

The Best Laid Plans...: Editor's Column

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I should really stop trying to plan these columns – every time I do, something happens at the last minute that seems more timely or relevant or that I feel more strongly about than whatever I had originally planned. In this case, it's something I feel more strongly about than what I had originally planned, but more ironically so. I was going to write about privacy as a key feature of information literacy and explore the literature regarding how privacy is commonly taught in info lit classes. Instead, I bring to you a story of how my own privacy was violated and how that violation reflects certain issues in higher education which affect all faculty, including library faculty.

In my last editor's column, I discussed the cult of the book and the demonizing of the librarians at my library in the wake of a large-scale deselection project. What I did not detail were the exploits of a singular professor whom I will refer to here as Problematic Professor, or PP. This single individual has caused more stress and anxiety in the library faculty and staff than I think any of us have experienced in any of our careers as librarians. She is my experiences in Missouri encapsulated in a single person. She was the source of many of the untrue rumors about the disposition of the collection; she was the source of many of the hostile, disrespectful emails I have received. She was equally hostile in person during meetings. She has made retention decisions in disciplines not even tangentially related to her own (really, can someone explain to me what an English professor who teaches British post-colonialism needs with an algebra book from 1973 or an Appalachian Trail guidebook from 1970?) and for which one can reasonably argue she is unqualified to make. She has almost single-handedly been the squeakiest wheel in the faculty input mechanism. She has expressed blatant disregard for the accreditation concerns

of the nursing faculty and tried to tell seasoned catalog librarians that it would be a simple matter to just “reclassify” all the books she “needs” so they can be retained – never caring that it would be hard to justify reclassifying a book on basketball defensive maneuvers into her area of expertise (and please believe me, I am not exaggerating any of this).

As you might imagine, this individual – who remains the only individual to make use of the faculty input mechanism – has caused me significant grief. We are continuing the faculty input mechanism *for a single faculty member*. I will not detail my own crying jags or the emotional meltdowns of one of my colleagues. I will not detail the private shows of support from faculty who have had run-ins with this person in the past. I will not detail the commiserate eye-rolling I have received from administrators. I will also not detail the triumphs we have had over her, such as keeping the review period faculty have to make their decisions at a week (the faculty wanted three weeks, never minding that we only have two years to accomplish this project). The Vice President of Academic Affairs had to step in and release a memo to the faculty reminding them that the library faculty/staff had been charged with this project, and the administration trusted us and our expertise, essentially giving us the final say in the project (so we thought); we viewed this as a triumph.

But I will not go into much detail here, as I cannot. You see, up until this week, I had been detailing these exploits and events on my private Facebook page (make sure you note that: my *private* page, *only* viewable by friends). I never used names; I referred to PP as PP; I just referred to my boss as “my boss” or by his title, Dean; and I referred to other key individuals in this saga by their titles (dean, department head, VP of AA, program director). Sure, if a person knew where I worked, they could look up these people, but I trusted the people on my page. And I was also very careful with my privacy settings; only my friends could see those posts. Most of

my stuff was locked down to friends only – only the very basic profile info and cover photos were public. Being a librarian and somewhat paranoid about privacy (and having received some sexually harassing messages), I was quite careful of my Facebook privacy settings.

Posting about PP and all the incidents surrounding her and this deselection project was therapeutic. Fellow librarians would commiserate; non-librarians couldn't believe that faculty would treat other faculty that way – that anybody would treat anybody that way. Some people described the posts as being like a soap opera or a saga, and though they felt bad for me they enjoyed the jaunty and comedic way I presented the stories (because it was laugh or cry, and I was tired of crying, honestly). They shared in the library's triumphs; they showed sympathy and support when times were bad. People said they never realized how 'political' higher ed was until my posts; others said it was fascinating seeing how college libraries functioned "behind the scenes." One friend contacted me, telling me that my descriptions of working in the library – even those about PP – had inspired her to become a librarian (she'll likely be attending my alma mater, which is also the alma mater of my two best friends, both of whom are special collections librarians). And people applauded the professional, mature, and seemingly Zen way in which I conducted myself. My mother taught me an important lesson about keeping one's dream job: never forget to be professional, no matter what. It is, honestly, the key to my success, and would be the key to my success no matter I did for a living. *Be professional. Never forget that you are a professional. Be courteous, be diplomatic, and never lose your cool. Never let them see you cry, never let them see you hesitate, never lose your temper.*

Of course, they never saw me crying as I got dressed for work. They never felt the tension migraines after dealing with yet another accusation of data-falsifying (I mean, how does one even falsify data that one has no control over, i.e., reports automatically run by

WorkFlows?). They never saw the trembling, white-knuckled typing as I crafted yet another courteous, patient email answering yet again the same questions which feature in the library's FAQ on the project, questions I have answered for the Faculty Senate again and again, for individual faculty again and again. You get the picture: I kept that stuff to myself and the husband because that's the stuff you don't let the people see: never let them see you cry, never let them see you hesitate, never lose your temper. And I never have.

Part of my ability to do that was because I was able to share my experiences with my friends in what I thought was a safe, judgment-free environment: my own personal, private Facebook page. There I could say what I needed to say – carefully, of course; *only the facts, ma'am, and no names*. I received support, encouragement, sympathy, and empathy. I also received perspectives, professional advice, and meaningful suggestions. People asked questions about libraries and their inner workings, and I got to share with my friends what I do in a way I'd never shared before. And everybody agreed: venting most certainly did help me.

But that all changed this week. Someone on my friends list screencapped one of my (private, friends-only) posts about PP and sent it anonymously to the Vice President of Academic Affairs who in turn sent it to the Dean of the Library, my boss. Given that PP's behavior has had her called up on the carpet a few times, the VP felt he had no choice but to direct my boss to call me up on the carpet and take me to task for my behavior, which was described as "coming close" to the kind of behavior PP had engaged in. Mind you, my post was not described as being in the same category as her behavior – only approaching it. Also mind you: my boss had seen all of my posts on PP. Because I used no names, he said he saw no problem with them, but to always be careful. And I thought I was being careful.

Nevertheless, I found myself before my boss yesterday, answering for my actions. I took

responsibility for them. I recognize their impropriety, their unprofessionalism. Before I even walked into the Dean's office, I had locked down most of the PP posts (to the "Only Me" option). I had also begun an unfortunately but no less necessary purge of my friends list, unfriending people who were also friends with PP, some faculty/staff at my university, and other people I didn't know in real life, as well as recent 'friends' who were friends of friends that I trusted.

(Or thought I could trust, if you will allow me a dramatic moment.)

I told my boss, sincerely, that I was sorry to have embarrassed him in front of his boss, but I had no regrets for saying the things I'd said. He asked me if the post was public; I told him no, none of my posts are public – they're friends only. He was startled; I said, yes, that means that someone I thought I could trust had screencapped a personal, private post from my personal, private Facebook and sent it to the VP. I told my boss that it would be worth pointing out to the VP that my privacy had been violated, that the post in question was not meant for or accessible to the public, but that I would not push that, all things considered.

I told my boss he could confidently inform his boss that the posts were locked down and that I would no longer post about PP in the future, and that I was very sorry for any trouble I had caused. My dean said he would convey that information to the VP; knowing the VP, I feel I chose the appropriate course of action, and I expect no fallout from this episode. I do not feel my career is in any danger – quite apart from the fact that I'm tenured, I've never "gotten in trouble" or been called up on the carpet before this. In other words, I have a good track record.

I conveyed the situation to my friends on Facebook, about the screencap and the meeting with my boss. There was a lot of outrage, an outpouring of support and encouragement, and a lot of confusion and questions. If it was a private posting, why should the university get involved at

all? If I used no names, what's the big deal? Many expressed the opinion that none of the PP posts crossed any lines, ethically or professionally, given that they were friends only, so why should I be getting in trouble? Many quickly realized that there was a traitor among them and began addressing angry comments to the anonymous person. Many pointed out that my privacy had been violated.

But a curious thing also happened: many of my librarian colleagues, both in state and out, expressed concern that I would lose my job or otherwise be disciplined in such a way that would put my career at risk. I assured them all that I was tenured, and when I told my boss about their fears, he laughed and said that not only was tenure enough to secure my job, what I had done was hardly a fireable offense. For my part, I was not in the least in fear of losing my job; I was more worried about losing the respect of my boss which was not really a threat at all (I honestly have the best boss in the world). I have no fears about the trajectory of my career either, and I feel that many people will lose no respect for me either because of this event.

This situation raises many issues, both in the specific sense of higher education and in the broader sense of the workplace, about the stability and protections of tenure, privacy, ethics, and professionalism. It was not until I had my meeting with my boss and could report the “all clear” that things went well to my friends that many of the faculty librarian friends believed I wasn’t going to lose my job. Though I’d told them I was tenured, that didn’t seem enough to them to guarantee the protections allegedly afforded by tenure. Tenure for faculty librarians has always been and continues to be a contentious issue, even among the profession; some of us regard it as something of a right and a necessity, while some of us see it as an artifact of a bygone era that no longer applies to what we do. But it is clear that some of us who have tenure or who are tenure-track don’t believe in its ability to protect us. I used to think that was a Louisiana thing, a product

of soon-to-be-former Governor Bobby Jindal's poor opinion of higher education, but it is clear that this belief – or lack thereof – is or is becoming endemic to academic librarianship. What is the point of tenure, if we have no faith in it? Frankly, to paraphrase Darth Vader, I somewhat find our collective lack of faith disturbing. If our belief in tenure is declining, what hope have we of hanging on to it, since it does – legally and technically – protect us?

With regard to privacy – oh, that slippery slope – I have questioned whether or not my privacy was actually violated. After all, as the saying goes, once it's on the Internet, it's out there forever. Whatever content we contribute to it becomes part of a larger system, one which virtually no one can control (regardless of Donald Trump's belief that Bill Gates could shut down key areas of the Internet). In other words, in posting what I posted (which I can see as being unethical and unprofessional, if I'm being honest), I put something "out there" which I cannot take back. On the other hand, I did post it for a limited audience. But the fact that it was only intended for my friends clearly did not secure it; someone who had access screencapped it and sent it MUCH farther afield than I EVER intended it to go. So, not only did my privacy settings fail to protect my privacy, my trust that others shared my belief in privacy and the ethical use of information failed me.

Of course, the issue of privacy with regard to workplace situations and issues is only a small part of the discussion of workplace ethics. Many people have insisted I did nothing wrong, and in general I agree with them. But I can also see how what I did could be wrong. I can see how what I did was unethical. Whether I *intended* to be ethical or not is really immaterial; the ramifications of my actions – the ripples of cause and effect – do not take my intentions into consideration. From at least one person's point of view, I behaved unethically with regard to a workplace situation. From another's point of view, I behaved ethically. My own perception is

that I behaved ethically. There is a certain relativity inherent to ethics which cannot and should not be disregarded or diminished.

In terms of professionalism, well, that may be even more difficult to pin down. Did I behave unprofessionally? I don't think I did. I used no names, ever. I never name-called or misrepresented the situation. As I said earlier: *only the facts, ma'am*. I never disclosed sensitive material. I never disclosed anything inappropriate. I never falsely accused anyone of anything. Did PP act unprofessionally? Why, yes, yes, she did. She cc'd emails to various people on campus in which she accused me and my colleagues of falsifying data, questioned our competence, and called us liars. She spread rumors about the project. She was disrespectful to library faculty/staff and other classroom faculty alike in the course of this project. She has behaved unethically, attempting to circumvent the faculty input mechanism and demanding special treatment (which made us all laugh, after she accused of us giving 'other people' – she never specified who and we could never figure out what she was referring to – special treatment). At least one of her former colleagues has referred to her as a bully, both cyber and otherwise.

And PP received tenure this year.

When I consider that PP – behaving the way I just described above *before* obtaining tenure – received tenure, I begin to share my colleagues' lack of faith in tenure. She has behaved unethically and unprofessionally, disrespectfully, and – if I may be a little dramatic again – unworthy of tenure. The fact of her tenure has been speculated on: it was less a product of her own merits and more fear on the department's part of losing money from their budget. I could also see it being the department's fear of having insufficient tenured Ph.D.-holding faculty members to justify and support a graduate program. Regardless of why PP received tenure, the

fact remains that she received that tenure. And the fact remains that she has, in essence, been rewarded for inappropriate, unprofessional, and uncivil behavior. The institution has rewarded her bad behavior in the worst way possible: by giving her incentive to stay on at the university and reap the benefits of being a tenured faculty member. It raises the question: what is the point of tenure anymore anyway? Is it just a retention tactic, a way of collecting faculty, or does it still have merit and meaning in terms of professionalism, productivity, research, and collegiality?

I don't have the answers to any of these questions. And I am concerned that much of the evidence which could provide the profession with answers to such questions – questions which I believe are of the utmost importance, not just for librarians but also for any faculty – is anecdotal or quantitative. While such evidence does carry weight, it lacks the material heft of qualitative data which would underline the damage done to the bottom line which is – I believe – the main focus of many universities, either out of good old-fashioned greed or, as it is in the state of Louisiana, out of necessity to survive. It is the place where the university as an institution seems most vulnerable and is perhaps the best place to exploit when trying to demonstrate to administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders who have financial influence over Academia the importance of taking seriously many of the problems which plague it and identifying meaningful solutions.