

Callan Bignoli, Natalia Estrada, and Kelly McElroy

Status in academic libraries

Seeking solidarity rather than binary

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a bimonthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors, and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the frontlines. This issue's conversation addresses the faculty-staff binary in academic libraries and how more solidarity is always the way forward.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Kelly McElroy (KM): Other academic workers are often surprised at the range of job categories in libraries, and yet we often end up discussing a binary of faculty or staff status for library workers. (In my own career, I've had a mix of job categories/ranks, from on-call staff to now being a tenured professor.) What have been your experiences with these oft juxtaposed categories?

Natalia Estrada (NE): I've spent almost 20 years working in libraries, starting from when I was an undergraduate, but I've only been a "librarian" for about 3 years. Most of my experience has been in library staff positions, so that's affected my perception of how academic institutions treat its workers. When I started out, I had the assumption that one could work their way up the ranks and eventually become a librarian or admin (a reflection of my understanding of American culture through pop-culture, I guess). I unfortunately realized that it wasn't the case, at least in academic libraries.

KM: Ah, the myth of meritocracy!

NE: In many of the places I worked, fellow staffers were told that they were not going to progress because they were staff (something that was brought up repeatedly when we interviewed current staff about morale).¹ Nevermind that we would be told that if we earned our MLIS (while working and paying out of pocket for many) it would be a career boost! Meanwhile, we would witness over and over people with no library experience but multiple degrees and PhDs become managing librarians (essentially our bosses), and remained ignorant of many of the workplace issues staff faced. It ended up creating this tension between the two groups, with staff ending up with less resources, less pay, and just generally less autonomy.

Callan Bignoli is director of the library and instructor at Olin College of Engineering, email: cbignoli@olin.edu, Natalia Estrada is the digital scholarship librarian at the University at Buffalo (SUNY), email: nestrada@buffalo.edu, and Kelly McElroy is the student engagement and community outreach librarian at Oregon State University, email: kelly.mcelroy@oregonstate.edu.

KM: What mixed messages about credentialing and the value of work! How about you, Callan?

Callan Bignoli (CA): When I got to my job from outside academia, it seemed to me like the library staff's lack of faculty status was undermining our ability to do our work. It seemed like this was making it tough for us to participate in conversations about curriculum and to make sure faculty understood what we offer. I began to seek advice from other directors who had advocated for a staff-to-faculty status change at their own libraries. I heard similar stories, often featuring library workers not being treated with respect by faculty colleagues or not having a say in campus governance.

As I pursued a status change, it became clear that it would be a deeply political and fraught mission to seek faculty status. But since I started thinking about all of this, I've come to feel the "faculty vs. staff" conversation is a non-starter. It feels like an undermining of solidarity—a weird way that librarians have excluded themselves from a broader conversation about labor, disciplinary humility, and the importance of co-curricular learning in academia.

KM: Yes, and management, which sets those categories of employment, has largely shaped that—job classifications and categories are artificial groupings that can have a very real impact on working conditions, job duties, and so on. But when we all think our situation is unique, we fail to see our shared interests and struggles. So where did you and your colleagues go with the question of status?

CB: While I didn't gain faculty status at my institution, I worked with my supervisors to change my job title, description, and reporting structure to more accurately reflect my instructional and academic duties. This was a recent change, so I'm still seeing how things will go. My hope is that it will embed the library more concretely in the academic program; before I arrived, it felt like we had drifted very far away from that. It was important to me that this wasn't a change that would only go into effect for me based on my particular interests, but one that would impact the library's small staff and future people in my position. I hope to use my interstitial role to foster better connections and collegiality between faculty and staff; that might be a tall order, but the two groups are quite disconnected right now.

NE: Nice work! I think, though, that we need to look at how we label our own colleagues, and how that impacts our ability to share in the fight. When I think about my current titles (librarian, tenure-track faculty) versus my previous titles, the one main difference I see is that it's given me more autonomy and a sense of authority (especially compared to previous titles that ended with "assistant"). And that always frustrated me. If you think about current titles, staff positions mostly have "assistant" or "support" added to them. It just acts as a reminder that you don't get to have that sense of ownership or authority, even if you have years of knowledge and expertise. It just felt like more of a way to signal how little power you have in those positions. While now, I have more freedom over my workday, people take me seriously (give or take a disciplinary faculty), and I get more confidence from that. But why couldn't I have that *before becoming a "librarian"*?

KM: Totally. All workers deserve autonomy and respect. So other than these status distinctions, what strategies do we have for advocating for that?

NE: Staff autonomy is definitely the big piece here. I think another way is to actually understand what a staffer's day looks like. Do you know what their constant stressors are, especially if they're working with the public? How about their wages? When was the last time they received a cost-of-living adjustment? I once had to sit in a meeting writing a job

posting, and when the original salary was discussed, someone mentioned jokingly that the salary was too low to be comfortable in our high cost of living area. The problem? It was about 10K more than what I was making at the time. That was years ago, and I still remember it very well. Your colleagues are paying attention to these things! How are you going to claim yourself an ally if you're missing this info?

KM: Oh wow—those moments when the gap becomes clear are painful, but they're telling.

CB: I have limited experience in academia, but it seems consistent that many people on the staff side of higher education want opportunities for advancement and struggle to get them without taking on a significant financial or time burden—and that includes library workers. There is often no promotion; there is more often than not no tenure. My own path to development felt like advocating for faculty status at first, but in retrospect I'm realizing a lot of it was rooted in wanting to do more and try new things. I think the appearance of faculty development being prioritized over staff development (or the notion that “staff development” is not a thing) is one of those tricks that gets us creating a binary, and how much better things would be if only we were on the other side of it. And the binary continues to harm all academic workers, right?

NE: I would agree with that! There's an ethnography on tech work culture called *Engineering Culture* by Gideon Kunda that I'm going to reference.² He emphasizes that the workers who maintain the function of the company he's researching (the admin assistants, the facilities workers, security, and so on) get shafted in many ways because they're not the *image* of the company. The *image* is the engineers, the folks that do the work that you would imagine is done at a tech company if you think of nothing else.

So when I think of this question, I think of this assumption many in academia have of the stereotypical librarian, where the librarian's work is to protect books and information and thus is objectively good and precious and must be protected at all costs. The problem is that it's only a surface level of how a library is important to the institution, but it's easier to represent with a stock image person of librarian than having to try to explain how it was a team of people who got you that ILL request in less than a day.

KM: There's an interesting parallel when we consider academic faculty, too, right? In these conversations, it has struck me that library discourse around “faculty” generally compares ourselves to the archetypal tenured/tenure-track professor, rather than the reality that 75% of faculty are contingent, instructors or adjuncts who will never have access to the stability and benefits of tenure.³

CB: So what does solidarity look like in a world where we don't fixate so much on titles?

KM: We need to start by getting real about the landscape. Solidarity means recognizing that our struggles are linked: this is true for library workers across categories, but also for all academic workers. I always come back to the tangible—how do we allocate resources, and what are the policies and procedures that govern our work? Within a library, we can push for more equitable and inclusive policies for everyone. How do we create job descriptions that offer room for choice and growth, no matter the category or rank of the position? We can always organize across artificial job categories/ranks—issues often cross those lines, and so should we. When you think about tangible or structural changes we could make, what is one thing you'd like to see at your own institution?

NE: I think something along the lines of “offering more chances for advancement that aren't just management positions” might be a start. Because (1) not everyone wants to be a

manager. That requires actual skills and training. And (2) we've ended up with this system where people who are good at being librarians end up in management roles they're not prepared for. And not only does that set them up to fail, you've put this person in charge of staffers who probably have more experience and understanding of what's going on. They're now stuck with terrible management (let alone the terrible messaging given here) that will impact them greatly. Let's start there.

CB: In short, it starts and ends with more solidarity and opportunity for all, regardless of rank and title in academic libraries. ☞

Notes

1. A. Glusker, C. Emmelhainz, N. Estrada, and B. Dyess, "Viewed as Equals': The Impacts of Library Organizational Cultures and Management on Library Staff Morale," *Journal of Library Administration* 62, no. 2 (2022): 153–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.2026119>.
2. G. Kunda, *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
3. American Federation of Teachers, 2022 Contingent Faculty Survey.