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## The Administrative Assistant— Pragmatic Job Description

*The library administrative assistant is an officer of an increasing number of university libraries, but there have been few efforts in the past to describe the kinds of duties which he is frequently called upon to do. The author draws upon his many years of experience in such a position. He discusses office management, relations with colleagues both up and down the administrative ladder, fiscal and other business activities, plant, communications, and other problems.*

ALTHOUGH HISTORICALLY few academic libraries have been large enough to warrant appointing a full-time administrative assistant, the number of such institutions is rapidly increasing. Very few statements exist, however, of just what constitutes an appropriate list of duties for this position. As with many other positions, these duties are usually the product of the persons and circumstances that have been involved in them. The following pragmatic "job description" was created by one person in one large library system, but the elements of universality it contains will no doubt be obvious to most academic librarians.

One must understand fully the often intricate aims of the institution and the library organization in any given situation before he can work effectively in its daily operation. Once this understanding has been acquired, he will find himself deeply involved in some or all of the following areas of responsibility.

### THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES

Generally speaking, you, as the administrative assistant, will be responsible

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for the physical set-up and staffing of the administrative suite or office. The responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the work of this office will be yours. A considerable amount of the library's public image is held in your hands, although this is a responsibility you share with the public service departments. Throughout each day people pour in and out of the administrative offices, frequently their first contact with the library, and the manner in which each person is handled can help to make or deface the library's image. You never know with whom you may be dealing when a stranger walks through the door, and you will be wise to treat each person with courtesy, interest, and intelligence. You no doubt will be expected to handle visitors from outside the campus; you might even be surprised how many such visitors there are on a major university campus. People from all over the world come to our universities, and each in his own way is here for a very special reason. If you have to plan a library tour for a visitor, make certain you ascertain the reason for his visit, any special areas he wants to see, and introduce him to staff members if there are points about which he would like to have considerable detail.

### THE TOP MAN

Always remember, you are *his* administrative assistant. Here you have a real responsibility, and your appointment to such a position has implications. You have the most direct path to his hearing. What do you tell him? What don't you tell him? You will have to learn with experience those things about which he must be informed and also learn to recognize those things about which he should not be bothered. You have to learn to filter the trivia and involve him only when it is really necessary.

To be able to keep him properly informed, you may need to devote considerable time to your relationships with members of the library staff at all levels. If you are not approachable, in the best sense of the word, you may hear little or nothing. Many people are going to come to you with a great variety of problems they do not feel they want to take to the top man. You will be surprised what you can learn about an organization by keeping your mouth shut and learning to listen intelligently.

To be approachable you also must be available. Odd work schedules for an administrative person in this area will not do. If you are not there the work is not being done or someone is forced to do it for you. Bless our highly competent secretaries! As far as possible, you should be on hand during all hours the offices are open.

If you are handling the work as you should, you often are acting as a buffer and interpreter for the top man. There is an element of danger here. Whether you actually are doing it or not, it will be assumed that you are speaking for him. The average person coming into contact with you understands that you are representing him, so you must remember whose opinions you are expressing.

In your personal relationships and work with the top man (and they often are very close relationships) you may find yourself a confidant, a friend, a

sounding board, an amateur psychiatrist, an ear for listening, a professional co-worker, and a sudden sixth at a dinner table. Major administrative officers in any sort of organization have social responsibilities which cannot be overlooked or avoided and some of that responsibility is yours in whatever manner it may need to be expressed. These personal areas will occupy only a small amount of your time but they are very important and, more often than not, they are most pleasant. From time to time you will be asked to assist in his research work. You may find yourself assisting in a study in which an attempt is made to place a financial evaluation on an important research collection, and you may be a member of a major library survey team in another state when the top man is director of a statewide survey. This sort of involvement is stimulating, professional, and exciting.

### THE BUSINESS ANGLE

You may be deeply involved in the preparation, submission, and control of the over-all library budget. This may involve writing justifications for increases in varying types of library funds; there may be certain allotments for which you will be responsible; the over-all monthly control of the general library budget usually will rest in the administrative offices and you will be involved.

The general administrative office probably will handle all purchasing except for books, serials, and binding. You may need to know how to buy supplies, services, furniture, and equipment of all kinds. This is difficult, especially if you have had no experience in purchasing. More often than not, experience is the only real teacher. I have been grateful for more years than I care to admit that my first acquisitions job was in a library in which acquisitions meant everything from books to library paste.

When you're new at it, don't be afraid of the sales personnel from the library supply houses. Learn to know the repre-

sentatives from the reputable firms; all of them can help you, some more than others, depending on the local situation. The reliable firms are well known in the field, and it will not be difficult for you to get opinions from professional colleagues in your area.

Within the framework of your own purchasing organization there is a lot you can do to ease your purchasing problems. Learn to know the purchasing people and the regulations under which they must operate. This I have learned over the years—you seldom can beat a large system and you will do better to learn to live with it. The better you learn to live with it, the better your chances are of convincing someone that there may be changes necessary from time to time in regulations which are being interpreted too stringently. There are ways to overcome what has been referred to as the "charm of the low bidder." Learn to know your purchasing people well and cooperate with them as best you can. When you place orders with them, place them correctly, adequately, and with every bit of information you can muster. If you know exactly what you are buying and where it can be obtained, you will save time for them, and they will respect your judgment when they recognize that you know what you are talking about. Be prepared at any time to justify a purchase decision by knowing enough about the product to discuss it intelligently. Handle their paper work with care, be cooperative, and you will find yourself ahead of the game.

Let me mention two publications in passing. First, keep handy the annual buying guide which appears in *Library Journal*. When you are in doubt about the source of a particular supply or equipment item, this guide frequently will do the trick. Use the list of suppliers in the guide as a request list for current catalogs, and you will find that you have a fine beginning of a collection you will consult daily. If you are in-

involved in a more sophisticated kind of purchasing, a subscription to the *Library Technology Reports*, the loose-leaf series published by the ALA Library Technology Program, is a must. These reports on studies of equipment, furniture, and supplies are wonderfully put together, the information is reliable, and you will learn to look forward to each issue with considerable anticipation. This publication alone may help you to convince some purchasing agent that the brand you wish to purchase is the best buy for the money.

#### THE PHYSICAL PLANT

No matter the size of campus or institution in which you are located, there will be a physical plant staff through which you must obtain janitorial services, building upkeep, repairs of all kinds, and other assorted services. As I suggested in purchasing procedures, learn to know the staff of the physical plant and be aware of the procedures under which they work. If there is a large enough plant to have a general routing office, that office will be of considerable importance to you in getting things done when they need to be done. You will be flooded with staff and patron complaints—it's too hot; it's too cold; there's a flood in the third floor restroom; a floor tile is loose in the reference room and someone has just fallen; the door to the supply cabinet is locked and the keys are on the inside; a large section of heavy steel shelving is beginning to sway suspiciously; the telephone in the serials department is not ringing loudly enough to be heard across the room; someone has painted a full-color mural on the wall of the restroom on the second level of the bookstacks; and so on, *ad infinitum*. You and your staff will have to absorb all of this information, decide what should be done and how rapidly it should be done. From that point on it depends on the manner in which you get the proper information

into the hands of the proper person in the physical plant. Don't ask for a carpenter when you need a steelworker; this will only delay the service and create other problems. Don't cry wolf unless you have a real emergency. I have tried to separate the really important rush items from the nonrush items, and have found that physical plant personnel will respond quickly and efficiently when you need them most. If you are particularly impressed with any special services you receive, write a letter to a supervisor and compliment the staff. Most people don't take time to do this, but it is appreciated. Again, the use of diplomacy is half the battle.

#### THE COMMUNICATION LINES

*Staff communication.* Though I have mentioned this before, let me remind you again of the importance of being available to all of the staff on all levels. People must have someone to talk to who will listen, respect confidences, be understanding, and, relatively speaking, unbiased. The top man will do this too, of course, but many people don't feel like going that far. You also may be able to express an eye-opening opinion when a problem gets too involved in crossing departmental lines. With the over-all view of the library constantly in the back of your mind, you may come up with a fresh viewpoint so often overlooked by the people most deeply involved with a problem or conflict. Being two steps away from a troublesome situation may make it possible for you to examine the problem in a very different light.

*Communication across the campus.* By the very nature of your position you can help to sell the library and its program across the campus. How far you can go depends very much on how much effort you are willing to expend in this direction. There are boards and committees of all kinds in which there is a real need for participation on the part

of members of the academic community. You can serve on a faculty-staff social committee whose major responsibility is the planning and directing of the President's reception for new faculty and staff, a major campus event each fall. There will be people from all across the campus on this committee and you can extend your field of vision where the institution is concerned. You might be a faculty representative on a university theater board, a policy-making board which may exist to function as a guide to a major university division and activity. Again, you are spreading your personal contacts with other members of the faculty and staff, learning more about their fields and also indicating to them that the library feels itself a part of the academic gathering.

One of the most effective communication groups I have ever seen was created on the University of Illinois campus several years ago, with a nucleus of people in administrative positions whose work cut across departmental lines throughout the institution. Called the Campus Roundtable, this group meets once each month for luncheon and a presentation from some division of the university. We have heard from the supervisor of traffic and safety, the director of the health service, the director of the bureau of institutional research, the university labor relations officer, the director of Krannert art museum, the university architect, the director of public services for the university library, and many others. Each of these persons presented the organization and work of the division he represents and described plans for the future. At tables for eight, at any of these meetings, you might find yourself sitting with a security officer, a purchasing agent, a food service director, a radio or television director, a librarian, a business manager, an associate dean of women, or an assistant director of public information. Those who attend these meetings learn more about each

other and the university than would be possible under any other circumstances. They meet each other face to face, often after talking by telephone at an earlier time, and the impact changes. Never again are they dealing with a stranger—there is a face now to go with the voice. All of this serves to strengthen communications lines in the best way.

Many of the activities potentially available to you on a campus are there because you have academic rank and are accepted as a member of the faculty. If you are accepted as a faculty member, act like one! Most faculty members have campus responsibilities which reach beyond their own little backyards and most of them accept this responsibility graciously. The same will be expected of you. You cannot close your eyes at 5:00 P.M. each day and hope that the institution will go away. There are many ways you can support the university after regular office hours, and you should be willing to do it.

Meanwhile, the telephone is ringing and you may have something surprising awaiting your attention:

The architect has put the offices on the second floor. Can you supervise a

division from that vantage point?

The dreaded company sent in the low bid for the \$5,000 pamphlet binder order. Convince the purchasing department that this product is inferior and inadequate for library use.

The elevator is stuck between the second and third floors and some woman on the inside is getting hysterical.

Purchasing and Contracting has just thrown out the out-of-print journal contracts. Write a justification for their return.

The budget hearing is scheduled for 8:30 tomorrow morning. Watch out for "you-know-who," he's out to whittle down the library's request by thirty per cent.

I just saw —— washing her feet in the lavatory of the women's room on the first floor.

She did too!

There are few dull moments and in so many ways it is rewarding. You will feel very much like a cog in the endlessly rolling wheel of an educational institution and you can make a greater contribution than you may think now. If you don't like people, forget it. I like them! ■ ■

