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Approaching challenges to tenure

A fully remote librarian perspective

According to a large 2016 study, more than half of university librarian positions are granted nominal faculty status by their institutions, which includes a tenure or peer-review process.¹ So, scholarship and service, along with the performance of regular job duties as outlined by a position description, are expected as points of consideration for the promotion of university or college librarians. Current literature on tenure-track librarianship includes, but is not limited to, both the professionalization and the de-professionalization of library positions, how generational groups feel about librarian faculty status, and the impact that racial identity and disability status have on the process. While the discussion around the necessity and even desire for tenure-track library positions continues, there has so far been little consideration of the expectations set by this status for fully remote employees. Remote work in libraries has become increasingly common during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it seems more positions are being hired as fully remote. This fully remote designation presents challenges for librarians hired in tenure-track positions. As a fully remote tenure-track librarian who works across the country from my institution, I have identified three major challenges set by tenure-track expectations: a lack of peer collaboration opportunities, physical barriers to service at the library and institution levels, and a profound feeling of disconnect to the mission and vision of the institution.

One of the most impactful barriers to tenure track success, in my opinion, is the insufficiency of collaborative opportunities with peers. Peer collaboration and support has been shown to increase productivity for tenure-track librarians and contribute to a positive working environment.² New tenure-track librarians may also feel overwhelmed and insecure or experience self-doubt at the prospect of tenure, and working with collaborators to create something that will count for scholarship on the final dossier can ease some of that tension. In an in-person working environment there are opportunities for serendipitous conversations around the so-called water cooler. For me, informal chats with colleagues about current work or interests have paved the way for subsequent collaborations on projects, presentations, articles, etc., many times in past positions. Alternatively, in the Zoom environment, there is usually a set agenda and enforced time where these types of conversations are much more difficult to hold. With focused meetings it is also difficult to ascertain what other colleagues are working on outside of the main agenda item. These focus-driven meetings that end abruptly with the click of a button do not do much to foster creativity or friendship.

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Online meetings can only go so far in getting to know colleagues, and the time taken to build collaborative relationships still counts against the tenure clock.

For a fully remote employee, the barriers to completing the service requirements for tenure review are even more straightforward. While national and even local service depends heavily on the online environment (there are at least three time zones represented on every ACRL or ALA committee I've joined), this changes when focusing the scope down to the institution and library levels. Many colleges and universities place high value on the "in-person experience" and are increasingly calling for a return to normalcy after the initial onset of the ongoing pandemic. With the move to face-to-face meetings there is a limit to which committees fully remote employees can serve on if those committees decide to meet in person without accommodations for online participation. It is also impossible to participate in specific service activities and volunteering opportunities that can enhance the dossier. Unless transported to campus there is no way to participate in welcome week, informational sessions, teaching, or tutoring roles that require an in-person presence. Service is already a time-consuming and difficult accomplishment for new tenure-track librarians, and not having a full set of options to choose from significantly reduces chances of success in this area.

Finally, as a fully remote employee there can be significant feelings of disconnect from the library and the college or university itself. While this feeling does not translate to a specific section on the tenure dossier, it can contribute to a lack of inspiration and investment. Tenure is ultimately granted by an institution in its interest to continue the research and scholarly output reflective of multiple academic disciplines. Distance from the institution and resulting inability to attend events, form relationships with colleagues, or interact with students can reduce the drive to do things in its support. It's difficult to care for something intangible, which leaves the desire to acquire tenure focused solely on job security. The means to the end of tenure may not matter much, but the road has the potential to be much more isolating. Identifying as part of a group with a shared common purpose can positively impact morale because of an established sense of belonging, and without the in-person experiences necessary to solidify any sort of bond it is difficult to identify as a true member of the group that is the university or college.

In conclusion, while it is certainly possible to achieve tenure as a fully remote librarian, there are mental, physical, and emotional barriers that exist unique to this designation. Approaches to these challenges may vary vastly depending on the individual facing them, but the barriers themselves are common among all remote workers. Future consideration should be given to engaging remote employees and fostering collaborative networks in an online environment. ❧

Notes

1. William H. Walters, "Faculty Status of Librarians at U.S. Research Universities," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2016): 161–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2015.11.002>.

2. LeEtta Schmidt, Jason Boczar, Barbara Lewis, and Tomaro Taylor, "Increasing Scholarly Productivity: Developing an in-House Academic Librarian Support Network," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 47, no. 5 (September 1, 2021): 102385, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102385>.