

Prologue

In the course of my investigations both for this project and elsewhere, I often have found that qualitative research requires the researcher to look within in order to find explanations for why he or she came to their particular conclusions. Therefore, I am beginning with a bit of a background that will explain in part why I chose to complete a dissertation—and now a book—involving academic librarians. This is especially so, given that my chosen career path likely will not find me working in a library ever again.

Let me start by saying this: I am not a librarian by education or profession. Some of you may discount my message after reading that clause. I implore you to read nonetheless because I share a similar perspective as many of my librarian colleagues.

When I conducted this study of the academic librarians at St. Jerome University—the pseudonym of an actual institution in the United States—I was a nonfaculty, classified researcher in an academic library’s reference department. I performed many of the same tasks as librarians though. I would log hours on the reference desk, teach classes on library resources and information literacy, seek out and find materials for collection development, and so on. Through these professional duties, I came to understand the role of the academic librarian. Yet due to my staff role, I could never be considered a “librarian,” either in practice or in social interactions.

At the same time, consider my academic career. I am a doctoral graduate of a higher education program. However, I was a part-time student, not privy to teaching assistantships, internships, or other prospects available to full-time students. This experience in the higher education program provided me with associations that transcended some of the established campus and disciplinary silos but still ensured that I would be considered an outsider. Like the librarians that I will speak about in this book, I had a blended role that bridged many third spaces, but I was confined by the culture(s) with whom I circulated.

In this way, I can empathize with some of the perceptions expressed by the academic librarians that I interacted with and interviewed as part of this study. Due to my professional work, I understood the challenges of the librarians’ practice. My academic studies facilitated a more complete consideration of the culture that hindered the acceptance of academic librarians as anything greater than service providers.

There are hierarchies in higher education. People in this environment care a great deal about the letters after one’s name. It is a reality of the workplace. The librarians in this study held a supposed position that was inferior to the tenure-track faculty. How they were considered, or rather, how they perceived that they were considered, affected their ability to grow and develop as professionals in their academic community.

This, of course, limited their success and efficacy in networking with the faculty, staff, and students of the university.

Due to my interactions with other higher education professionals in the field, I suspect some of these prejudices extend well past this case study into the larger academic community. In fact, I often have attempted to present library-oriented research at higher education or interdisciplinary conferences. The responses usually follow this pattern: “The proposed presentation does not address the themes of [this higher education and/ or interdisciplinary conference]. However, the proposal as submitted may fit well on the program of [a semi-random library conference].”

I completed this study in 2014, and it is now the autumn of 2015. I am working at a new university in a dean/director-level position that is in charge of the General Education Department, Faculty Development, and Research. While I interact with the library frequently due to my research obligations, I am no longer directly in that professional realm. I really do not foresee returning to school to obtain a library science degree. I suspect my professional time in the libraries has come to a close. Yet my perspective remains the same. Academic libraries and their librarians offer many collaborative opportunities that supersede the “service” mentality that the library employees are often afforded.

About a month ago, I was sitting in an academic affairs meeting at my new job with the provost and other deans and school directors. One dean, in reference to the library, said: “I don’t mean this in a derogatory way but you [the library] are just a service for the students. You’re not at the same level as we [the academic schools] are at.” Once again it struck me that the library and its librarians were held at a lower perceived level than the rest of the academic community. There is work to do, both from within and without.

The first step is to consider the blended role and identity of academic librarians. This book will guide you through the details of my study on academic librarians as blended professionals. The applied model originated in higher education theory and literature. The hope is that you will find applicability of the frame and employ it in your own libraries so that academic librarians will have an enhanced and accurate understanding of their true role and identity within the context of higher education.

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