

President's Column

Librarian Faculty Status, Maureen Sullivan, and You

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Some months ago an article about the issue of librarians losing Faculty status at The University of Virginia, East Carolina University, and other institutions was published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹ In it, tales are told of several universities which have or are considering re-classifying faculty status academic librarians as staff, often despite the protests of these librarians and others. The article says that Maureen Sullivan, an "organization-development consultant" was brought in to advise on a reorganization of the libraries at East Carolina University. Sullivan happens also to be the current President of the American Library Association. Several members of The Association of College and Research Libraries Louisiana Chapter board took notice of this, including a past president Michael E. Matthews (also this years' winner of the Louisiana Library Association's Outstanding Academic Librarian Award) and another one of our past presidents, Anthony Foncesa, who wrote a form letter and emailed it to other ACRL leaders to adapt and share.

The ACRL-LA board and friends talked about this issue via email quite a lot, communicating with various leaders in ALA and ACRL with some success. Yet I also felt that this issue had to be addressed in a public sphere rather than remain restricted to private emails, and that it should be my responsibility to do that. For my part, I made a video on our [ACRL-LA YouTube channel](#) about it in "vlog" (or video blog) form rather than a scripted response to convey my ideas quickly and honestly, putting my voice and image with them. Apart from my own words, I read comments left by other *Chronicle*

readers to make it clear that my concerns were not mine alone, but were shared with many others.

To President Sullivan's credit, she actually did release [a statement](#) in response to the controversy on her official Facebook page. I am not sure if ACRL-LA's emails, my video, the already upset comments on *The Chronicle* website, or other messages precipitated this result, but I assume it was a cooperative gestalt. I was and still am impressed with her gesture, since I was not expecting it and President Sullivan was not obligated to write a response. Yet that doesn't mean that I and the rest of the ACRL-LA board found it entirely satisfying. ACRL-LA members continued to express dissatisfaction with President Sullivan's explanation, and I made another video in reply. We felt that the statement on Facebook was not public enough and did not clearly explain her actions in her consultant role. This is of concern to us because, as one of the ACRL-LA members put it, "Holders of the ALA Presidency cannot and should not perform any work that undermines the highest ideals of our profession"

Now that the dust has cleared a bit, my critical thinking skills lead me to ask myself, "Were Maureen Sullivan's comments worth getting upset about?" I still think so.

As I already mentioned in one of my videos on this subject, I am not unaware of the counterpoints to faculty status for librarians, and for very personal reasons: I have not yet achieved tenured status myself. A couple months ago I turned in my tenure portfolio at ULM, and can not officially receive tenure until August of this year, so the process goes. If I were to fail to make tenure, that would be a devastating blow to my being, or who I am as a person, to say nothing of my career and employment status. Thus the tenure process has been a great source of stress for me since its importance is

immeasurable. In fact, I have heard about a member of our ACRL chapter having been denied tenure; though I do not know any details, this news was somewhat shocking since the person in question always appeared to be professionally active. I extend my sympathies to anyone in that position and hope that it was a fair and warranted verdict.

Yet I wouldn't have such trepidation if I didn't have faculty tenure-track status. Is that what I would want? The idea of being offered the chance to opt out of faculty status seems to me as if a old woman dressed in black came to my office door with a basket of large bright red apples, offered one to me, and said, "These apples are magic, and if you take one bite, you won't have that burdensome faculty status anymore, and all of your tenure worries and responsibilities will simply disappear!" Even putting pop culture age discrimination aside, and even if the apple could do what she says it will, I would not take that apple-- unless I was starving, of course.

Some librarians might worry that what we do is very different from what other faculty do, and it is not equitable to judge us with criteria which has not been designed to describe or measure our worth and talents. If that is the case, I can see how it might be demoralizing if it does not appear to matter how good a librarian is at being a librarian. This problem of course extends to teaching faculty positions, so it's not unique to librarians. Faculty in History might be uncomfortable with being evaluated by people who teach English and vice versa, but if there are not enough qualifying committee members within a particular department, this may have to be the scenario.

The value of tenure is not only for librarians themselves, of course, and there are great benefits for the library patrons. Some people believe that faculty status detracts from the professionalism of librarians by distracting them from the true responsibilities of

librarianship. These people are not made of straw, and I've seen some online. In 2009 the famously and deliberately divisive "Annoyed Librarian" published a blog post on the *Library Journal* website called "Academic Librarians: Please Love Us!" which depicts Academic librarians as desperate pretenders who beg for the respect of professors:

Academic librarians feel inferior, and their desperate desire to be liked seems to be centred [sic] on a mythical beast called "the faculty." This "faculty" is endowed with impressive qualities. They sit on their Olympian thrones far removed from the daily concerns of librarians, whose earnest efforts they take little notice of. This is a pity, because librarians are always trying to engage the attention of this "faculty." They want to be invited to "faculty meetings." They want the "faculty" to like them, and what's more, to acknowledge their worth. Academic librarians want this "faculty" to consider them partners and perhaps even equals. (Please, no laughter!) This is especially ironic for those librarians with "faculty status." This status doesn't seem to help much, but that's not surprising. Librarians with "faculty status" are neither faculty nor have status. (Discuss amongst yourselves.)²

I am not offended by the words of the Annoyed Librarian blog because it is often deliberately inflammatory, perhaps to generate discussion, comedy, page views, and ad revenue (it is the closest thing librarians have to AM talk radio, for better or worse). The blog page has many commenters in agreement with the article, so I construe that it is not at all abnormal for librarians themselves to harbor distaste for faculty status. I will admit that there is an invisible divider between academic librarians and faculty, but it doesn't define us as professionals and it is not supposed to be taken so personally; I do not believe we are rolling in our beds at night dreaming of having lunch with professors.

Patrons can benefit from tenured librarians. There is evidence that faculty status can actually improve libraries. Around 2010 Shalu Gillum in the *Reference Librarian* found that found that this is likely untrue, through comparing resources.

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.³

Thus the proliferation of literature on library science enhances the profession as a whole, since we can produce and share information with one another in order to improve our services to patrons. As Gillum writes, publication can "advance the knowledge base available to all practitioners." Or, if you cannot believe that librarians can be improved by academic research, I can put this in a more cynical perspective: Even the most ardently civic-minded of people might have more impetus to perform if they feel that their work has value. In any workplace there are different ways to engender that kind of respect in employees, and in an academic library it is appropriate for librarians to see themselves as participants in academic discourse rather than only consumers and distributors of such information. The complications of scholarly publication, though sometimes intimidating, are the reality which faculty deal with, and the valuable information which we broker springs from that environment. The Annoyed Librarian wrote near the end of the aforementioned blog post, "Librarians would probably be happier if they gave up this obsession with the 'faculty' and just did their jobs." Perhaps that is so; maybe some of us would be happier with fewer responsibilities. Yet how much self-respect is generated from having lower expectations and fewer challenges? How can it make a better librarian, or a better person, to say "We choose not to go to the moon... because it is hard."

People do need enough time to do more work, though. Librarians' workload might also be an ironic roadblock to tenure. One faculty librarian I know has told me that she is worried about her tenure portfolio because she has so much work to do under her librarian duties that she has no time for research and publishing. She may not realize it, but that may be an issue of its own, apart from but related to her tenure requirements. If an institution has given a faculty member so much work that she or he does not have enough time to devote to research, that is a problem, especially if that institution has also connected performance evaluations with scholarly and professional activity. In fact, faculty workload in regards to tasks such as teaching and advising versus research is one of the issues the ULM Faculty Senate has discussed in the past year, so it is a concern for all faculty, and not only librarians.

Still, perhaps we can all agree to disagree, leave it to our institutions to decide whether librarians are faculty or not and just choose to apply for positions according to our individual preferences. Yet with the job market as tight as it is, choices are much fewer. Even the Annoyed Librarian blog can see that librarians can't easily choose, having written this in a new post about faculty status (which is different in tone than in 2009) a few months ago: "That seems unlikely given the persistent jobs crisis. Somehow I doubt a librarian on the market would take a look at UVA and think, 'great library, but that no faculty status thing is a dealbreaker.'"⁴

As an ACRL Chapter President I cannot accept actions which diminish the role of librarians, but again, as an individual I would eat the apple if I were one day starving, and I'd respect that institution as appropriate (note that there is a different between my roles).

President Sullivan is paraphrased in the Chronicle article to have the "different strokes for different folks" position on faculty status and its value:

Ms. Sullivan, who is also president of the American Library Association, said any change in title should not undermine the deep respect East Carolina has for its librarians. Universities operate on their own library models, she said, and those models regularly change to fit the institution's needs.¹

Judging by the rubric that libraries' models are diverse and mutable, none of us should feel any trepidation or disgust when changes to faculty status happen because what is going on at one institution is wholly appropriate for that particular institution, and there is no contextual relationship between those events and what may transpire at another completely dissimilar university. If your institution still has faculty status for librarians, does that mean that you should not be concerned if other librarians at other institutions have lost their tenure status? Fundamentally, I don't really think it's wise to ignore the misfortunes of others. One anonymous tenured librarian at East Carolina University was quoted in the *Chronicle* article saying, "We don't want this and feel like it's being forced on us."¹ That could be you one day, but you probably would care then.

While talking to an older family member (who does not primarily work in Academia) about the budget situation at ULM, he was surprised to hear that my institution does not have a union. "No," I explained, "This is a 'right to work' state... That is why tenure is so important down here." My relative and many non-academic members of the public like him seem to have a perception that tenure is like a suit of armor or golden parachute, protecting its bearer from harm in any situation, no matter how despicable a person might later become. Critical remarks about tenure are often made in the context of a perceived villain hiding behind the shield. This misunderstanding appears

in regards to both primary and secondary education as well as higher education, though the bitterness could be greater for the later since going to these institutions is usually a voluntary decision. However, it does help put the situation into perspective to remind people that tenure is often the only real protection educators might have.

Furthermore, intellectual freedoms are no small part of librarianship and what libraries are for, and faculty status helps to protect these freedoms. Since I have faculty status and I am not a classified employee I don't need to worry too much about the legal restrictions that are placed on classified employees dictating what they can and cannot say in regards to politics, but that doesn't mean that I don't care about my University co-workers and other such state employees. I do think it's unjust that classified employees must have their free speech curtailed in this way already. As a librarian, this kind of legal institutionalized censorship is bitterly unsavory to me. It might also exacerbate acrimony between faculty and non-faculty, which is a problem of its own (however, I have been to The Old Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge and I have read enough about Louisiana's political history to understand how and why those restrictions came to be). So I'm very aware of the freedoms which faculty status preserves, and the mere thought that I could lose that is disturbing indeed.

It is, however, only a thought, as I am not sure how possible or impossible it might be for academic librarians to become classified, and I think of it the same way that I think about planet-destroying meteors: It's disastrous and terribly worrying, but improbable enough that I am not paranoid about it. Even though one may never arrive on Earth, if you asked me if I like planet-destroying meteors, obviously I'd say "no." Shalu Gillum also wrote in the *Reference Librarian* article that an increase in salary is among

the chief reasons librarians desire tenure⁵, but due to budget cuts in Louisiana, some of us who attain it will likely see little to no extra coin. The pecuniary aspect of tenure doesn't motivate me much because that carrot is not on the stick. I have other concerns.

In my conversation with my relative, he further instructed me not to become "boisterous" about state budget issues because such persons are the "first to go." Also he told me that "you can't be worried about other people" and that I should have concern only for myself and not be bothered if others at ULM are laid off. This cynical and survivalist attitude is very necessary and healthy (especially for those with families), and I don't think he was giving me incorrect recommendations, but I still disagreed with and overtly rejected his suggestions, explaining to him why as well. Since I am a member of the ULM faculty senate and the President of ACRL-LA, as humble as those posts may be, I have a responsibility to care about the well-being of those in working at my institution and in my general profession in the state (and beyond). I am not 100 percent sure that Maureen Sullivan feels the same way, although, I am not 100 percent sure that she doesn't either.

I do not believe that cynicism and selfishness is always beneficial to the individual, and this is especially true when changes needed to secure one individual are also changes which can only be precipitated with the participation of a multiplicity of other individuals. To put it another way, not looking out solely for "number one" is a very effective way to do just that (and thus I may be, in fact, a rather selfish person after all). This kind of cooperation is demonstrably successful and beneficial for librarians in Louisiana, as we have more than once demonstrated our ability to campaign together for the benefit of libraries, sometimes libraries that are not even the same type as our own.

Together we restored funding to LOUIS: The LOUISiana Library Network a couple years ago and only a couple months ago prevented the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) from editing the importance of school libraries from its guidelines, and achievement which *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge notes is "highly unusual."⁶ These things could not have occurred with a "you can't be worried about other people" attitude.

So again, if you still have faculty tenure track status at your own institution and you know that other librarians have lost their faculty status elsewhere, you ought to be at least slightly concerned-- even if you are not a librarian. As one of the *Chronicle* online comment posters, "abichel," said: "Another nail in the coffin of tenure. Divide and conquer works every time. Any bets on what the first college at UVA or ECU to reclassify faculty will be?"¹ From his/her perspective, the idea of re-classifying faculty members out of the faculty could spread to other colleges. I don't think it's excessively paranoid to imagine that, and so the position of ACRL-LA and I is to defend tenure for academic librarians in Louisiana and beyond, to the extent of our ability.

¹ Andrew Shurtleff, "As Their Roles Change, Some Librarians Lose Faculty Status," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, last modified March 18, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/As-Role-of-Librarians-Evolves/137937/>.

² Annoyed Librarian, "Academic Librarians: 'Please Love Us!'" *LibraryJournal.com*, last modified March 17, 2009, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/blogs/annoyedlibrarian/2009/03/17/academic-librarians-please-love-us/>.

³ Shalu Gillum, "The True Benefit of Faculty Status for Academic Reference Librarians." *Reference Librarian*, 51, no. 4 (2010): 323.

⁴ Annoyed Librarian, "Goodbye, Faculty Status," *LibraryJournal.com*, last modified March 11, 2013, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/blogs/annoyedlibrarian/2013/03/11/goodbye-faculty-status/>.

⁵ Gillum, "The True Benefit of Faculty Status for Academic Reference Librarians," 322.

⁶ Will Sentell, "BESE drops plan to change rules for counselors and librarians," *The Advocate*, last modified April 30, 2013, <http://theadvocate.com/home/5728524-125/bese-drops-plan-to-change/>.