

Chapter 4

Emotional Dimensions of Academic Librarianship

ABSTRACT

This chapter is the heart of this whole discussion: the emotional dimensions of academic librarianship. The chapter examines the nature of academic librarianship and what makes it an emotionally-laborious profession, exploring such topics as faculty status and tenure; change, technology, and innovation; intrapersonal challenges; subject specialty; campus leadership; and economic factors. The chapter explores what the academic librarianship literature is reporting regarding emotion within the profession, reporting on physical health problems, mental health problems, and the professional impact. It also discusses issues of gender and race/ethnicity and reaches beyond the borders of the U.S. to examine how librarians all over the globe are affected.

INTRODUCTION

Here we have reached the heart of this book: the main crux of this discussion. Many aspects of academic librarianship are fundamentally people work and therefore are considered to require a great deal of emotional labor. This suggests that librarians are susceptible to emotional exhaustion and therefore burnout. Some aspects of the job relate directly to working with the public, where “the public” ranges from patrons (faculty, staff, students, and members of the community) to vendors to other librarians and individuals at other institutions (e.g., consortium members, interlibrary loan partners). Of course, just like

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individuals in other work environments, librarians must also contend with their workplace colleagues which can be just as challenging as dealing with the public, depending on how supportive or troublesome one's workmates can be. Moreover, librarians can be managers and administrators as well, adding a different (and sometimes additional) dimension of emotional labor to the work that they do.

This is not simply the personal experience of either author speaking, though both of us have worked in, and continue to work in, positions which required contact with both the public at large and with colleagues – working service desks, interacting with faculty and vendors, and dealing with co-workers through committee work. All of this brings with it the by-now-familiar emotional exhaustion associated with the pressures of emotional regulation (Christian, 2015), trying to control one's feelings in the face of an ill-equipped student attempting to complete a research paper that's due tomorrow (cue the panic), or an irate faculty member who cannot understand the impact of budget cuts or why "their" extremely-specialized journal (which only supports their specific area of research) is being cut. In her study of the emotional labor and exhaustion of circulation librarians, Chen (2012) reminds the reader that "because of its commitment to quality service, library business is considered to be a service industry" (p. 5), an assertion with which not many librarians would disagree. In this regard, academic librarianship is not unique.

However, academic librarianship – and librarianship in general – does have particular features which have increased the level of emotional labor and stress within the field. First, "the need for expertise within the field has presented new challenges and hazards," especially the increasing need for information technology and other technology-related skills such as web design, graphic design, and familiarity with course management software, not to mention several others (Christian, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, funding in higher education has been negatively affected over the last several years, forcing libraries – and therefore librarians – to "compete for limited resources in the organizational chain" (Christian, 2015, p. 2). Coupled with budget cuts which have either resulted in lower pay or stagnant salaries – and in some cases furloughs and layoffs – and a diminishing pool of resources from which to draw – for both professional development and the daily needs of the job – it is not just the librarians' emotional resources which are being taxed (Christian, 2015). Their physical resources are diminishing which adds to their emotional labor and exhaustion.

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