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Implementing a Promotional Process for Academic Librarians

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Abstract

This article describes how the librarians at Duquesne University's Gumberg Library developed a system for the promotion of academic librarians. While some of the details in the article may apply only to the faculty at Gumberg Library, the thesis of this article is that other academic librarians wishing to develop similar promotional systems might benefit from what we have learned. Library faculty at other institutions should be aware of the practical aspects of aligning the library promotional path with established university structures, working with existing library culture, and making provisions for the initial cohort to work with the new guidelines. This article will be useful for librarians with faculty status who plan to implement a new promotion process or refine an existing system.

Keywords: Promotional Process; Tenure and Promotion; Faculty Librarians

Introduction

The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Joint Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians* expects that librarians "must go through the same process of evaluation and meet the same standards as other faculty members."¹ In practical terms, this statement poses several challenges for moderately-sized academic libraries. Certain aspects of academic librarians' roles within the university do not match the traditional role of many university faculty members. Twelve-month contracts, requirements to staff service positions either in person or virtually, and the expectation to keep up with library workflow leave precious little time for scholarship and service.² Blending the quotidian aspects of librarianship with the demands of a promotional process has challenged librarians to meet the expectations stated by ACRL.³ However, in recent years librarians have made great strides in working with teaching faculty and developing a role as respected members of the modern academic process. Abandoning a promotion process, or in some cases abandoning a tenure track, could be

viewed as a step backward from the positive image academic librarians have cultivated in recent years.⁴

Within the context of the ACRL expectations, the library faculty at Duquesne University's Gumberg Library began the process of developing a promotional path for librarians. The process, from its inception to the submission of applications for promotion, took nearly a decade. The following article describes the promotion process by members of the task force that drafted the current revision of the promotion guidelines. The task force observed key elements that may prove useful for other academic librarians interested in developing similar guidelines.

The Broader Context of the Institution

Duquesne University is a private Catholic university located in Pittsburgh, PA. Founded in 1878 by members of the Spiritan Congregation of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, its mix of liberal arts and professional degree programs includes ten schools, 100 undergraduate degree programs, and 66 graduate degree programs.

With the exception of Duquesne University's School of Law, which has its own library, Gumberg Library supports all of the programs of the university. There are currently 14 full-time professional librarians at the campus. The library faculty participates in the governance of the university with representation on the university's faculty senate as well as all major university committees. Within the library, the Gumberg Library faculty committee meets regularly to address professional matters, elect representatives to university committees, and consider matters of library faculty promotion.

Duquesne University, like many universities, has a well-established promotion system for teaching and clinical faculty. Because many library faculty believed that university officials would be more receptive to a promotional track that mirrored existing university structures, the faculty committee used the existing promotion system for teaching faculty as a model. The faculty handbook contains two possible promotional paths for faculty, one for teaching faculty and one for clinical faculty, but neither path seemed fully applicable to the library faculty. The component of the faculty promotion process that proved most problematic for librarians was the three-domain structure of evaluation covering teaching, scholarship, and service. While scholarship and service fit into the context of the library, teaching was not a primary responsibility of any of the library faculty members. Many librarians at Duquesne do teach, and even teach credit-bearing classes, but nearly half do not. To address the problem, the committee kept the three-domain structure from the faculty handbook, but replaced the teaching domain with a new domain, librarianship, that more accurately encompassed the varying roles performed by the professionals within the library. Replacing teaching with librarianship but keeping scholarship and service paralleled the faculty document as closely as possible while still maintaining the unique characteristic of librarianship.

The library faculty adopted other features of the existing university structures as well. The library faculty kept the same format for the curriculum vitae. The timeline for submitting promotional materials coincided with the timeline for other categories of faculty. Even the format

of the supporting evidence maintained as many similarities as possible.

Dealing with a Culture Shift

Even though the librarians at Duquesne had always enjoyed faculty status, they were reviewed annually as administrators. There was no academic rank structure in the library. All librarians regardless of years of service or position within the library served with the same academic rank of "Librarian." The proposed promotional processes introduced both an academic promotional path and expectations for scholarship and service. Because the administrative evaluation process had not required librarians to produce any evidence for constructing promotional portfolios, the librarians who had worked under the former system were faced with the daunting prospect of retrospectively producing the evidence needed to populate their promotional packets. The inclusion of a formal promotional track in addition to the annual evaluation process proved to be an uncomfortable change for some librarians. Articles describing environments where "publish or perish" is the norm for library faculty caused angst even among Duquesne librarians with established records of scholarship.⁵

To facilitate the implementation of a promotional process, the library faculty committee enlisted outside help. The head of the university's Center for Teaching Excellence prepared a workshop on how teaching faculty at the university prepare their tenure and promotion packets. Area librarians from institutions with mature promotion processes already in place visited Duquesne to describe their experience with preparing promotion materials. The workshops and visits provided the librarians with some assurance that similar processes had been successfully implemented and sustained by other libraries. Somewhat more difficult to address was the problem experienced by librarians who previously had no expectation of documenting their work in librarianship, scholarship, or service. Several librarians had difficulty producing evidence retrospectively. The committee developing the guidelines for promotion struggled with how best to help librarians who found themselves in this situation and considered limiting

the timeframe for what librarians could include in their promotional packets. Doing so would potentially save librarians from having to document an entire career in the relatively short timeline available to apply for promotion, but this might exclude materials favorable to a candidate's case.

Fortunately, time proved to be on the side of these candidates. The fact that developing the guidelines for promotion became a protracted process worked in favor of librarians who needed to document their work. By the time the guidelines were implemented, even the librarians with the longest service in the profession had sufficient time to find materials from previous years and submit the documents in their dossiers.

Because scholarship and service have not been strongly emphasized in the past, some librarians had limited contributions in these fields. During the development phase, those needing this type of professional development took the initiative to build records of service and scholarship. Since the new promotion process provided clearer expectations of what librarians would need to do in order to be successfully promoted, in this respect, developing the process proved to be a positive driver for increased professional engagement among librarians.

The Initial Cohort

Apprehension about traditional peer review had been one deterrent to implementing a promotion process at Gumberg Library. Some librarians had worked together as colleagues for 15 or 20 years, and some found the prospect of reviewing one's peers or being reviewed by one's peers daunting. To overcome this, the university librarian offered an expedited promotion process that would incorporate some positive aspects of peer review without the perceived negative aspects. To jump start the process, there would be no peer review committee of librarians in the first cycle. Instead, candidates would submit their promotion portfolios directly to the university librarian for initial review, and she would then forward them to the provost for further review. In looking at how other libraries had instituted promotional processes from the

ground up, the library faculty became aware of several similar ways to expedite the process successfully.

First, the shortened process would apply to full-time librarians hired before January 1, 2008. To incorporate the positive aspects of peer review, those seeking promotion via this process would hold meetings in which librarians could share their portfolios if they wanted to. They could also ask each other questions about developing CVs or documenting their accomplishments. The intention was to make this a positive and encouraging experience.⁶ Members of the initial cohort for promotion had a wide variety of experience in librarianship, scholarship, and service ranging from fewer than five to more than 20 years. While the guidelines for promotion covered four levels, all librarians, regardless of years of experience, were given the initial rank of Librarian I. The challenge arose as to how to treat equitably this cohort of librarians with such varied experience. In addition, the practicalities of reviewing a potentially large number of applications would be challenging. With most eligible librarians applying, the university librarian and the provost would have to review more than 10 promotional packets. Moreover, the inability to provide financial incentive for those applying for promotion would present a potential barrier. The following describes the strategies taken to accommodate the initial cohort. Because of the varied levels of experience in the initial cohort, special consideration was given to both the level of application and experience gained at previous institutions. Librarians I were invited to apply for any level, II through IV, they deemed appropriate regardless of years of experience at Gumberg Library. In order to accommodate such a large cohort, the timeline was altered for the expedited process. Usually the university reviews faculty applying for promotion at the end of the calendar year, but to provide enough time to review the librarian cohort, promotional packets were reviewed in the middle of the calendar year. Changing the timeline in this way allowed the provost to review the entire librarian cohort without the pressures of reviewing other university faculty members as well.

To facilitate the promotion process, librarians also agreed to apply without any financial incentives. The library budget could not accommodate any financial incentive to accompany promotion to a higher level, even for a few librarians. The librarians agreed to proceed without financial incentives, but with the expectation that financial compensation would later be incorporated into the process.

The next cohort of librarians will have their packets reviewed with the standard peer review process, that is, internally by other librarians, not submitted to the University Promotion and Tenure Committee. The librarians who will serve on the peer review committee for the next cohort will be from a pool that successfully completed the expedited process, and will receive training on how to review a promotional packet. All of these steps are expected to bring the library process even closer to the university's existing promotional structure.

Working Collaboratively

Throughout the course of developing a promotional process, the faculty librarians worked collaboratively as a committee, with sub-committees charged to develop specific parts of the promotional procedures. While there were some formal votes taken by the library faculty committee in developing the promotion guidelines, most of the work was done by consensus. Working collegially seemed to be a healthy by-product of developing promotional guidelines. Reaching consensus proved more difficult in the early years of drafting the guidelines than in the later years. The final version of the document was voted on by the faculty as a whole, but the sense of the group was that consensus had been reached prior to the vote.

Collaboration proved crucial in developing the document. At least half of the library faculty served on various sub-committees to work on revising portions of the document. Each draft was produced collaboratively instead of simply selecting one librarian to create the document or having an external consultant develop the document. The fact that the document had been developed in this manner gave many librarians a

sense of ownership not only of the document but in the promotional process itself.

Conclusion

The library faculty at Duquesne University learned many lessons while developing a promotion process that could help other libraries facing a similar task. Library faculty wishing to develop a promotional path should carefully consider the contexts of the university and the library. The university will most likely have existing structures in place to support and guide the library process. Library faculty should consider what is distinct about librarianship, and processes covering promotion should be modified as needed when existing university structures do not apply. Practical considerations, including university timelines, financial incentives, and years of experience should be considered when the review procedures are applied to the first cohort of librarians moving forward for promotion. Working collaboratively can serve to build a sense of shared ownership in the promotional process.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Joint Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians," Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/jointstatementfaculty.cfm>
- ² W. Bede Mitchell and L. Stanislava Swieszkowski, "Publication Requirements and Tenure Approval Rates: An Issue for Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 46 (1985): 249.
- ³ Jeanie M. Welch and Frada L. Mozenter, "Loosening the Ties that Bind: Academic Librarians and Tenure," *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 2 (2006): 164.
- ⁴ Stephen Pinfield, "The Changing Role of Subject Librarians in Academic Libraries," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 33, no. 1 (2001): 32; Evan Farber, "Faculty-Librarian Cooperation: A Personal Retrospective," *Reference Services Review* 27, no. 3 (1999): 229; Heidi

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⁵ W. Bede Mitchell and Mary Reichel, "Publish or Perish: A Dilemma for Academic Librarians?" *College & Research Libraries* 72, no. 3 (2011): 332; Cynthia Tysick and Nancy Babb, "Perspectives on ... Writing Support for Junior Faculty Librarians: A Case Study," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 1 (2006): 94-100.

⁶ Bridget Euliano and Carmel Yurochko, "Jumping into the New Waters of Librarian Promotion and Appointment: How We Dove in and Survived" (presentation, Annual Charleston Conference, Charleston, SC, November 3-6, 2010).