

The myths surrounding faculty status for librarians

By Beth J. Shapiro

Is faculty status really what we want for academic librarians?

Jacquelyn McCoy, the outgoing president of ACRL, writes about reengineering academic and research libraries. She rightly states that academic libraries are at a crossroads due to technology, finances, and changes within higher education that "are forcing our profession to reevaluate every feature and function of librarianship."¹ I would like to suggest that one of the first areas to be reevaluated is faculty status for librarians for it has outlived its usefulness.

One of the fundamental aspects of faculty status for librarians is tenure or some form of continuing employment status. Some of our teaching faculty colleagues are beginning to recognize that tenure is not all that it is cracked up to be. James Winn, in an editorial in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* cogently argues that tenure and the tenure review process no longer function as originally intended. Winn suggests that faculty initiate a grassroots movement "to give up tenure voluntarily so that we can move toward a more humane and flexible system."²

I agree with many of Winn's points and would like to suggest that it is time to re-evaluate the think tank's assumptions about faculty status for librarians. This spring the work of an ACRL-sponsored think tank on faculty status for librarians for the year 2001 was published.³ The think tank missed a great opportunity to take a fresh look at faculty status. Its approach was based on old assumptions and numerous myths. We can no longer afford to look at our profession in the same old ways.

Myth #1: Faculty status is appropriate to the role of librarians. I disagree whole-

heartedly with this assumption. While it is true that librarians are and should be considered key players in accomplishing the educational mission of our institutions, the work that we do is fundamentally different from that of the teaching faculty. Performance expectations and criteria for teaching faculty and librarians have little in common. In addition, the research requirements for faculty are significant to the fields in which they teach. Conducting empirical research is not necessarily essential to our basic mission as librarians. In reality, the vast majority of research, or what passes for research, at institutions where librarians have faculty status is of questionable quality. Rather than focusing exclusively on developing a research agenda, we must develop a shared sense of professionalism that involves professional participation at a variety of levels.

Myth #2: The protection of faculty status is important for academic librarians. Why? Do we feel that faculty status provides us with more credibility and respect on campus? Respect and status must be earned by developing our libraries into excellent, responsive units on campus that provide essential support to the teaching and research mission of the university. In recent years, many of us have talked about the central role of libraries on campus and about how important it is for librarians to be partners with the faculty. Faculty status does not ensure that librarians will be considered equal partners in the educational process. Rather, we are and should be evaluated on the quality, utility, and effectiveness of the collections and services we develop.

Myth #3: Faculty status benefits the academy, not just librarians. During the McCarthy era, tenure was thought to protect the academic freedom of many faculty. We need to be realistic about how tenure has been used. Clearly, junior faculty who have not yet achieved ten-

ure remain vulnerable. As Winn so aptly states: "The right to free speech is precious and fragile, but we should not be starry-eyed about the capacity of tenure to protect that right. Junior faculty members and others without tenure enjoy markedly less academic freedom than tenured people, and a determined vicious chairman can still abuse a tenured faculty member. Our protection from such abuses ultimately lies in the political system, specifically with state and federal laws that now protect all employees from dismissal on the grounds of race, gender, faith, or political views."⁴

Myth #4: Faculty status provides a position of influence for the profession. How does this occur and whom do we influence? Once again, our influence on campus is something that must be earned. Influence is not achieved through the collegial governance system.

- Faculty status is not required to ensure a system of collegial governance. Collegial governance can be a value that is reflected in our standards. Concern and interest in the governance of libraries can no longer be the sole purview of librarians. Many of our libraries are staffed with engaged support staff and other professionals who have as much at stake as do librarians—and they too wish to work with all library staff as a team to help us move the library forward. Faculty status for only one category of our staff creates divisions at a time when we need all library staff to work collegially and cooperatively.

- Faculty status provides no guarantee that librarians will be considered central to the educational process. I have seen librarians without faculty status appointed ex officio to faculty governance committees that are concerned with the curriculum because we have something important to contribute. I also have seen the reverse occur when library faculty are appointed to these same committees but are not taken seriously. The crucial factor is the quality of our participation.

- Academic libraries exist to SUPPORT the educational and research mission of the university. To do this, it is crucial that we enjoy open and regular communication with campus curriculum committees, something that faculty status does not necessarily guarantee or facilitate.

Myth #5: Faculty status has proven to be a benefit to academic librarians. How? Some have argued that faculty status has resulted in fair compensation for librarians. Fac-

ulty status as a guarantee of fair compensation is absurd and highly situational. Yes, at some institutions faculty occasionally may get higher raises than do other staff. But at other institutions the reverse is true.

In reviewing more than 30 years of our professional literature, Rachel Applegate finds little empirical research to support the faculty status model.⁴ Of the handful of comparative studies that have been conducted, two show higher salaries with faculty status, while several others do not. In addition, there are wide discrepancies on all campuses among faculty of different departments or schools. There is little parity between what faculty in a medical school make and those who teach English on the same college campus.

I contend that we should be more concerned with salary equity between librarians and other campus professionals (such as those in computing) than with the faculty. In many of our institutions, faculty status and some of the requisite perks (such as extended vacation and disability packages) have bought us off. We have significantly lower salaries and more generous benefits than other comparable professionals and still find ourselves at the bottom of the salary ladder with other faculty.

Many academic libraries today are undergoing significant organizational change—change that not only effects what we do but also effects the culture and organizational processes that permeate libraries. Just as Winn calls for a grassroots movement among the faculty, I would like to suggest that a similar challenge be promoted within ACRL to stop promoting unproductive issues such as faculty status and to begin developing a framework for professional work in the library for the 21st century. It is time to develop a new paradigm not only for our libraries but also for our profession.

Notes

¹Jacquelyn McCoy, "Re-engineering academic and research libraries," *C&RL News* 54 (June 1993): 333–34.

²James Winn, "Thinking the Unthinkable About Tenure," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 16, 1992): B1–2.

³"Faculty status: 2001," *C&RL News* 54 (June 1993): 338–40.

⁴Winn, "Thinking the Unthinkable."

⁵Rachel Applegate, "Deconstructing Faculty Status: Research and Assumptions," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 19 (1993): 158–64. ■

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