
It's Not Really My Job, but . . .

Librarians as Confessors, Job Counselors, IT Pros, Photocopier Healers, and Bike Mechanics

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ABSTRACT: The overall purpose of this conversation group was to identify and document the myriad ways theological librarians support the missions and ministries of our institutions that are not often included in our official job descriptions.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians, particularly public services librarians, often find ourselves taking on tasks that fall outside even a generous interpretation of “other duties as assigned.” We do so because we want to help, because we are available, and because we interact with students on a regular basis. Acknowledging and naming the many ways we go “above and beyond” contributes to a greater sense of comradery, knowing that others are also engaged in this good, albeit extra-professional work. In addition to having a chance to share stories, build comradery, and perhaps offer and receive ideas and suggestions for best practices, our overall purpose in this conversation was to identify and document the myriad ways theological librarians support the missions and ministries of our institutions that are not often included in our official job descriptions.

THE CONVERSATION WAS STRUCTURED AROUND THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES:

IT support/troubleshooting

We noted how even something as simple as helping a student with a printer issue may ultimately contribute to student retention and

success, especially when students are feeling stressed and facing an imminent deadline for a paper or presentation. In addition to finding a solution, or work-around for the immediate problem, we also serve as a calming presence, or an equally frustrated comrade seeking to exorcize the gremlin from the printer.

Pastoral Care/career counseling/existential crisis/faith crisis

Students sometimes find themselves confronting challenging questions in seminary, from anxieties over career decisions (many of us are theological librarians because of such conversations), to crises of faith. Librarians, especially public services librarians, are both accessible, in that we are often in public spaces, and approachable, in that we mostly do not assign grades. We are also professionally obligated to be non-judgmental. Thus, perhaps one of the greatest services we provide is offering students a safe space to share their doubts and struggles and fears by being present and listening, even without providing answers. As some participants in our conversation noted, theological librarians often have taken courses in pastoral care and counseling and can draw on this knowledge to help us discern where we may be able to help students by offering a calm, attentive ear, and when to encourage students to seek professional help. We are quite good at saying “I do not know, but I can help you find resources that may provide answers.”

Faculty support (e.g., tenure documentation)

While students are commonly, and rightly, regarded as our primary focus, theological librarians also support faculty. In addition to offering workshops to help some students fill gaps in their prior education (thus freeing faculty to devote instruction time to more subject-specific content), librarians also support faculty in their own research. This not only includes traditional librarian tasks such as submitting interlibrary loan requests, but also non-librarian tasks such as proofreading, collecting documentation for tenure applications, (more) IT support, and delivering books to and from faculty offices.

Writing support (students, faculty, staff, administration)

At institutions where there is not a dedicated writing center or tutor, or when such assistance is only available at set times, librarians

sometimes find ourselves providing basic writing support. This can extend beyond students and may also include helping faculty determine how to cite an obscure unpublished source or editing official institutional publications. We can also draw on expertise and experience to offer advice on signage, internal and external communication, and policy documents.

Administration/institution

Because many of us work directly with students, whether in offering research assistance or supervising student workers, librarians often have first-hand, unmediated access to students. This enables us to hear and see students' challenges with specific assignments and frustrations with policies. We thus can offer instructors, institutional administrators, and deans valuable insight and perhaps suggest possible, salutary changes. Such first-hand observations can also help correct faulty assumptions (e.g., students do not use print books anymore).

"Other duties as assigned (and many not)" (e.g., cleaning, mopping, maintenance requests, pest removal, vehicle assistance, distributing Band-Aids, calling 911)

Librarians sometimes find ourselves facing situations that require immediate intervention, whether that means offering a Band-Aid for a cut, calling 911 for assistance with disruptive patrons, or mopping up a spilled beverage to keep others from slipping. We remove pests, change lightbulbs, help students with flat tires, and find leaks. We do what we can to help protect our patrons and our collections. While many of us are genuinely always happy to help, as one participant in our conversation pointed out, it is also important to make sure "other duties as assigned" does not become a black hole, swallowing our time in efforts that are not adequately recognized or compensated.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, having such conversations will help us realize, and communicate, how oft-overlooked "other duties" contribute to the missions and ministries of our institutions and enhance the wellbeing of our patrons, students, faculty, and staff.

