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The Idea of Academic Library Management

Much, if not most, of the trouble academic library managers suffer is related to their weak grasp of what they are or should be trying to be. What tradition there was is broken and, except in very small libraries, useless in any event. Academic librarians tend, like most academics, to stumble into administration without conscious awareness that they are changing from one ill-defined profession to another, perhaps an even worse defined one, and they tend to rely upon images rather than ideas for guidance. An attempt is made in this paper to delineate the idea of what it is to be an administrator of an academic library and to suggest changes that could be made, unlikely though they may be, to ameliorate the present situation.

If the art of librarianship is largely ill- or underdeveloped, library management is certainly its most backward branch. I was struck with that familiar thought anew as I read Arthur McAnally and Robert Downs' "The Changing Role of Directors of University Libraries."[1] I realized that many of the quondam directors questioned by the authors on what happened to them and their ilk had little idea of what had hit them. They knew it wasn't their fault and muddled around among the clichés with which academic managers comfort one another: higher management did it, large impersonal trends and forces, or the students, or the faculty, or the other librarians, or all or none of the above were responsible. Finally, in one of those traditionally reasonable conclusions for such surveys, the authors conclude that nothing has really changed though things certainly are different and that the situation calls, as it has before, for a person with qualities that would fit him or her to be a director of an academic library, president of the university, or of the United States, or maybe even God.

The authors of "The Changing Role of Directors of University Libraries" got off to a good start with their opening sentences: "Traditionally the directorship of a major university library has been a lifetime post. Once a librarian achieved such a position of honor and leadership in the profession, he usually stayed until he reached retirement age."[2] Many clues to the difficulties subsequently examined could have been sought in that string of assumptions, but the authors simply stated them and went on, which is insufficient. What tradition is referred to? Has there indeed been a tradition of directorship, or is it just common practice of relatively recent years? Why is such a job an honor, and why does it imply that the holder

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is a leader of the profession? What was being professed? Who was being led? I think that answers to those questions can be informative.

Tradition and the Director

There is no tradition of the directorship of major or minor university libraries. There is a tradition of academic librarianship in this country, and it is vaguely related to similar traditions in other Western countries and is a very simple one. We may assume from patterns of practice, if not from library literature, that one supposedly started as an apprentice or intern in an academic library and progressed, if one turned out to be good, to becoming The Librarian, that is to say, the master librarian of a small- or medium-sized library or a department in what the authors term a "major" library.

By the time one was deemed sufficiently prepared to become The Librarian of a major library, one was probably middle-aged or older, and it might well be assumed that one would hold the job till retirement. Much of the current difficulty with directorships is that the tradition I have limned in here has all but completely broken down. There was a tradition, and it is now dead in universities full of doctors who are anything but learned and in which there is no Librarian but a Director of Libraries. What is it to direct libraries, that is, how does one go about directing more than one (as the title usually implies, usually meaning a main library and one or more branches) library? The overwhelming popularity of the term *director* among those holding the jobs should imply a changed attitude toward what the chief administrator does, unless we assume that vain and stupid persons have taken on the title without meaning anything except to have as glorious a title as the other person. I would say that in at least those cases in which the change of title was deliberately motivated, it is significant. Not all the implications of such a change appear to have been thought out carefully, however, as McAnally and Downs show in their article. They assume that the new administrators, the directors, will continue to share the characteristics of The Librarians, thus seeming to see little difference between a librarian and a director.

I do, however, know that there is considerable difference in what each title implies and must rely on those implications on the reasonable grounds that the actions of what McAnally and Downs took to be honored leaders of their profession were purposeful. Thus, once more, what is it to direct?

The term *director* has become generally popular in academic circles in comparatively recent years; and, increasingly like deans, directors are members of the administration rather than the faculty. Indeed, that is just the difference between the faculty inferences of the term *librarian* and the administrative, that is to say, managerial, inferences of *director*.

This differentiation has been an extremely sensitive matter in academe. Academics have, in practice, tended to creep out of the faculty and into the administration backwards—always facing the faculty and avowing that they were, indeed, members of the faculty and yet doing more and more managerial work and less and less faculty work. Such strenuous pretenses must imply very strong motivation indeed, and much of it derives from the academic myth that a college or university consists of classrooms, teachers, students, and nothing more. It should be obvious to anyone looking at a modern university that such a view is patently false.

Directors have been as loath as anyone else to forgo whatever faculty status they have had. While they can no long-

er hold onto an idea of themselves as chief among peers but must recognize that large libraries *do* call for managers *who are doing a different kind of work*, they still have clung to their status as members of the faculty of the library because no other status has been recognized.

In short, there is no idea of academic library management. Indeed, even the idea of librarianship is vague beyond comprehension, and when mixed with academic pretensions, the results are pitiful. Confused about just what it is to be an academic librarian, wavering between affirming oneself as a true-blue member of the faculty and then going off to an ALA convention—to affirm oneness with all librarians everywhere—the directors of libraries have been more than a trifle confused about what their roles are or could be. Many have wanted to leap into the arms of the similarly confused academic administrators, who have, in many cases, rebuffed them. Those who have embraced them have often proved themselves less than faithful.

Training of Directors

Conversations with directors have led me to suppose that it is an occupation learned almost entirely on the job. Everyone I have talked to has affirmed, without any prompting, that library school courses in administration are virtually useless. Library schools appear to be a little better prepared to instruct potential administrators than potential order librarians, but not much. How is that?

Library schools suffer the same delusions as everything else in academe. Even if a library school should honestly want to return to the idea of professional education and try just to prepare would-be professors for their internships by employing retired or at least long-experienced masters, they would get stopped cold in their tracks. Librarianship is not a scholarly endeavor so much as it is a matter of performance —that is to say, the essential question is not "Do you know it?" but "Can you do it?" The study of librarianship, thus, tends to be akin to musicology—something a practicing musician may well study on the side to his or her profit, but hardly the focus of his or her attention unless the person means to become not a musician but a musicologist. Universities, however, tend to demand that music and library schools act as if the study of music and librarianship were the point; that is, to demand scholarly degrees of those who should be preparing students for professional practice.

In this welter of confusion, status seeking, and desperation it is little wonder that most library schools had little time to notice that the old idea of The Librarian as a kind of chairman was being displaced by the confusion of the Director as a kind of librarian who was an administrator and thus not quite a librarian and still less than a fully (or often scantly) accepted member of the administration. What to do about them? What was to be said to those who wanted to be (and sometimes were already) such? Why, of course, have a course and call it Library Administration or even the Administration of the Academic Library (the Public Library, etc.). And who shall teach it? Why, of course, anyone you can get to do it.

In any event, we have ended up with a confused faculty of library science (and maybe information science now as well) who are not at all certain whether they are librarians or professors of the study of librarianship, thus joining the directors who don't know quite what they are, either, to lead the profession(?) in further disarray.

Direction

To explain the difficulties is still not to illuminate them or make any prep-

aration for their solution except the historical understanding which is only a little help to practitioners. How indeed does one direct a library? As I hope to have suggested already, it is certainly a different activity now than being the master librarian, and there are no reasonable grounds for supposing that the attributes of The Librarian should or could have been transferred to the Director.

It should be enough to be a master of reference service without adding the unlikely burden of acquiring the skills to become a good department manager. We have gone too long on the idea that when you are good you get to take over the department and run it as you will, making it *your* department till you go on to become the head of public services and bend public services to your will till, perhaps, you become The Librarian and bend the whole library to your will. It was never a good idea, and all that can or need be said for it is that it sometimes worked quite well when masterful people made it work. Such masters, such as they are, establish no heritage except as their mastership is genuine and therefore transferable—that is to say, insofar as it can be learned and passed on in an orderly way. The whole existence of any profession depends upon such transferability.

A director must be and, therefore, should be the master of the situation within the academic institution and within the library. That is hardly an occupational expectation to be left to chance or incompetent training. To be master of the situation it is useful to understand what the situation is. It is true that one can stay master of the situation by creating it oneself or by allowing it to be created by outside forces which one keeps up with—and it is also true that both ways are popular. However, there are fundamental defects in these ways of mastering the situation which should be mentioned. To employ the first way of being a director is, simply put, to play God, to project oneself as the Great Father or Great Mother. It should be clear that there are not enough godlike librarians around to make that course of action a reasonable one. For that very reason the old idea of The Librarian, while it hewed to a sound professional model, became obsolete. It can work in a small library where one person, well prepared for the job, can run the whole show. The larger the library gets and the more complex the activities within it become, the less likely it is that anyone, no matter how well prepared, can run it alone. That realization has crept up on library managers bit by bit, but they have generally been unwilling to forgo the godlike status they enjoyed. Assistant directors were employed, associates, administrative assistants, and other minions who were to take care of things the director could not or would rather not do. Paramilitary and paraindustrial organizational schemes were and are employed to keep things in good-enough order so that orders could be given, but all of it has tended to make the largest libraries not so much efficient organizations as institutionalized ones. The assistant librarians became not so much interns as employees in a firm whose business was largely to grind out annual report material that would give the director a sense of being in touch with what was going on and also keep him or her in an honored position of leadership until retirement.

But what of remaining master of the situation by being the only one who speaks to higher administration, which sets all policies? That is, what of the director as an intermediary between the faculty of the library and the administration of the college or university? Successful careers have been built upon

such a conception. At least men and women have stayed in positions of honor and putative leadership by being the administration's person in the library. On the positive side one can say that lines of communication are kept quite open, and the need for much administrative staff within the library is negligible except insofar as it is needed to preserve the honor of the director. There are negative features of this way of staying the master of the situation, however, which overpower its virtues. The most obvious is that one is not, indeed, master of anything, especially if the librarians know what is going on, as they probably do. Somewhat, but not much, less obvious is that nothing is accomplished but keeping the director in the saddle, while the library is subjected to uninformed direction. But then, what is informed direction?

Informed Direction

How does one become informed? The ordinary way is to require reports of inferiors. Inferiors, however, feel inferior and tend to report what superiors like to hear. Even in emergencies the staff system does not tend to work well, perhaps because staff tend to be ambitious individuals who are looking up and thinking more of how to please superiors and thus become superiors themselves than of how to be good inferiors and thus preserve inferior positions. But where are we to turn if we turn away from the staff system?

We might in the end, out of desperation if nothing better, look at professional models of organization and supervision. The literature on management is poor indeed when it comes to guidance on the management of institutions which employ mostly professionals or a great many of them, but the models are there to be seen and what ideas their structures may reflect are implied in those structures. The chief model, to my mind, has been before us for some time; it is the college or university itself, insofar as particular institutions have been collegial in spirit or substance.

While vast numbers of what are commonly called college professors have never really professed anything and have never belonged to a genuine faculty of anything, there have always been the knowledgeable ones who have considered themselves not employees of the university but professionals who have been hired by the university to provide their services; that is to say, who are not employees but independent agents who hire out not themselves but their services. The services of a professional are prized because a genuine professional can do things which most people just can't do. That, by the way, is the difference between professional and clerical work in the libraries; clerical work is that which the average person can be taught to do well in a relatively short period of time.

In theory, the faculty of a department should be able to gather together and, sharing collective knowledge and wisdom, govern the department. It is difficult in practice, but how difficult is largely a matter of choice. The role of the chairman is ambiguous: he or she may just chair the meetings, or may find, on the other extreme, that the faculty of that department are literally begging for a father or mother to run it like a family, and may accept the post. Whether such would be a wise decision would depend on the situation; one can only hope that the man or woman who accepts being the head of the family will try to help the children to grow up. In a small library nothing more (or less) than a chairman is called for: someone who can lead the faculty in whatever way the situation calls for, sometimes simply chairing meetings and acting as intermediary with the admin-

istration, at other times being a father or mother to those who need one and meanwhile weaning them in the hope that they may become professionals in every sense. Sometimes the chairman will have to move somebody who has been doing ostensible clerical work away from it and into what can mutually be agreed to be professional work. When an incompetent can be fired, then he or she should be fired; otherwise one must make the best of what is there. When dealing with at least putative professionals the comforts of the civil service scheme must be denied one, for when dealing with professionals one is dealing with matters of talent.

Ours is a profession in which practice is tied very closely to local circumstance. When local circumstance demands that something more than a chairman is needed, when the library has grown like a plant or expanded like a gas to a point where it is just too big an operation for anyone to act simultaneously as chairman of the faculty and supervisor of the clerical staff and still maintain a reasonable picture of himself or herself as a librarian, then it is time for somebody or other to leave the library profession and take on a new one—library management.

Deans came into existence first, I suppose, as departments got too big and the need arose to have someone in charge of the whole college who could be a sort of chairman of chairmen. As colleges became parts of universities, deans became what might be called middle management, a terribly ambiguous status. It is little wonder, what with that ambiguity, that incumbents wonder about what they are—faculty or administration, or a little or more of one and the same of the other. It is, as I hope to have implied if not shown, a delicate position whose occupancy fills the incumbent with doubts about what he or she is a member of. Hence the agony over being a director: "I'm more or less in charge, but of what? And who or what am I?" As I have indicated above, for some there was brief or little agony, and whatever there was was assuaged by the assurance, "I'm in Charge!" Of what? Oh, well, for many it is enough to be in charge, and that is what the old intern system was set up to head off, in part. For others it is a long agony of doubtful decisions on what should be done. Many have sought advice, in the current vein, on techniques, and not enough have sought wisdom.

Well, I am not prepared to offer wisdom, but I have ideas and offer this idea of the director: he or she should see himself or herself as a mediator among the interests of the chairmen, who should be left to chair their departments till they lose the elections which should be held every one, two, or three years. Maybe after several elections the old chairman will be back, but it should not have all been futile. The diurnal or longer changes will have provided experience in government preferable on any practical ground to that obtained any other way. However we may urge that faculty status should descend on us, in the end we have to earn it, not so much by getting required degrees, but by becoming the faculty of the library. Faculty status, after all, is relatively insignificant when there is no faculty, no body of those who govern the institution.[3]

Being the director is not all that significant if one's only idea is that one is the boss and one's head is filled with images of bosses telling workers what to do. One who directs *can* do it by means of directives, by putting out orders, but it is all too likely that the results will be much more a matter of seeming than being. The workers will look good insofar as they can and care little about whether they are good or not since their only responsibility is to

carry out orders from a source they come to know not as intelligent direction guided by understanding but as someone who may not understand the situation but certainly knows what he or she wants things to look like.

Of the worst ruler or manager it might well be said, "He does it all himself,"[4] but as I have noted earlier we are too short of heroic librarians to recommend this course of behavior. Most situations call for a moderately intelligent person aware not only of the possibilities in the situation outside himself or herself but of the possibilities within as well, to say nothing of inward limitations. It is not probable that one can hope to do more than be chief liaison man or woman with higher administration (but not the only liaison person; others should be prepared to take on some managerial responsibility and know what they are doing and with whom they are dealing in case you have a heart attack or are run over on the way to the library) and direct the operations of the library by indirection, not insisting on a paramilitary or industrial staff plan but dealing with superiors in the basic meaning of that term—those who, indeed, have superior knowledge, wisdom, information, or skill (which any faculty should have). It is probably desirable that the director should have been a librarian and should make some attempts at keeping up with current practice and knowledge. Most librarians want the director to have been a librarian, a common desire among professionals in all fields, and one as likely to promote good practice as trying out someone with management but little library skill, training, and experience. In practice as a librarian a would-be director should recognize that at least several other librarians are his or her superiors, and as one gets more and more into the practice of management the number of librarians who are superiors in one way or another should increase. It should be sufficient for a good library manager to be superior to everyone else in the library in library management without trying to pretend that he or she is an all-round superior.

The director should deal with inferiors as well on a familiar basis—not as a terrible presence, a god without a machine who descends not to set everything right but to confuse and alarm, but as a familiar presence who can be spoken to without distress. Coffee breaks are a good time to assure everyone that you are approachable if hardly the universal buddy. People should not gasp and fall silent when you come into the room, because that is a certain sign that your presence creates, in itself, an unnatural situation which will return to normal some time after you leave. You will, thus, never experience the normal since you walk in a nimbus of abnormality. In short, the director should make it possible, through his or her own behavior, to experience the library as it usually is. How else will one know what the situation is and be able to maintain its direction or give it new direction?

The idea, at least my idea, of direction, then, is that the director is or should be a librarian of sufficient practice who recognizes that he or she has now entered a related profession and, indeed, abandoned the old one. He or she should keep up enough contact with the library profession to maintain a collegial relationship with the library staff at all levels from the clerical to the professional in order to be able to direct the activities of the library; that is to say, to give them direction. He or she should also become familiar with academic administration and politics insofar as it is necessary to maintain the direction of the library and ensure its continuance. That seems enough to ask of anybody, and one must recognize that it is too much to ask of many peo-

ple. Steps, however, can be taken to ensure sufficient experience and training for those who have the skill and personality.

Library Administration

Library administration must be recognized as a profession in itself. The administration of academic libraries is certainly different from that of other kinds and probably calls for a professional association of academic library administrators. Such a course might well put a professional association of academic library managers in conflict with the ALA on accreditation of professional schools. There was never much sense, however, in having professional schools accredited by an aggrandized friends of the library organization. Reform in administrative education, as I have suggested earlier, must be tied to general reforms in the professional schools; and professional schools must come under the control of the relevant professions within and allied to librarianship.

With some trepidation I would suggest that the administrative degree be a doctorate which could be sought only after at least five years of experience as a librarian or whatever substitute therefor that would be acceptable to a board of practicing administrators. If one were to hew to the idea that the director should, first, be a scholar, then he or she should get a doctorate in a scholarly field. But if librarianship is generally more a matter of doing than of knowing—and administration is eminently practical—then something more akin to the performing doctorate in music or art is appropriate. In any event, what is needed most is a program laid out by practitioners. There is, of course, the ever-present danger that intelligent and competent practitioners will wander off into a fog of pretensions and grandiose suggestions when asked for, let us say, the ideal program to prepare one to do the work they do. The temptation to suggest unrealistic ways of preparing future administrators can be reduced if the administrators who make the suggestions must also supervise the internships of the candidates. A profession without internship is mad, and we have carried on long enough as though we were insane. As a final caution, I would suggest that whatever boards might be set up to pass upon programs, qualifications of the instructors, and internships, they should be more than liberally sprinkled with administrators of small institutions and chairmen of departments within larger ones. One of the real difficulties of the directorship of a major university library is that it removes one all too far from what is going on in the library.

Yet another suggestion on professional schools for administrators: it might seem a hopeful course to combine the program with that of the school of business administration. And yet the people in business administration are so apparently unaware of any models of organizational structure except the industrial and civil service that such is not so much a hopeful as a hopeless idea. Both schemes presuppose a plant that is producing something and that employs a large body of line workers who are supervised by successive tiers of managerial employees. The world is, of course, full of ignoble attempts at imposing this sort of organization on institutions that are not like factories, and has no need of further encouragement.

Conclusion

Now what I have said here and what I have proposed no doubt seem utopian or at least impractical to many if not most librarians and administrators. It calls for such thorough reform, and reform so in conflict with the present

modes of education, that there is little chance of success. And still, the basic conflict is between being and seeming; and it is always possible for any profession to break away and renew itself, to return to its own profession of ability.

It is perhaps almost too late for academic librarians to inspect their professions and decide what the possibilities may be for improving and perpetuating them. The directors, to say nothing of other kinds of academic librarians of the future, will be what we make them be through good training that weeds out those too ambitious to take charge of *something,* even if it is just a library, as well as other likely incompetents, or there will be still more of the people McAnally and Downs questioned who were so ill-prepared that they didn't know what happened to them.

As I have opined, the trouble is not specifically within academic library circles, nor endemic in academe; it is a general problem within our society. Trying to be objective, we have equated qualifications with specifications and ground out people in higher and lower education much as we might grind out parts. The quality control has not been good, more than likely it never could have been all that good, for I doubt there are ever enough people around who can honestly profess anything. And still, we could have done better, far better, and there remain some opportunities—some possibilities. First, we must be able to say, in administration as well as in any branch of librarianship and related fields, "I am a director; I profess it; I know how to do it far better than almost anyone else; I am skilled, educated, and trained." It is more than a trifle boastful, but that is what any real profession is.

References

1. Arthur M. McAnally and Robert B. Downs, "The Changing Role of Directors of University Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 34:103–25 (March 1973).
2. Ibid., p.103.
3. I have dwelt on this concept elsewhere, in "The Divine Right of Kings: Academic Status Viewed by Roger Horn," *American Libraries* 2:625–29 (June 1971).
4. *The Wisdom of Laotse;* trans. and ed. by Lin Yutang (New York: Modern Library, 1948), p.114.