

# Introduction

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There is a compelling dynamic in academic libraries between the librarians and the support staff. Historically, there have been distinct divisions regarding the roles and duties of the librarians and the staff, with the latter tending to handle the simpler tasks (Oberg, 1995). Classified circulation staff will check books in and out for patrons, but the academic librarians will aid the patrons in identification of proper sources. The librarian duties are more complex and generally require more experience and training. The demarcation of duties has long been justified by the requirement that unlike the support staff, academic librarians must hold a masters degree in library science (Rubin, 2004). Therefore, an academic librarian's education validated and rationalized their position and rank in the library community.

However, the roles within the academic library, especially with the influx and escalation of the usage of technology, have hastily begun to blur actual roles and create tension among the tiers of employees. "The rapidly changing library workplace has created tension, even resentment, among support staff. Paraprofessionals see themselves performing the tasks they have watched librarians perform for years, as well as the challenging new tasks created by automation, but for less money and lower status" (Oberg, 1995). Classified staff personnel now often perform similar duties, yet they do not regularly enjoy the same level of compensation or esteem within the libraries (Simpson, 2013).

This certainly was true in my own experience. I began full-time library work as a Circulation Supervisor, and I eventually joined a reference department as a "Reference and Research Specialist." I specifically made sure that my title did not have the word "assistant" in it, as I was concerned about how the transition from "supervisor" to "assistant" would be interpreted on a resume. Nevertheless, I continuously was referred to as an "LA" or "Librarian Assistant" by reference librarians right up until the time that I left that position. While it never was meant maliciously, this would be a semiotic ding to my ego every time someone referred to me in that manner.

Through the course of this study though, it occurred to me that the librarians were attempting to define their own space and role. The changing activity role of all individuals in the libraries has resulted in librarians examining their own function within the academy (Simpson, 2013). This assessment has fueled debate as to whether academic librarians are in fact faculty, based upon their professional activities (Coker, van Duinkerken, & Bales, 2010).

Interestingly, outside of the libraries, academic librarians themselves experience similar difficulties gaining acknowledgment for their roles and activities, particularly among the faculty (Coker et al., 2010). Traditional faculty in the academy value the service offerings of librarians that aid in faculty research, such as collection development and document acquisition (Yousef, 2010); however, faculty do not view librarians as collaborative equals due to long-standing historical roles that place the librarian as auxiliary to in-class instruction (Hardesty, 1995; Rubin, 2004). Similar to the strain

placed upon relationships and roles in the library proper, external tension between faculty and academic librarians has developed over the role and status of the latter, especially with the expanding demands of the position (Hardesty, 1995). More or less, the librarians have the same treatment from the faculty that the classified “LAs” receive from the librarians themselves. Therefore, reconciling and defining the role of academic librarians is a key component of this study.

Furthermore, there exists a dichotomy in the concept of role and identity for professionals. Role is the mechanics of a position. It is what an individual performs in their profession on a daily basis. The professional identity is a construction of the attitudes, understanding, and beliefs associated with that role (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013); it is the mental configuration of the physical responsibilities. Herein the difference between professional role and professional identity is illustrated. Role is the function, whereas identity is the personal perception.

My experience will lend a prime example of this dichotomy. My last job within a library was as a “Reference, Research, and Instruction Specialist,” a classified staff position a paygrade above the aforementioned “Reference and Research Specialist.” My role entailed sitting at the reference desk or on Virtual Reference/IM for roughly 20 h per week, teaching individual library skills classes and working on random research projects. Research and academic productivity was only a portion of my responsibilities in that role. If I were at a dinner party or some social function where the majority of people were not library employees though, then I would define myself as “an academic researcher who works in a library.” To me, the research and publication that I conducted embodied the most fulfilling aspect of the job and by defining myself with that perceived identity, I was better able to explain my relative functions in the profession.

Academic librarians have a similar opportunity to define themselves by portions of their roles, especially considering the multifaceted components of the position. Librarians have a complex set of responsibilities, working within the library, interacting with other academic departments and units around campus, and in various communities in and around the campus (Crawford, 2012). These activities create a unique position among the academic community, as their roles create opportunities to interact and communicate on several different planes of influence with a variety of the population. The librarians interrelate with faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, and members of the community in tasks as simple as locating a book within the library to collaborating on high-level research projects, and the intricacy of the responsibilities varies often without notice. The librarians’ exchanges occur in a similarly complex set of locations such as the physical libraries, academic departments, and through virtual communication. Understanding the impact of the role and its subsequent status on the professional identity of academic librarians is an important topic that bares examination and will be a key component of this work.

## 1.1 Background of the study

Lovitts (2007, p. 19) produced a study whose chief aim was “for departments, disciplines, and universities to develop objective standards for the outcomes of doctoral training- the dissertation.” However, what about activities and student preparation

during the program? If the goal of an academic department is the adequate preparation of a future graduate and extends beyond the culmination of the dissertation to the entirety of the doctoral program, then the program offerings required assessment. I subsequently developed a project that looked at doctoral studies beyond the scope of just the dissertation.

A colleague and I examined the curriculum in history and computer science programs and the successive academic professionalism<sup>1</sup> of doctoral students at the five largest public institutions in the country (Perini & Calcagno, 2013). Many department websites and their marketing suggest that their particular program would prepare prospective students for professional careers of their choosing. However, not all programs offer curricular courses on publication, or alternatively, either student- or faculty-led workshops or groups that focus on that aspect of academic professionalism. The study suggested that there is indeed a sizable gap between the number of students in the programs and the number of students who produce scholarship in their fields.

These findings were troubling. First, it demonstrated that potentially a significant portion of doctoral students are not engaging in published scholarly productivity concurrent with their studies. This becomes problematic because many of these students will seek employment in academe and be at a disadvantage when compared to their peers who do publish. Second, it is difficult to evoke changes to a doctoral program without a doctoral-level terminal degree in hand. In addition to the difficulty associated with the introduction of courses through a university curriculum committee, it seems unlikely that program populated by doctorate-holding faculty with years or decades of instruction experience would be receptive to curricular critiques fielded by a doctoral student and a librarian.

Academic librarians though often engage in professional activities that might aid doctoral students in their development of academic professionalism. In fact, a subsequent study found that 74 percent of academic librarians had experience publishing formal research papers (Baruzzi & Calcagno, 2015), which is a skill easily passed along to receptive doctoral students. Thus, the librarians were found to have engaged in at least a portion of the activities that traditional faculty are noted for, specifically research.

This revelation led to a series of questions involving the actual role of academic librarians throughout the university system. For instance, what type and quality of research do academic librarians perform? How often do they instruct? What type of service activities are they involved in? Essentially, in academe, who are librarians and what do they do?

In addition to the issues regarding librarian function, questions emerge when considering the individuals who occupy the position. This study will be gender specific

<sup>1</sup> Academic professionalism in the context of that paper referred to the professional role of the doctoral student once they had graduated and entered their place in the academy. Aspects of this process no doubt occurred within the doctoral program itself, such as what the new graduate might expect in the acculturation process of their future department. However, since that study concerned the librarian's role in the process, the focus was on the aspects of this training that the academic librarian realistically could alter, such as exposure to a publication process. As a result, professionalism related to the preparation for anticipated academic output: publications, presentations, and so on.

in studying the identity of female academic librarians. This is significant, as since its inception, in contrast to traditional faculty, the role of academic librarian historically has been a female profession. In fact, of the 20 original students in 1887 at the first library school at Columbia, 17 were female (Rubin, 2004). Of the 15 schools in existence in 1919, 10 were established by women (Maack, 1986). Yet there are consistent inequities by gender. In 1999, the American Library Association reported that 67.99% of academic librarians and 57% of academic library directors were female. Yet the average salary for a male director was \$62,961, whereas the female directors averaged \$58,202, a difference of nearly \$5000 (American Library Association, 1999).

Similar inequalities persist between men and women in the traditional professoriate. Thus, the role of librarian has historically been occupied by women, and their experiences of bias in the academy merge with those of their full-time tenure-track female faculty counterparts (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Even though their historical pathways evolved in different manners, the perception of roles of female academic librarians and female faculty occupy a similar experiential space within their respective fields. While the female faculty role inherently may be different from that of the female academic librarian, the biased treatment of the individuals in relation to their gender is comparable. By additionally introducing the consideration of gender, the discussion may deliberate on the effect that the role as a female academic librarian has on professional identity.

Make no mistake: the frame applied in this study is not gender specific. If you choose to replicate my work in order to analyze your own institutional environment, then this method will be valid. In fact, in later sections of the book, I address the legitimacy of the process by offering provisions for future research. However, as the following chapters will indicate, I believe that the librarian status among the university hierarchy is determined by the misuse and misunderstanding of the function of the role of the academic librarian. This perception closely mimics the overall experience of females within the academy. As a result, the sample not only reflects the prevailing historical image of librarians, but it illustrates a social dynamic as well, thereby providing a viable context for the discussion here.

When considering the individual's place in the academy, there emerges the split between role and identity. In the context of this work, the *role* of faculty is defined by the actual responsibilities of the individual as characterized by their job description. Some theorists add additional responsibilities to the faculty position, such as governance (Bowen & Schuster, 1986) and the actual level of faculty scholarship and goals differ by institution (Boyer, 1990). Contemporary academics most often distill the function of faculty in some fashion into three categories: research, instruction, and service (Lucas, 2006). For librarians, these activities often carry an ambiguous tone. As faculty, academic librarians are expected to publish. Since the librarians are not tenure-track faculty though, the projected complexity of this research and publication is vague. Which research role has supremacy, librarian as faculty or nontenure-track librarian? In this work, the functional role will be measured by job description and subsequent activity, and the attempt will be made to tease out some of the ambiguities in the academic librarian role.

In contrast, *identity* may be a more subjective and malleable term than role dependent upon the individual perception. “Identity encompasses how individuals understand themselves, how they interpret experiences, how they present themselves and wish to be perceived by others and how they are recognized by the broader community” (Lieff et al., 2012, p. 208). A faculty member may spend the majority of their time involved in classroom instruction, yet identify themselves as an academic researcher. Role and identity differ in this way. While there may be some overlap to the entities, the role and the identity of faculty remain distinct.

Levin and Shaker (2011, p. 1465) also state that “articulation of identity brings together personal experiences and expectations with the social-cultural environment, specifically, the university, including its structures, norms, and practices.” Therefore, the environment in which the faculty operates shapes identity, and as intimated, the workplace atmosphere tends to be more difficult for female faculty and academic librarians, and this is a suggested premise in this work. How a faculty member—to include all classifications of faculty, such as academic librarians—perceives any professional experience, regardless of the interface, has a direct positive or negative effect on the individual’s identity (Whitchurch, 2009).

## 1.2 Conclusion

Thus, what began as a study on doctoral student academic professionalism emerged into an examination of the roles and functionality of academic librarians to include considerations of their roles and professional identities. The full evolution of the process and the subsequent consideration of the literature led to more complex questioning. For instance, if librarians engage in activities akin to formal faculty (research, instruction, and service), what is their role and position in the professoriate? Should academic librarians be considered faculty? These are the questions that required investigation on a larger scale, and therefore led to this current study.

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