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Promoting faculty success

Ten ways to reinvigorate your library's faculty organization

Although librarians first achieved faculty status more than 50 years ago, the debate over the advantages and disadvantages of the institution continues to flourish. While we cannot know the outcome of this debate, we do know that approximately 50 percent of U.S. academic librarians currently enjoy the benefits and face the challenges of faculty status.[1]

A brief survey of the vast literature on this topic suggests that faculty status has been far more successful in some settings than in others, both as an individual career experience and as a collective voice in governance and conflict resolution. While many factors undoubtedly contribute to a satisfying experience, a strong library faculty organization (LFO) may be a key component. Two surveys of LFOs, one conducted by Joan H. Worley in 1983,[2] and one by Susan Massey and Mary Ann Shebl in 1995,[3] suggest a wide range of possible activities and structures, but provide few concrete examples of LFO successes.

As a voluntary organization, an LFO must earn the support of its faculty and establish itself as a relevant institution. Without faculty interest and involvement, an LFO can easily become stale, cycling through an endless pattern of occasional speakers, business meetings with little real business, and annual elections for yet another year of predictable behavior. When challenges to faculty status or faculty rights occur, such organizations have neither the cohesion nor the authority to make a forceful response.

A strong LFO, on the other hand, will position itself to meet the greatest challenges with an authoritative and unified voice. Perhaps more importantly, it will offer daily support to its librarians, providing a forum for discussion, innovation, and camaraderie. The authors of this article (two past presidents of the Library Faculty and Professional Organization at the University of Alabama) experienced successes, failures, and frustrations during their tenure, but both emerged from the experience convinced that an LFO is an undervalued mechanism to improve the quality of life for academic librarians. Accordingly, listed below are ten ideas for reinvigorating a library faculty organization.

1. Reintroduce substance into the organization. Many of a faculty's most compelling concerns never make it to an LFO agenda. Rather than imposing a predetermined program on the group, LFO officers can promote relevance by surveying the faculty to identify discussion topics and by making themselves available for conversations about individual concerns. Issues of widespread interest to academic librarians might include tenure and promotion standards, travel funds, salary compression, the annual review process, and release time for scholarly pursuits. While individuals may hesitate to raise such issues with their supervisors for fear of appearing confrontational, an LFO can address these problems in a factual and dispassionate way, generalizing

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the experiences of the group and achieving fair, constructive solutions.

2. Engage new faculty members. LFOs can address both cognitive needs (training, policy information) and affective needs (sense of belonging, peer bonding) of new members in a variety of ways:

Meet with candidates during the interview to introduce LFO activities and services.

Welcome new faculty at an informal annual or semi-annual reception. During the reception, offer refreshments, provide name tags, introduce new faculty in a brief program, and encourage the established faculty to mingle with the new.

Create a photographic employee directory to help new employees put names to faces.

Compile a welcome package with information about local businesses and services, contact information for questions, and other items that a newcomer to the community might need.

Develop orientation checklists for new librarians.

Form a discussion group for new librarians focused on the unique challenges of tenure and promotion. In addition to sharing experiences and information, members can identify common questions that can then be conveyed to administrators.

Consider a one-on-one mentoring program. In addition to a support group, many new faculty will benefit from a mentor who can help them personalize tenure-earning strategies and assist with the tenure application process.

3. Re-examine membership criteria. The membership of your LFO shapes every other facet. Does the LFO membership consist of only full-time library faculty, or does it also include part-time and temporary faculty, administrators, and professional staff? Clear membership criteria, explicitly stated in the bylaws, will help to avoid confusion during elections. In some cases, a change in membership criteria may strengthen the organization. Should administrators hold membership in the group? The presence of administrators may deter some faculty from putting forth issues or discussing problems. On the other hand, having administrators in the group may emphasize the unity of the library faculty and help administrators understand the concerns of the faculty. Also worth considering is the status of professional staff members in the LFO. Would they have stronger representation with their own group, or would they prefer membership in the LFO, perhaps with a roundtable to address their particular needs? Whatever the solutions, it is important to consider the opinions of all LFO members in determining membership criteria.

4. Partner with other groups to expand focus. Active collaboration with library support staff associations, other campus faculty groups, and library administrative councils can increase the power and relevance of an organization. For example, an LFO might partner with a library staff association to offer receptions for new employees. The organization might also work with library school faculty or other campus faculty to organize programming for the benefit of all. In all cases, an LFO should reinforce the initiatives of the university-wide faculty organization. Within the library, the group should work closely with administrative and management councils on such issues as tenure, performance evaluation, and professional development. In some settings, it might be appropriate for an LFO officer to represent the group on such councils.

5. Improve communication within the group. Strong communication may be the single most important factor in creating a strong LFO. Overly scheduled librarians will appreciate well-organized, substantive meetings, scrupulously confined to a single hour. Shorter, more frequent meetings will maintain continuity and permit progress reports on issues before the group. While some meetings certainly require parliamentary procedures, LFO officers should conduct most meetings in an open, free-flowing manner to encourage conversation. Meetings

should end with clearly articulated plans for follow-up. Beyond the meeting structure, electronic lists, library blogs, or newsletters can help to maintain contact. Finally, communication must always ow in two directions, with the LFO of cers responsive to comments and recommendations from the membership.

6. Encourage communication with the library's administration. While ongoing dialogue among library faculty nourishes a healthy LFO, regular communication with upper-level administrators is equally important, especially in cases where the administrators are not members of the organization. Question-and-answer sessions, on either open or speci c topics, allow faculty to discuss concerns with the administration before they become problems.

For complex topics, LFO meeting moderators may wish to gather questions before a meeting and submit them to the administrator who will be addressing the group. This practice encourages thoughtful conversation, but also provides anonymity to the questioners, who can trust that all questions will be pooled and submitted in the name of

the group. On a more informal level, the president of the faculty group might ask for regular meetings with the library dean or director to discuss current projects. In all cases an ongoing, respectful relationship between the LFO and the administration will guarantee open conversation and constructive resolution when dif cult issues arise.

7. Energize LFO committees to increase participation. An organization s committees transform passive interest into active participation. One way to energize an organization is to energize its committees.

Encourage junior faculty to participate by pointing out that LFO involvement ful lls service requirements for tenure and promotion.

Re-engage senior faculty members. While junior faculty often tend to take the lead in committee work, older faculty members can bring experience, institutional history, and perspective to the process.

Create committees with representation from diverse segments within the library, e.g., from both technical and public services, from multiple branch libraries, and from all academic ranks.

Provide speci c charges to committees, and encourage committee members to establish momentum by starting the year with a small project that will yield immediate and measurable results.

Request periodic reports from committee chairs at LFO meetings to document progress and to encourage interaction with the LFO membership.

At the end of the year, ask each committee to draft recommendations for the following year s committee to avoid the need for constant reinvention.

Consider two-year, rotating appointments to facilitate continuity.

8. Promote continuing education and professional development. Developing educational programs will empower your faculty to succeed in their primary jobs as well as their scholarly efforts. Both new and

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established library faculty have an interest in topics like management, teaching, campus outreach, publishing, poster sessions, grant-writing, and conference participation.

While outside speakers can provide valuable continuing education workshops, internal speakers can often supply equally informative and more cost-effective pro-gramming. Informal brown bag lunches or roundtables may also appeal to library faculty. In such meetings, faculty can share tips about publishing, for example, or dis-cuss their experiences with management. In addition to live meetings, consider creating Intranet pages with the following types of practical information for professional de-velopment:

Tips on preparing poster sessions, including a logo that faculty can place on their posters and sources for supplies and printing services.

Reading lists about topics of concern.

A list of library faculty research inter-ests to help individuals identify potential collaborators.

Links to calls for papers and grant op-portunities.

Handouts from workshops.

Rosters of workshops open to campus faculty.

9. Document activities. While perform-ing any of the above activities, LFO members should document procedures for future bene t. LFO presidents may wish to keep a journal, review it at the end of the year, and write down suggestions for the next year s president. Committee heads should archive their minutes and other materials on an Intranet page, thus providing a pool of ideas for future committees.

An LFO should also develop an organi-zation-wide timeline that notes target dates for important functions such as the call for committees, general meetings, and elections. Documenting an organization s activities will help formalize useful programs, save future leaders from having to reinvent policies or practices, and help the organization to build on previous accomplishments.

10. Socialize! Whether a pot of coffee and a plate of cookies before a meeting or an elaborate holiday party or spring picnic, a social event will allow members to get to know one another and to communicate on a different level.

Social interaction is perhaps especially important in decentralized libraries, where librarians from the various units rarely inter-act. Social events can be for members only or can include partner groups to broaden the focus of the group. In such settings, hierarchies break down, professional faces become human faces, tensions are released, harsh words are forgotten, and relationships are renewed.

Conclusion

Just as each library has its own culture, each LFO must nd its own voice, its own role. The suggestions above will not apply to all libraries, nor will they solve all problems. But without a strong support group, faculty status can easily seem a burden rather than a privilege, and the individual librarian can easily lose his or her way. There is strength in numbers and pride in collective accom-plishment, and a vital LFO can provide both to its members. Expend a little effort on a stagnating LFO, and enjoy the many bene ts!

Notes

1. Dorita F. Bolger and Erin T. Smith, Faculty Status and Rank at Liberal Arts Col-leges: An Investigation into the Correlation among Faculty Status, Professional Rights and Responsibilities, and Overall Institu-tional Quality, *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 3 (2006): 217 29.

2. Joan H. Worley, ARL Library Faculties and Their Meetings, *College & Research Libraries News* 44 (1983):324 25.

3. Susan Massey and Mary Ann Shebl , Faculty Organizations in ARL Libraries: Activities and Documents, ARL Spec Kit, no. 206 (Washington, D. C.: Association of Research Libraries, Of ce of Management Services, 1995). ℤ