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Conceptualizing Classified Staff as Collaborative Partners

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Conceptualizing Classified Staff as Collaborative Partners

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Abstract

Academic librarians have varied roles within the higher education community and librarian perceptions of these duties establish their professional identity. Applying Whitchurch's "blended professional" model of professional identity, the findings of this case study of librarian perceptions of their roles and functions suggest that academic librarians fail to consider all of the collaborative partnerships available to them due to institutional restrictions or perceived structural and hierarchical constraints. This discussion analyzes the effect of these impediments on academic librarians and advocates utilizing classified staff in a more substantive manner.

Keywords: Blended professional: Academic librarianship; Classified staff

Introduction

Academic librarians have a complex set of responsibilities that include working within the library, interacting with other academic departments and units around campus, and engaging various communities in and around the campus.[1] These activities create a unique standing for librarians within the academic community as their roles generate opportunities to interact and communicate on several different planes of influence with a variety of populations. Librarians interrelate with faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, and members of the community from tasks as simple as locating a book within the library to collaborating on high-level research projects and the intricacies of these responsibilities can vary considerably.

At the same time, a various dynamics exist in academic libraries between the librarians and the support staff. Historically, there have been distinct divisions in the roles and duties of the librarians and those of staff, with the latter tending to handle the simpler, more routine tasks.[2] Librarian duties are more complex and generally require greater experience and training. For instance, classified circulation staff will check books in and out for patrons but the academic librarians will aid patrons in identifying proper sources. The demarcation of duties has long been justified by the requirement that, unlike the support staff, academic librarians must hold a master's degree in library science.[3] In this way, the education of an academic librarian validated and rationalized their professional position and rank within the library community.

The clearly defined roles within the academic library, especially with the influx and escalation in the use of technology, have begun increasingly to blur with the result being certain tensions amongst the various tiers of library employee. As Oberg suggests, "The rapidly changing library workplace has created tension, even resentment, among support staff. Paraprofessionals see themselves performing the tasks they have watched librarians perform for years, as well as the challenging new tasks created by automation, but for less money and lower status."[4] Classified staff personnel now often perform librarian-type duties, yet they do not regularly enjoy the same level of compensation or esteem within libraries.[5] At the same time, the changing activities and roles of library employees have resulted in librarians examining their own function within the academy.[6]

The role and identity of academic librarians were recently examined in a case study as part of the author's dissertation. This paper discusses findings from this research that pertain to various relationships maintained by librarians, but particularly those with classified staff.

The findings suggest that the academic librarians in this study underutilize the classified staff as possible and effective collaborators due to cultural issues and organizational matters. The hope is that this discussion will provide impetus for academic librarians to reconsider collaboration amongst the entirety of their colleagues, professional faculty and otherwise.

Background

A dichotomy exists in the concept of role and identity for professionals. Role concerns the mechanics of a position. It is what an individual performs in their profession on a daily basis. Professional identity involves the construction of the attitudes, understanding and beliefs associated with that role;[7] professional identity is the mental configuration of the physical responsibilities. Herein the difference between professional role and professional identity is illustrated. Role is the actual function whereas identity pertains to personal perception.

Academic librarians carry similar *roles* as non-tenure track faculty and adjuncts, at least in the way that the librarians are perceived around campus. They fulfill many roles, but the balance between the traditional faculty model and the function of academic librarians has been greatly discussed.[8, 9,10] For instance, Hosburgh[11] noted that librarian roles affect tenure opportunities, salary, and research or presentation funding. However, the professional *identity* of academic librarians only has been examined in passing. Bennett[12] suggested that institutional structures promoted a secondary identity for librarians, but he does not delve into the meaning of professional identity. Downing[13] utilized social identity theory to examine the roles of librarians, finding that the roles were influenced by variables such as race, gender, and age.

Along with these analyses, a significant new conceptual framework has emerged in which to understand the profession and the relationships of its practitioners—the "blended professional"—put forward by Celia Whitchurch.[14] Librarians in the past have considered the notion of the "blended librarian," but these discussions revolved around professional role[15] as

opposed to the conception, that is the "identity," of that position. Whitchurch's model, however, considers professional identity within the context of higher education by examining personal perceptions developed through the manifestations of activities. This model is the basis for the following discussion.

As institutions have evolved to meet the demands of the age, the exact specifications of various forms of academic roles and identities subsequently have changed.[16] The combination of these new, actual roles, and perceived identities at times create what Whitchurch[17] defines as the *blended professional*. Blended professionals are individuals who "are characterized by an ability to build common ground with a range of colleagues, internal and external to the university, and to develop new forms of professional space, knowledge, relationships and legitimacies associated with broadly based institutional projects such as student life, business development and community partnership."[18] Basically, blended professionals bridge gaps in both institutional and external silos in order to perform their professional and academic duties, and whereby the roles and the environment in which they are performed create new professional identities.

As a theorist of higher education, Whitchurch actually did not consider the identity of librarians in her studies and thus the author's research sought to fill this gap. As such, the focus of this particular discussion concerns the relationships between librarians and classified staff as they are understood in terms of the Whitchurch model.

Methodology

The context of this qualitative study was developed with a traditional role in mind but the results were based upon contemporary experiences. Using a case study approach for this analysis appeared to be best option in that the "case study relies on many of the same techniques as a history, but it adds two sources of evidence not usually included in the historian's repertoire: direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events."[19] Historical works often

analyze people, events and environments where the key players no longer are available for further inquiry, rendering the evidence, theory and findings limited in application in contemporary situations. Case studies may draw on historical studies, but the primary focus is on current situations where opinions are documented and witnessed by the researcher. As well, the case study method is "heuristic" a term for self-guided learning that employs analysis to help draw conclusions about a situation.[20]

The Institutional Review Board approved this study in June 2015. In order to protect the identities of the interviewees, the name of the institution, the libraries therein, and the names of the individuals all were changed. As such, the sample was taken from St. Jerome University (St. Jerome).

St. Jerome is a mid-Atlantic state university with approximately 34,000 students spread across 200 degree programs located on three main campuses: St. Gabriel, St. Michael, and St. Raphael. St. Gabriel Campus is in an urban setting, St. Michael Campus is in the suburbs, and St. Raphael Campus is rural. About 6,100 students live on campus, primarily at the St. Michael Campus. There are around 6,400 faculty and staff working at St. Jerome. The St. Jerome Libraries employ approximately 130 full-time professional and classified staff. Professional librarian positions account for 40 to 45 positions. All librarian positions have professional faculty status, but duties vary by department.

Due to the nature and expectations of the role, this research focused on "liaison" librarians. As opposed to the traditional model of librarians that field either random or subject specific inquiries at a physical desk in the library, liaison librarians are attached to a specific academic department or sector of the community, such as undergraduates in entry-level required English courses.[21] Crawford defines liaison librarians as the "old subject librarian PLUS" who operate "beyond the traditional realms … to explore new possibilities."[22] Therefore, the role of the liaison librarian potentially fits the concept of blended professional in definition and function. As individuals who operate internally and externally through a variety of academic and professional realms, they work within the library but also liaise with academic departments and other constituents and in various communities around the campus.

Also, this study specifically focused on female librarians due to the demographics of the potential interviewees. Comparing aspects of the professional identities of male and female librarians in this case study made little sense, as all but three of the librarians, as well as the library department heads, are female. In addition, consideration of race did not appear a feasible topic of inquiry since only one of the female librarians was of minority status.

At the time of data collection, there were 21 female liaison librarians in these libraries; 17 of these librarians participated in this study. Of the 17 participants, five of the librarians held managerial roles. The librarians were recruited via email invitation that was distributed July 7, 2014. The 17 interested recipients of the email responded and interview times and dates were arranged according to the librarian schedules. Each librarian was interviewed alone with the author.

The questions asked of the librarians were designed around the juxtaposition of role and identity. As well, librarians were questioned about the concept of the blended professional put forth by Whitchurch since such a model provided the author with ways to identify and understand important aspects of their professional situation and to consider these matters in broader terms."[23]

The 17 interviews took place between July 7, 2014 and August 12, 2014. All interviews were recorded with an Olympus VN-702PC Digital Voice Recorder. The 17 interviews totaled 788 minutes. Following the interviews, the author transferred the digital recordings to a 4GB thumb drive. The author transcribed the interviews and double-checked them for veracity between July 8, 2014 and August 19, 2014.

For analysis, this study in general followed Creswell's[24] "bottom-up" approach:

1. Collect data
2. Prepare data (transcription, etc.)
3. Read through data
4. Code data
5. Code text for themes
6. Interpret data

The interviews, transcriptions, and verification of the accuracy of the transcriptions—steps 1 and 2—were completed by August 19, 2014. The actual qualitative data investigation was developed using inductive analysis. "Inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data. Findings emerge out of the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data."[25] Specifically, this study employed inductive content analysis to code the data and develop categories and themes. The intent of this method was to cultivate core concepts that emanated from the existing data.[26] Following the completion of the data interpretation, the findings were analyzed. The subsequent section discusses one segment of the findings as it relates directly to librarians and collaboration with colleagues.

Findings and Discussion

One of the four components of Whitchurch's blended professional model pertains to the relationships that professionals cultivate in their field or work. The librarians' personal perceptions of their relationships illuminated what librarians believed about the physical and metaphorical place they occupy in the larger university community. In order to explore this aspect of the model, the librarians were asked: What is (are) your most significant relationships in the academic community? Interesting responses were offered.

Relationships

Emphases placed on relationships differed according to the various types of roles librarians play in the institution. Librarians who are managers/supervisors, for instance, saw value in relationships with other campus departments. If, for example, a snake is found in a chair (this did indeed happen!), then it is beneficial to have a solid working relationship with the facilities crew members. Also unsurprisingly, the non-supervisory librarians at St. Jerome viewed their colleagues, i.e. other librarians, as the most important partnerships and other library stakeholders such as faculty, students, and other classified staff, were secondary considerations or complete afterthoughts when discussing significant relationships.

Remarkably, the term "colleagues" was never meant to refer to classified staff by either managers or librarians even though many of the classified staff personnel, particularly in the research-oriented departments, have multiple master's degrees or are pursuing doctoral degrees. Some staff members actually have research experience acquired in educational institutions and/or in industry. In terms of academic productivity, many non-librarian staff would be, in fact, helpful colleagues of librarians since both groups—librarians and staff—benefit professionally by their research, publications and other scholarship of various kinds.

When non-librarian staff are not considered for partnerships on projects with librarians, they unfortunately remain an untapped resource and librarians do not benefit by a professional network extended internally.[27] Discovering these partnerships with staff is important for librarians committed to the model of the blended professional. It involves a mindset that imagines a broader scope of professional collaboration.

Differentiation, Integration, and the Organization

Based upon the totality of the findings, academic librarians at St. Jerome are blended professionals. Unfortunately, due to organizational restrictions, many of their classified colleagues reside in more fixed roles and are not part of the blended environment. The potential productivity of librarians is thus reduced by confining the scope of relationship development, and this tends to minimize the efficiency of the organization as a whole. Bolman and Deal specify two key elements of the organizational structure: "how to allocate work (differentiation) and how to coordinate roles and units once responsibilities have been parceled

out (integration).[28] Feedback from the librarians interviewed suggests that St. Jerome falls short in terms of both differentiation and integration. As a result, productivity, morale, and the professional environment are negatively impacted by these structural realities.

Differentiation is difficult in St. Jerome's system due to the complex distinctions between classified staff and professional or administrative faculty. The general characteristic of these two roles is that classified staff commonly not to have an MLS whereas the faculty, as trained librarians, do. In addition to this basic difference in credentials, roles of employees tend to be complicated by the allocation of responsibilities depending on the rank one has at the institution. The problem arises at St. Jerome, however, in that limitations of roles are very strict due to state-wide classifications, and this prevents wide collaboration and partnerships. In theory, though, differentiations should promote a more collegial environment as suggested by Bolman and Deal, "clear, well-understood roles and relationships and adequate coordination are key to how well an organization performs."[29] In what follows, further discussion of the elements of differentiation and integration unfold in reference to specific qualitative findings of the research supporting this case study.

Qualitative Data

Roles at St. Jerome are differentiated by rank but the blending of roles is hampered by an organizational structure that prohibits work being done that is not compensated financially in the same way across the organization. Jessica explains one situation.

> It gets into class differences more or less and…we actually lost…I don't know if you knew [a former classified staff member], but my understanding from hearsay is that…well we all knew that he did spreadsheets. The man was a wizard at spreadsheets. And he wanted to do more with the data but they would not give him a more professional role so he said "I'm done. I'm done with stats. Someone else can deal with it" because he felt like he was doing

more than what was required by the position and he was not being rewarded for it. And I can understand that.[30]

If workers exceed the responsibilities outlined in their respective job descriptions, then the state mandates that they should be compensated for the work. This becomes problematic when economic constraints make raises and reclassification of positions impossible. Although the roles at St. Jerome are differentiated between the ranks, the ability to blend roles within the organizational structure is limited by the formal specific boundaries of their rank.

The functionality of the roles in the library for the most part is based upon skills and knowledge.[31] Typically, each library has separate units such as reference or circulation that vary in size depending on the needs of a particular location and on other factors such as shift time and geography. This becomes awkward at St. Jerome because the integration of the skills of the classified workers sometimes intersect with those of the librarians. Jessica reports,

> I've been hearing a lot of bits and pieces from conferences and elsewhere where the role of librarians and the role of non-librarians are becoming a lot more fuzzy. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing but part of me says, "I went to library school, darn it!" I wouldn't have gone to library school if I hadn't had to. I only went because that's how you got a job, otherwise I would have never gone to library school. I'm not really sure that I can say that the MLS should be required.

Many of the skills of the librarian are pragmatic and experiential, and therefore may be acquired by staff performing the same duties as the librarians. The academic degree did not so much legitimize the professional as it simply opened the door. Betsy Simpson suggests, "The concept of a non-MLS librarian may appear to demean the profession by suggesting the degree is not essential to being a librarian in the sense that the degree serves as a professional credential indicating mastery of theory and practice of librarianship."[32] Generally, librarians do not appreciate this infringement upon

their professional territory, especially when they are vying with others for credibility and legitimacy on campus. The point to be made is that, while roles in the library are clearly differentiated based on academic credentials, the functionality of these roles can entail considerable overlap, and this intersection fosters territorialism and mitigates opportunities for collaboration.

This differentiation in roles may also be seen in the titles assigned to the classified staff in the libraries, such as "paraprofessional." The term itself denotes assistance to the licensed professionals, which in this case are the librarians. Librarians can be keen to point out this difference in ability. Bridget discusses the need to make this paraprofessional-professional distinction.

> … This is not an insult to the paraprofessionals at all because I think you know I think you guys are awesome…but I think there's…maybe I'm generalizing and maybe that's too much because I like to think of what I do on the reference desk. The student does not know the question they need to ask. But through my experience and my opportunities, I'm like "Oh, that's where you need to go."

At St. Jerome, paraprofessionals attached to liaison librarian departments were additionally labeled "librarian assistants," or "LA's," creating another role distinction that is not necessarily beneficial to the professional environment or productivity. Lucy reports,

> When it becomes a distinction I think it creates an atmosphere that's not good for anyone, and I feel that that distinction is definitely made more at Alexander VI than it is maybe at the other libraries. And, truthfully, a lot of our LA's, or whatever we call them nowadays, have higher degrees, or are pursuing higher degrees, or have more academic research, than the librarians …. So I mean, yeah, I think the reason we're so hung up on the MLS is there have been pockets where [the] … idea that an MLS is even necessary is being challenged.

The librarians, of course, also defend the legitimacy of their positions for financial reasons. A 2011 study found that 78% of library directors consider budget as a significant reason for hiring non-MLS individuals as librarians.[33] As a rule, classified staff makes less money than the faculty-level librarians. If the financial situation leads to cutbacks, then what would be the sense of hiring an MLS-holding librarian when a non-librarian staff member can do the same job for a fraction of the salary?

At the same, managers realistically cannot ask employees to carry out the same duties as a librarian or a higher-ranked classified staff member. This creates a motivational and potentially a disciplinary concern as well. And the state system makes discipline very complicated. This exchange resulted in this case study research:

> Gwen: [In order to fix the system] I might change the fact that we can't terminate people here or [if we do], then it's such an…arduous process.
>
> Author: Eighteen…eighteen months to terminate anybody who's classified.
>
> Gwen: Yeah. I would maybe change that. My husband always says to me that no actual business could function the way your library functions. There's just no way. Businesses couldn't be profitable if they have people that just kind of showed up and then went home. So I would probably change that [although] … I recognize there's benefits the system that we have now, but that's something that I would change.

In short, the constraints of the job description for classified staff make the integration of employee tasks and motivating them to engage in collaborative activities with librarians difficult. Systemically, the structure of the organization makes management and mobility in the interest of collaboration very challenging.

The totality of these findings is significant because they demonstrate the difficult structural environment in which the librarians attempt to blend professionally at St. Jerome. Perhaps

these findings resonate with situations elsewhere, especially in larger and publically funded institutions. Ideally, the role of librarians transcends a great many organizational boundaries, but, unluckily, the personnel who might exemplify the success of the blended professional are often unable to transcend various restrictions of their positions, perceived or real.

Use of Personnel

In the course of the differentiation and integration of the various roles within the library system, the rigidity of the classifications impedes librarians to develop and grow, and to "blend" as professionals. In this case study, the issue is recognized by several managers and senior librarians, yet they lack the ability to enact true change. Bolman and Deal explain, "Experienced managers … understand the difference between possessing a tool and knowing how to use it. Only experience and practice bring the skill and wisdom to size up a situation and use tools well."[34] Too often, though, screwdrivers are being used to pound in nails, as it were. Jessica comments,

> We should be grooming people and that's one of the things that we have not done. Actually, that is a barrier since there's a tendency to see people in little pegs. You do this job … and you do that job, and there hasn't been as much interest in letting people do things that are a bit broader and fuzzier.

Part of the issue is that St. Jerome must work within the boundaries defined by the state. At the same time, though, the system retards the development of ambitious classified staff by limiting their practical experience to the strict confines of their existing position. This, in turn, leads to a high level of turnover among that level of staff. Gwen reports,

> I feel like I'm hiring people that are either out of undergrad or [just] out of library school. They want some experience and I expect them to leave, like they're going to get bored. They want to learn new things

and I can only offer so many training opportunities or responsibilities, and they're going to get bored, and then they're going to move on …. I expect that.

Some of the managers actually suggested utilizing classified staff in more substantial roles. As Catherine proposes, "I see the [LA level III] as almost an administrative librarian … role. … [You] want folks to grow … and we don't have … [such opportunities] for those folks in those [classified positions]…, so I would change that." This type of change would require a systemic overhaul of the theory and function of library positions, but economic realities of publically funded institutions create an unlikely scenario for such change to occur.

The existing system also potentially impedes the productivity of the librarians themselves. Part of the reasoning behind many paraprofessional positions is to see classified staff appointed to aid librarians in projects that could benefit from potential partners or collaborators. Inasmuch as librarians state that they do not have enough time to complete substantial research, they are unable to take advantage of paraprofessional collaborations. Moreover, library schools may not have equipped librarians with the abilities needed to complete significant quantitative or qualitative methodological studies. Some librarians, however, such as Lucy, are willing to draw on the skills of classified staff. She reports, "You are the stats guy and there is no way I would deny that. If I were going to have a stats question, I would ask you, because you know stats. It doesn't matter if you have an MLS." But not all librarians are willing to ask for help from the lower ranks because of status issues. Simply put, while the system has in place potential opportunities for librarian—classified staff collaborations, local pressures limit the time available to librarian-initiated research, and attitudes of librarians toward classified staff can be barriers to this type of partnerships needed for the blended professional to thrive.

Finally, in addition to the systemic and attitudinal challenges to the blended professional, collaborating with classified staff is hampered by

the "siloing" that occurs internally because librarians simply are not aware of, or unable to recognize, the abilities of staff to collaborate. The following exchange exemplifies this.

> Maria: In general, I think we're really bad at recognizing peoples' innate talents and interests and trying to develop those professionally. I've always thought that. You get these people and you see them three months out, six months out, maybe even a year out, and you say "Gosh, well I didn't know they could do that." Well they said they could do that on their resume but I didn't know they *did* this. You know what I mean?

> Author: Compartmentalization.

> Maria: Thank you. And I think for all their talk about "de-siloing" they reinforce it by not recognizing the innate skills of people, and maybe [by not] putting people with like skills together in a unit. [You need] not just a temporary taskforce…not just a team…. You structure it.

The findings of this case study are significant because they demonstrate the creation of artificial boundaries that encumber the blended professional role. While it initially appears negative, such barriers to collaboration can actuality provide substantial opportunity for outreach and professional development which, in turn, can lead to even great development and implementation of the blended professional model. By recognizing and understanding impediments to collaboration, the weaknesses come to light, and as illuminated, they can become opportunities for growth. It just becomes a matter of looking for existing partners—regardless of rank or title—and operating effectively within the confines of the organizational structure. It is a challenging task, but it is feasible.

Conclusion

Analyses of the role and function of librarians abound, but with the conceptual analysis of Whitchurch found in the notion of the "blended librarian," new perspectives emerge.

This blended model conceives of librarians developing and functioning in new modes of partnerships and collaborations. Based on a case study at St. Jerome University, research uncovered certain barriers to collaboration between librarians and classified staff (non-librarians) due to institutional impediments such as restrictive job descriptions, human resource compensation policies and the inability among the institution's classified staff to move within or across job classifications. Barriers also existed due to attitudes and perspectives of librarians toward classified staff, as well as a lack of understanding of capabilities or potentials of their skills in assisting with or fully partnering with librarians on research projects. Affective barriers also exist on the part of classified staff where resistance to collaboration surfaces due to the fact that institutional managers are not permitted to provide appropriate compensation for their additional work.

These barriers to the model of the blended professional can have a negative effect, but understanding the nature of these issues can lead to both librarians and classified staff recognizing such barriers exist that can then lead, if there is the will, to overcoming such difficulties, engaging in meaningful collaboration, and reaping the benefits of broader partnerships internal to the academic library.

As a case study, this discussion, by definition, represents just one portion of one institution. The next logical step would be to analyze other academic librarians, both at St. Jerome and other universities, in reference to the blended professional model. As well, more research is required to determine whether the insights and implications of the blended professional model for the librarian endure through changes in demographics and geographies. Still, some of the seminal findings of the case study at St. Jerome have been helpful in understanding barriers to collaboration and in anticipating greater opportunities for partnerships, and these findings may be helpful in similar work environments.

Endnotes

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[28] Lee. G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership, 5th ed.*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), 49.

[29] Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 44.

[30] During the course of this case study, the reader might notice several quotes from the librarians with the phrase "you" or "you guys" directed at the author. This is because during the time of research the author was classified library staff. Like many of his classified colleagues, the system proved too restrictive for development and the author recently found greater opportunity away from St. Jerome.

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