Were the expectations for tenure clear when you began your position?
7. What does being a tenured professor mean to you professionally?
8. Do you believe that you have the time and necessary skill set to fulfill the required research responsibilities related to your position? Why or why not?
9. How has your bid so far for tenure impacted you professionally or your professional activity?
10. Which resources are available to you on campus to support your bid for tenure?
 - a. Examples: Research Funding, Options for sabbatical, Funding for professional development
11. If you had the opportunity to choose whether your library hired librarians on the tenure track, would you continue to do so? Or abandon the practice? Why or why not?
12. How has your racial identity, gender identity, or ethnic identity impacted your experience as you work your way through pre-tenure and beyond?
13. As a tenure-track librarian, which professional activities do you currently engage in?
14. Please describe your participation in institutional affairs (e.g., university committees, university, or faculty senate, etc.). Do you feel that tenure enables librarians to participate in the shared governance of your institution? (Why, or why not?)
15. How has your personal identity (related to gender, ethnicity, or other factors) impacted your experiences during the tenure process?
16. How do you contribute to teaching and learning at your institution?
17. Please describe your experiences working with faculty outside the library. Do you feel that faculty across your institution recognize your tenure-track status?
18. What does academic freedom mean to you? Do you feel that tenure protects your academic freedom, especially in regard to librarianship? Can you give an example?
19. Have you or have you witnessed new librarians rejecting the idea of tenure?
 - a. If so, or if not, why do you think some librarians may reject the idea of tenure for librarians?
20. Are you aware of anyone who failed to get tenure? Why do you think that was the case?
21. What are your future aspirations? Do they require additional experience or education?

Interview Protocol for Tenured Librarians

1. Can you briefly describe your educational background, when you received your degree, how long you have worked at your current institution, and how long you have worked in an academic library setting?
2. Why did you seek out the MLIS program that you did?
3. What are your thoughts on whether an MLIS is sufficient preparation for the tenure process?
4. Did you seek out a tenure-track positions after completing your MLIS?
5. What advice might you give an early-career librarian entering the profession?
 - a. Would you suggest they only apply to tenure-track positions? If they were already on the tenure track, how might you advise them in terms of earning tenure?
6. What does being a tenured professor mean to you professionally and personally?
7. How do you identify and introduce yourself on campus?
8. Do you believe that you have the time and necessary skill set to fulfill the required research responsibilities related to your position? Why or why not?
9. Were the expectations for tenure clear when you began your position?
10. Which resources were available to you on campus to support your bid for tenure?
 - a. Examples: Research Funding, Options for sabbatical, Funding for professional development
11. How has your personal identity (related to gender, ethnicity, or other factors) impacted your experience during the tenure process or after tenure?
12. As a tenured librarian, which professional activities do you currently engage in?
13. Please describe your participation in institutional affairs (university committees, university, or faculty senate, etc.)
14. How do you contribute to teaching and learning at your institution?
15. What does Academic Freedom mean to you? And do you feel that tenure grants you academic freedom in regard to librarianship?
16. Please describe your experiences working with faculty outside the library. Have you experienced any resentment from faculty regarding your faculty status?
17. Now that you received tenure, how would you describe your overall job satisfaction? Do you believe tenure status plays a role in overall job satisfaction?
18. If you had the opportunity to choose whether your library hired librarians on the tenure track, would you continue to do so? Or abandon the practice? Why or why not?
19. Have you or have you witnessed new librarians rejecting the idea of tenure?
 - a. If so, or if not, why do you think some librarians may reject the idea of tenure for librarians?
20. Are you aware of anyone who failed to get tenure? Why do you think that was the case?
21. What are your future aspirations? Do they require additional experience or education?

References

American Association of University Professors. (1940). *Statement of principles on academic freedom and tenure*. <https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>

American Library Association. (1972). Standards for faculty status for college and university librarians. *College and Research Libraries News*, 33(8). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.33.8.210>

Applegate, R. (1993). Deconstructing faculty status: Research and assumptions. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 19(3), 158–164. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0099-1333\(93\)90518-A](https://doi.org/10.1016/0099-1333(93)90518-A)

Antonese, M. (2007). Challenging times: Some thoughts on the professional identity of the academic librarian. *SCONUL Focus*, 40, 9–11.

Bolger, D. F., & Smith, E. T. (2006). Faculty status and rank at liberal arts colleges: An investigation into the correlation among faculty status, professional rights and responsibilities, and overall institutional quality. *College and Research Libraries*, 67(3), 217–229 <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.67.3.217>

Bolin, M. K. (2008). A typology of librarian status at land grant universities. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(3), 220–230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2008.03.005>

Bosseau, D. L., & Martin, S. K. (1995). The accidental profession. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 21(3), 153–230.

Coker, C., Van Duinkerken, W., & Bales, S. (2010). Seeking full citizenship: A defense of tenure faculty status for librarians. *College and Research Libraries News*, 71(5), 406–420. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl-54r1>

Craft, R. K., Baker, J. G., & Finn, M. G. (2016). The value of tenure in higher education. *Journal of Business Inquiry*, 15(2), 100–115.

Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. University of Nebraska Press.

Cronin, B. (2001, February 15). The mother of all myths. *Library Journal*, 126(3), 144.

Deitering, A.-M., Schroeder, R., & Stoddart, R. (Eds.). (2017). *The self as subject: Autoethnographic research into identity, culture, and academic librarianship*. American Library Association.

Dunn, S. (2013). As their roles change, some librarians lose faculty status. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 59(28), 3–4.

Fleming-May, R. A., & Douglass, K. (2014). Framing librarianship in the academy: An analysis using Bolman and Deal's model of organizations. *College & Research Libraries*, 75(3), 389–415. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl13-432>

Fraser-Arnott, M. A. (2019a). Evolving practices and professional identity: How the new ways we work can reshape us as professionals and a profession. *IFLA Journal*, 45(2), 114–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0340035218810960>

Fraser-Arnott, M. (2019b). Personalizing professionalism: The professional identity experiences of LIS graduates in non-library roles. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 51(2), 431–439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000617709062>

Freedman, S. (2014). Questions about academic librarians: Factors influencing our academic identity. *Too Much Is Not Enough!*, 319–323. <https://doi.org/10.5703/128828431520>

Garcia, M. A., & Barbour, J. B. (2018). "Ask a professional—ask a librarian": Librarianship and the chronic struggle for professional status. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 32(4), 565–592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318918776798>

Gergen, K. J. (1997). Social psychology as social construction: The emerging vision. In C. McGarty & S. A. Haslam (Eds.), *The message of social psychology: Perspectives on mind in society*. (pp. 113–128). Blackwell Publishing.

Gonzalez-Smith, I., Swanson, J., & Tanaka, A. (2014). Unpacking identity: Racial, ethnic, and professional identity and academic librarians of color. In N. Pagowsky & M. Rigby (Eds.), *The librarian stereotype: Deconstructing perceptions and presentations of information work*. Association of College and Research Libraries.

Greenwald, R. A. (2019, March 14). Protecting tenure. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/03/14/overlooked-administrative-and-financial-benefits-tenure-opinion>

Griffin, K. L. (2013). Pursuing tenure and promotion in the academy: A librarian's cautionary tale. *Negro Educational Review*, 64(1–4), 77–96.

Horenstein, B. (1993). Job satisfaction of academic librarians: An examination of the relationships between satisfaction, faculty status, and participation. *College & Research Libraries*, 54(3), 255–269. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_54_03_255

Hosburgh, N. D. (2011). Librarian faculty status: What does it mean in academia? *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-Journal)*, 519, 31–27.

Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(1), Article 7120. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7120>

Joint Committee on College Library Problems. (2006). *ACRL joint statement on faculty status of college and university librarians*. Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/jointstatementfaculty>

Lanford, M. (2021). Institutional competition through performance funding: A catalyst or hindrance to teaching and learning? *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53(11), 1148–1160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1783246>

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

MacLaurin, G. (2022, March 7). University libraries to see unprecedented structural shift; No complete digitalization. *The Battalion*. https://www.thebatt.com/news/university-libraries-to-see-unprecedented-structural-shift-no-complete-digitalization/article_226f312a-9b57-11ec-82d0-1746ac52ced9.html

Moody, J. (2022, May 25). Texas A&M librarians lose tenure in reorganization plan. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/05/25/texas-am-librarians-lose-tenure-reorganization-plan>

Nolan, C. W. (2004). Tenure-track or tenure trap? In P. K. Shontz (Ed.), *The librarian's career guidebook* (p. 12). Scarecrow Press.

Oberg, L. R., Schleiter, M. K., & Houten, M. V. (1989). Faculty perceptions of librarians at Albion College: Status, role, contribution, and contacts. *College & Research Libraries*, 50(2), 15–30.

Pettit, E. (2022, February 11). Tenure without teeth. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/tenure-without-teeth>

Preer, J. L. (2006). "Louder please": Using historical research to foster professional identity in LIS students. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, 41(4), 487–496.

Reale, M. (2018). *The indispensable academic librarian: Teaching and collaborating for change*. ALA Editions.

Reichman, H. (2021). *Understanding academic freedom*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ridley, M. (2018). Academic librarians and the PhD. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 13(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v13i1.3971>

Sare, L., & Bales, S. (2014). Professional identity: A grounded theory study of veteran academic librarians. *Library Review*, 63(8/9), 574–589.

Saunders, L. (2015). Professional perspectives on library and information science education. *The Library Quarterly*, 85(4), 427–453. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682735>

Snow, D. A., & Anderson, L. (1987). Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(6), 1336–1371.

Suspitsyna, T. (2013). Socialization as sensemaking: A semiotic analysis of international graduate students' narratives in the USA. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(9), 1351–1364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.629343>