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Shalu Gillum

Harriet F. Ginsburg Health Sciences Library, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

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The True Benefit of Faculty Status for Academic Reference Librarians

SHALU GILLUM
Harriet F. Ginsburg Health Sciences Library, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

Faculty status means having the same privileges of rank, promotion, tenure, compensation, leaves, and research funds as other faculty. Arguments against faculty status include that focusing on status detracts from librarians’ mission of providing access to information; that the rigorous requirements of faculty status are not something that librarians are prepared or qualified to pursue; and that good librarians would be just as good without faculty status. These arguments can also be used in favor of faculty status, especially as it relates to increasing the quantity and quality of library and information science literature and contributions by academic librarians.

KEYWORDS faculty status, tenure, LIS publications, LIS literature

Some academic reference librarians are fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to have faculty status and ultimately tenure. Faculty status elevates the position of librarians and can enhance their ability to work with teaching faculty in their institution. At some institutions, faculty status refers to academic rank (e.g., Librarian I, II, or III) and the same rights and privileges of teaching faculty, whereas at others it represents the availability of tenure. Tenure, one aspect of faculty status, is continuous appointment or a commitment by an institution to provide permanent employment where one can only be terminated for adequate cause.

There are several advantages of having faculty status. According the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), faculty status means having the same privileges of rank, promotion, tenure, compensation,
leaves, and research funds as other faculty members. For academic reference librarians, who (like all librarians) are generally underpaid, the increase in salary that comes with faculty status is often the most significant benefit. However, this article will focus on another equally important byproduct of the faculty status and tenure track system: an increase in library and information science (LIS) research and published literature.

Many academic institutions require their librarians to publish research articles in national peer-reviewed journals to be promoted or receive tenure. However, not all institutions of higher learning grant their librarians faculty status. Without the lure of promotion and tenure, there is little motivation for librarians to contribute to the body of LIS literature. In fact, in every decade since the 1960s a study has been conducted on the state of LIS literature in the United States and the reviews have not been stellar. Not surprisingly, faculty at LIS programs publish a large percentage of articles that is disproportionate to their population. Academic librarians, on the other hand, comprise less than 40% of the contributors to LIS literature. According to Powell and Connaway, “[t]hose who have assessed the previous research of librarians have been of a consensus that the quantity and quality have left something to be desired.” The number of peer-reviewed articles by at least one academic librarian actually decreased 12.60% between 1998 and 2002. There was also little growth in the number of LIS journals between 1993 and 2002. Without increased faculty status, this trend is likely to continue.

Despite its benefits, various arguments have been made against faculty status for academic librarians, including the belief that focus on status takes away from librarians’ real mission of providing access to information; that the rigorous requirements necessary to obtain such status is not something that most librarians are prepared, or even qualified, to deal with; and that good librarians would be just as good without faculty status. Although these arguments may have some merit, all three can also be used in favor of faculty status for academic reference librarians, especially as it relates to increasing the quantity and quality of LIS literature and contributions by academic librarians. For example, conducting research and scholarly writing deepens one’s knowledge of the subject matter being researched, resulting in enhanced provision of information. In addition, although librarians might not be trained to conduct high-level research immediately after library school, institutions providing faculty status often have mentorship programs that can help mold and train new librarians to become excellent researchers and scholarly writers. Finally, for librarians who are already motivated to research and publish, faculty status can afford them the time and resources needed to meet the rigorous requirements of publication while helping to advance the knowledge base available to all practitioners.

One argument against faculty status is that focusing on status takes away from librarians’ real mission—to provide access to information. Although it is true that the mission of all librarians is to provide access to information,
the demand to research and publish literature that results from having faculty status only adds to this mission. This is because researching a subject and then writing and publishing an article on that subject can only expand one’s knowledge. This results in the provision of improved access to information. Fennewald agreed and argued that engaging in research actually strengthens and improves library service. His study revealed that academic librarians with faculty status felt that their research not only improved services, but also was important in helping smaller libraries that may not employ a librarian with the same subject expertise. Those same librarians believed research is important because it identifies new knowledge that enhances practice.

Bernstein claimed that the “obsession” with faculty status detracts from librarians’ customer service, but as the results of Fennewald’s study indicated, the research performed by librarians in their scholarly writing process actually helps them with their daily problem solving, which translates into better customer service. Bryan also agreed that faculty status can motivate librarians to work more professionally. More professional librarians with in-depth knowledge of their area of expertise will provide superior customer service by default, or in reference librarians’ cases, access to information. This is especially true of reference librarians, who tend to receive fewer but more in-depth questions than their public library counterparts, and who therefore need to have this level of expertise to provide excellent service to their patrons.

Leonhardt argued that librarians have a service mission and that focusing on status takes away from this mission. However, the opposite is true because promotion requirements for faculty status, and especially tenure, require academic librarians to contribute to their profession by participating in service activities. For example, many academic institutions who grant faculty status to their librarians require service on university committees, participation in American Library Association (ALA) committees, or other service at the state, regional, or national level. In fact, the ACRL stated that “[l]ibrarians contribute to the sum of knowledge through their research into the information process and other areas of study. Service improvements and other advances in the field result from their participation in library and other scholarly organizations.” Such professional development as required by faculty status and tenure makes librarians more knowledgeable about their profession, which results in better librarianship.

As White explained, such professional development helps in conducting reference activities because it provides “an increased awareness and knowledge of new, innovative resources and services.” He goes on to argue that because service requires librarians to interact with different community constituents, it increases reference librarians’ visibility and status and gives them unique knowledge of local issues. Such knowledge benefits reference librarians in learning about new resources and programs, as well as areas of potential research for future publication.
Similar to Leonhardt’s argument that librarians only provide access to information is Carver’s statement that librarians’ function is one of providing knowledge not creating it, and that faculty status and tenure are meant to protect “the pursuit of highly specialized research interests” and therefore do not apply to librarianship. Underlying this position is the notion that only a select few librarians are interested in pursuing research and scholarly publication. This is the problem that has resulted in the current lackluster state of published LIS literature. If the only road to promotion in all academic libraries were by way of conducting research and then publishing, more librarians would be interested in doing so and would contribute to overall LIS literature. Columbia University’s Mark Winston argued that reference librarians in particular “should see themselves as both contributors to the knowledge base and users of the knowledge base.” Encouragingly, academic reference librarians associate their roles with research and teaching versus corporate and public librarians, who feel that providing information is their primary role.

However, another position against faculty status is that the rigorous requirements necessary to fulfill the level of commitment needed to obtain such status are not something that librarians are prepared to follow. Arguments against academic librarians being able to perform high-level research are that librarians are not prepared for this in library school and that librarians lack the time to conduct research and do scholarly writing because of 40-hour workweeks and full-year contracts. Many believe that faculty status is counterintuitive to the roles for which academic librarians are educated, hired, and trained. The belief is that “the level of commitment to research and professional presentations is beyond that which academic librarians should be expected to execute.” According to Bryan, some claim that library schools insufficiently prepare students for research because empirical research is not typically a central role of most librarians. It is true that many, but not all, Master of Library Science (MLS) programs offer only a basic research methods course. In fact, only 54% of MLS programs have a required research methods class, and only 10% require students to produce a thesis.

On the other hand, a 2006 study of doctoral degree holders working at academic or research institutions found that most respondents were reference librarians. This would seem to indicate that reference librarians are in fact qualified to perform high level research because many have earned degrees beyond the standard MLS, in areas such as applied sciences and professional degrees, natural sciences, humanities and the arts, and social sciences.

Although Tysick and Babb claim that many new MLS graduates are left to their own devices to figure out how to produce a professional, peer-reviewed publication and that many students following an academic librarianship track are not prepared to contribute to professional literature,
this does not necessarily have to be the case. The solution has already been employed by many academic libraries: mentorship programs.

Several academic libraries, including those at the Mississippi State University, Oakland University, Stony Brook University, and Texas A&M University, have established mentorship and support programs for untenured librarians to assist them through the promotion process. These programs help librarians enhance their research skills and encourage informal discussion of research ideas, methods, opportunities, and strategies. Library students might not have much research and writing practice during their program, but mentoring from experienced librarians can provide much needed hands-on experience and assistance that are not otherwise available to students pursuing careers in academic librarianship. These new librarians can then be future contributors to LIS publications.

Several opponents take the position that academic librarians have little time for original research because they, unlike regular faculty, often work 40-hour weeks and are under full-year contracts. However, Mitchell and Reichel point out that if these arguments were true there should be empirical evidence suggesting that large numbers of academic librarians fail to meet promotion and tenure requirements. They go on to explain that previous studies indicate that this is not the case, and that lack of time is no greater hindrance to research for librarians than for regular teaching faculty. Furthermore, several academic libraries allow their librarians released time for research. A 2003 survey of heads of reference services revealed that more than 60% reported they were eligible to receive release time for research. More importantly, true faculty status, as defined by the ACRL, would allow academic librarians to have time off for leaves and sabbaticals, during which time librarians can devote themselves to large research and writing projects.

In the case of reference librarians, they often have times when they are not working the reference desk, which may allow them to work on research and writing for publication. Although it is true that reference work is not limited to time spent at the reference desk, compared to other librarians (e.g., those in technical services) reference librarians are not as bound to their desks, giving them a little more flexibility in working on other projects. Reference work can also fluctuate in demand (e.g., during the summer semester when there are fewer students), giving reference librarians more time to develop projects for publication. Therefore, time is not necessarily a hindrance to reference librarians with faculty status conducting research and scholarly writing.

Finally, opponents of faculty status argue that faculty status and tenure do not lead to better librarians (i.e., that good librarians would be just as good without faculty status and tenure), and that the pressure to publish does not lead to an increase in publications from librarians who would have likely produced the same level of work regardless. The presumption is that a “good librarian” (i.e., one who would probably take it upon himself
to conduct research and publish literature) would engage in such behavior regardless of whether faculty status and tenure were at stake. However, the lack of LIS substantive research indicates that perhaps this is not that case. This is especially true of public librarians, who are just as “good” as academic librarians at what they do. However, the amount of articles published in the LIS literature by public librarians is significantly low. In fact, public librarians comprise only 3% to 6% of the total contributors to LIS literature overall.39 One reason for this discrepancy is obviously the lack of external pressure exerted on public librarians to publish. If librarians, even the “good” ones, were left on their own to publish, the body of LIS research would be even scarcer than it is now. In fact, Fennwald reports that many academic librarians surveyed doubted whether they would participate in research and publication if it were not expected of them because of promotion and tenure.40 Welch agreed and warned that if university and library administrators move away from the faculty status system, there will likely be “less publishing and scholarship to the detriment of the profession.”41

In addition, even if good librarians published without having to meet the expectations of their institution, having faculty status would only promote such behavior. As previously discussed, faculty status affords academic librarians the time, resources, and support to conduct their research. The ACRL stated that librarians with faculty status should have both access to funding for research projects and leaves or sabbaticals, during which time they could attend to long-term research and writing projects.42 Fennewald reported that “librarians who are self-motivated to do research and publish, as well as those who lack confidence and research experience, benefit from a collegial environment in which involvement in research and publication is normative.”43 Several librarians surveyed by Fennewald reported that they benefited from being surrounded by other librarians actively engaged in research. Working in an atmosphere where research and publication are expected and encouraged benefits not only those librarians who already enjoy doing research and writing, but also those academic librarians who are more timid about the process.

The purpose of bestowing the title of faculty upon librarians was historically to acknowledge the important role academic librarians play in successful research, teaching, and learning.44 Academic librarians have a responsibility to contribute to their profession by adding to the canon of library and information science literature. This is especially important because some studies indicate that LIS literature is experiencing a downward trend in both quantity and quality. Despite such benefits as increased salary, job security, and academic freedom, faculty status still has its detractors. There are several common viewpoints against faculty status, including that it distracts librarians from their true purpose of providing access to information. However, just because librarians provide information does not mean they cannot also create it. Librarians who have faculty status are expected to
write scholarly articles for peer-reviewed publications. The in-depth research involved in such a writing process can enhance librarians' roles as information providers. Another position is that faculty status is inappropriate for librarians, who are not prepared by their degree programs to conduct high-level research. However, this does not mean that librarians cannot become accomplished researchers. This is especially true where mentorship programs have been established to assist academic librarians in the publication process.

Finally, institutions that grant faculty status (especially tenure) can further motivate and encourage those librarians who may already be predisposed to research and writing by creating a supportive environment where such behavior is encouraged. Faculty status would also give academic librarians the time and resources needed to be successful researchers and writers. If more academic institutions granted their librarians faculty status, more librarians, even those already interested in scholarly writing, would be motivated to contribute to LIS literature. As Powell and Connaway reported, “One of the hallmarks of a profession is the ability of its members to give advice to clientele derived from a body of generalized and systemic knowledge that comprises its theoretical core.” Having a body of theoretical knowledge is vital to librarianship as a profession, and faculty status can promote the creation of this body of knowledge by encouraging scholarly writing by academic reference librarians.

**NOTES**

9. Wiberly et al., “Publication Patterns.”
15. Leonhardt, “Faculty Status.”
32. Carver, “No, It Can Hamper Their Roles.”
40. Fennewald, “Research Productivity.”
41. Welch and Mozenter, “Loosening the Ties That Bind.”
42. Association of College & Research Libraries, “Standards for Faculty Status.”
43. Fennewald, “Research Productivity.”
44. Leonhardt, “Faculty Status.”
45. Fennewald, “Research Productivity.”