

Editor's Column: The Cult of the Book and the Demonizing of Librarians

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My career in libraries started waaaaay back in 1997 when I took a job as a student worker in the library at my undergraduate alma mater Mississippi College. I *loved* working in the library, and I especially loved helping my peers do research (though I hated shelving books – it always gave me a headache). I loved it so much and got so good at it that the reference librarians strongly recommended that I pursue a career as a reference librarian, which I ultimately did. After finishing my undergraduate degree in English, I pursued a Master's in Library & Information Science at the University of Southern Mississippi. Initially, I worked in the MLIS department before switching to a newly-created graduate assistantship in the reference department of the campus library, Cook Library. I finished the degree in a year and graduated in August of 2002, starting my first job as a professional librarian in November of the same year.

Through all of this, I always felt that librarianship was my calling, and the support, encouragement, and praise of professional librarians made me feel that I was on the right path. I felt as though I was a natural at 'doing librarianship' – at helping people do research and teaching them how to do it themselves, among other things. Over and over again, students (and even faculty) would thank me for my help, telling me I made it all seem so easy, and they could never understand *how* or *why* it came so easy to me. I used to joke that librarians are *born* not made; in my bibliographic instruction sessions, I'd tell students, "If you really like research and it seems second nature to you, just go ahead and accept it: you're going to be a librarian." Secretly, I believed it; research has

always come easy to me. Courses on reference librarianship in grad school were not difficult because I'd already essentially been 'doing reference' since 1997.

My first job – as coordinator of library instruction – took me to a small university in Missouri, and it was absolutely demoralizing. The work environment was hostile and confrontational, and the then-director (who has since left) had virtually no control over his staff. Department heads were constantly at each other's throats and often had shouting matches with one another in front of patrons and faculty alike. I started my job November 1st; by the end of the month, there was snow on the ground, and my husband had to drive me to work because we only had one car that could handle the hilly, snowy roads. The environment at work was so bad, I would often cry on the way to work, and then cry on the way home from work. It didn't matter that I actually had my dream job; the environment was that difficult to endure. However, I did not see being a librarian as a mistake; my only mistake had been taking the job, a mistake I rectified less than a year later when I moved to my current university.

My point in all this is to say: I felt confident in my choice to become a librarian. Being a librarian gave me a great deal of satisfaction. As they say, it's a career, not a job. My time in Missouri, which left me legitimately depressed and fighting suicidal thoughts, may have demoralized me psychologically and emotionally, but it did not shake my faith in my choice to become a librarian.

I have been at my current library since 2003; I began as a reference/instruction librarian and have become the Coordinator of Public Services. Again I have what amounts to my dream job, and I cannot complain about that. In fact, I cannot complain about the job itself. My co-workers and colleagues, the dean and assistant dean – all of

the people I work with on a regular, daily basis – are hard-working, reliable, and wonderful, and I couldn't ask for better people with whom to work.

What I wish I could change are faculty attitudes about librarians. The first presentation I ever gave at a professional conference was on librarian-faculty relations (side note: it was attended by several of the librarians from my undergraduate alma mater, who all proudly told me that when they saw my name on the conference agenda, they knew they had to attend). I did extensive research on the historical enmity between librarians and traditional teaching faculty. That was in 2003; since that time, I have personally learned about (and, in some cases, earned) that enmity. Not for failure to do my job – oh, no. Usually it is and was because I fail to be cowed by faculty – never mind the fact that I, too, am faculty. *Tenured* faculty. *Promoted* faculty. Undoubtedly, some of that enmity was earned through my failure to always agree with my teaching faculty colleagues on certain points during my time on the Faculty Senate. Undoubtedly some of it was earned through my refusal to serve as a research gopher; my refusal to bend rules; and my insistence on becoming tenured, being tenured, and believing in tenure for librarians. And who knows? Could be my personality, my tendency to avoid natural hair colors, and/ or my penchant for body modifications are also to blame.

I have come to accept many aphorisms about traditional teaching faculty, the most well-known of which is probably that they hate change. And it's true: ***they hate change***. Some of them hate it with every fiber of their being. I have found that age often makes no difference; the young ones hate change as often and as much as the old ones. The difference is that the young ones are often more vocal about their displeasure, while the old ones tend to grumble quietly. Across the board, they often balk and resist,

making/finding excuses, and otherwise making the lives of the agents of change – regardless of who those agents are – miserable.

This has never been more keenly evident to me since we began a large-scale deselection project at my library – emphasis on *large-scale*. We are reducing a four-floor collection to two floors. This project, of which I am the head, is part of a larger project geared towards converting our traditional library to a more digital one. The two cleared floors will undergo extensive renovation to create classrooms, seminar rooms, and study rooms, which will all be equipped with collaborative technology. Our students frequently complain about the dearth of study rooms, as well as spaces in which to work on group projects. Faculty complain about the dearth of faculty-friendly spaces. The addition of the aforementioned spaces are intended to address these complaints and to meet the changing needs of a university that has a growing online presence as well as significant populations of commuter and non-traditional students.

Despite the fact that we are attempting to ‘clean up’ an outdated, outmoded, and downright *embarrassing* collection, the faculty have been up in arms. Terse emails, rude snubs I could handle; inflammatory, insulting emails and faculty making fun of the profession in front of their students *while I’m in the classroom* are harder to handle. Despite repeated emails (which faculty readily admit they don’t read) and offers to conduct workshops or sessions about the deselection project, faculty have dragged their feet and complained every step of the way.

This has been difficult. Yes, the Library developed a meaningful faculty input mechanism...but only a handful of faculty are using, which means decisions about the collection are being made by just a few people – people who do not have degrees or even

research interests in disciplines where they are requesting retentions. By the way, during the development of the faculty input mechanism, they complained about the mechanism and have never been quite happy with it. The whinging emails about the mechanism (as well as a lot of the insulting, inflammatory emails) only ended when the Vice President of Academic Affairs finally stepped in.

My question is this, fellow librarians and library staff: is the “sacredness” of the library attached almost entirely to the presence of physical books? I had been led to believe that the “sacredness” of the library is its ability to connect people with information. Is this a distinction that only we who protect and roam these hallowed halls make? The fact that librarians are keepers of books has not prevented my classroom colleagues from being disparaging and disrespectful. They have more respect and more consideration for the books themselves – they tenderly gather them up from the “free to the public” table and take them home. They are angry that the librarians won’t take requests for books to set aside, or that the librarians won’t just set aside titles on certain subjects for them (never mind the time that would take, and the space it would consume, and we have neither time nor space). But when it comes to the *librarians* and the *library staff*, the actual, living, breathing, feelings-having *human beings* who keep these hallowed aisles and sacred tomes, we are not given reverence or respect. We are not given consideration. We have become demons to the teaching faculty – they seem to genuinely believe that we keep the best bits of information from them. We mindlessly, thoughtlessly, cynically discard books without a second thought. One faculty member even told people that we were carting out the entire collection to the dumpsters; a rumor reached my ears that word on campus was we were probably going to burn all the books.

When students got wind of these rumors and rumbles, they started contacting me. I did not one but two interviews with the student newspaper to describe the project, its criteria, its purpose, and what the ultimate outcome would be. A few doctoral-level students grumbled, but all in all students seemed excited that we would be acquiring technology they'd be able to use and the addition of study spaces. The difference in reactions between faculty and students has been dramatic enough to cause me moments of cognitive dissonance. As a matter of fact, the difference in reactions in faculty has also been somewhat disorienting. Those reactions sit on diametric ends of a spectrum: either they seem fully in favor of it, like nursing faculty who must be mindful of accrediting issues, and faculty who seem to think we have utterly betrayed their trust and have turned on them and the precious books.

Do I sound bitter? I feel a little bitter sometimes. Library faculty and staff at other universities in the state have confessed to my dean their fears that their campus administrations will require them to undertake a similar project. My dean was recently asked at a SACS conference about the experience by library deans; when told that we had involved faculty in the process, the deans were aghast, and my dean confessed to them that he wished we hadn't. Despite all of our best efforts and intentions, we have found ourselves on a path to hell, in a manner of speaking. I'd say we're all still very excited about the overall digital project – years ago we wanted to establish an information commons, but despite support and enthusiasm on the part of the campus administration, the necessary financial support never materialized. Monies have magically materialized for this digital library effort, but instead of looking back in anger at our thwarted info commons designs, we've simply rejoiced at being able to bring our library into the 21st

century. This joy has unfortunately put us at odds with faculty who seem unable to understand why we would get rid of books, why we can't just digitize them all "like the Library of Congress!" (never mind that the LoC has never undertaken such an effort, and that Google's efforts to do the same were legally thwarted), why we can't just recategorize books they want kept (never mind that still means keeping a book no one has used in 20 years), why can't we do this, why can't we do it this way...

I feel like I've spent more time fielding irate emails and having tense conversations with upset faculty than I have enjoying the prospects of the future library. One of the reference librarians confessed to me recently that she'd started applying for and interviewing for jobs elsewhere because of how faculty have treated us and the project at large and how stressful the deselection project had become.

I know how she feels. It's what I felt in Missouri – that impulse to escape.

When did libraries become all about the books again? When did they become so "of the people" or shared property that we guardians and gatekeepers lost our rights to do our jobs, the jobs for which we trained and were educated, the jobs for which we were hired, with which we were entrusted? I have always thought of libraries as "of the people," certainly – but with the understanding that librarians are trusted to care for those libraries, to make the hard decisions, to put to good use the training which helps us maintain and enhance the resources intended for use by the people, to help the people use those resources, and to collaborate with the people for the good of the many (rather than just the needs of the few).

Did that change while I wasn't looking? Is it time for me to retire to the porch and yell at kids to get off my lawn/library?

I'd like to think it's not. I still really believe heartily in librarianship, and I still very much enjoy the day-to-day work I do (especially instruction). When I can forget – albeit briefly – about the problematical professors, I thoroughly enjoy the deselection process. I'd like to think that I have not reached a point of no return in the burnout process – that there is hope for “recovery” from burnout.

The other day I was teaching a roomful of health sciences majors about plagiarism, what it is, and how to avoid it. I'd been invited by the professor who had attended a professional development session I did for faculty on the very same topic but in terms of how to prevent students from plagiarizing, how faculty can support their students, and how the library can help with the problem, too. The class was very receptive – they laughed at my lame jokes and asked really good questions. It was one of those classes – you know, the kind that reminds you of why you become a librarian. At the end of it, the professor came up to the front to thank me and conduct the rest of the class. As she thanked me, she said, “Even I learned a few things I didn't know!” She thanked me enthusiastically and reiterated to her students the importance of the topic. She also reminded them that I had given them my email address so they could contact me with any questions or concerns they might have, encouraging them to use the library's resources.

This heartened me. The whole experience reminded me of why I'd become a librarian in the first place. It reminded me that there are faculty who do appreciate the library and the librarians – that we still have a place in the modern university, even as technology advances and print materials diminish in numbers.

So, what can we do about the conflict? What can we do to bridge the gap between

our responsibilities and faculty perceptions regarding who we are and what we do? Yes, I could go to the literature, but I feel that times have changed dramatically, and that the literature is still rehashing recommendations from ten years ago, when collections and faculty seemed much different from today.

Here's what I'd like to do. I'd like for you – the folks out there, whether library faculty, staff, or library students – to email me at lowe@ulm.edu and clue me into your solutions or ideas about how to reach out to faculty and help them understand what we do. These can be ideas or strategies that you've used or tested; they can be things you've read in the literature that you think have sincere merit; or they can be things you think might work theoretically. Email me this ideas and this time next year, I will publish them, giving you credit for your contributions. Let's see if we can generate the longest authors' listing for a single article EVER. Seriously. We're all in this together, so it follows that we can all help support one another and share our collected wisdom.