

Academic librarians as scholars

Publishing is your moral obligation

by John Newman

At this stage of my academic career, my position is secure and further advancement is unlikely. Thus, I can bear the risk of making some new enemies in return for this delightful opportunity to share my views, and perhaps generate some useful discussion, about the role of academic librarians as scholars.

Broadly stated, my opinion is that academic librarians should publish more and complain less. I think that scholarship is both an obligation and a pleasure and that concerns about lack of time can be managed.

Moral obligations

Original scholarship and the publication that emerges from it are the moral obligations of those who accept public money to perform as intellectuals. The perspective here is that of an academic librarian with full faculty status in a public institution.

When not at work, I usually associate with people in the building trades. Many of them lead lives that are somewhat more demanding, over a broader spectrum of human activities, than those lived in academia.

When we accept, through taxes, money from such hardworking people, we accept as well, I think, a mission to do our best. The highest intellectual order of activities available to a university professor is the creation and dissemination of new knowledge. It is what others expect of us and what we should expect of ourselves.

Become a scholar

There is a second set of obligations, perhaps more social than moral, to our academic colleagues both at our own institutions and worldwide. It is no secret that not everyone in academia thinks librarians should enjoy full-faculty status. This is true no matter how much traditional library service we provide or how good that service is. Some version of the debate about professors who spend their time in esoteric research instead of teaching has always been with us, but those who publish seem to acquire more material and social rewards. By establishing ourselves as scholars, librarians can more honestly claim full membership in the academic community with corresponding access and influence. We can also earn the rewards that are fun to have.

Publication itself is fun. Scholarly books and major articles display our ideas on an international stage. Modesty is always praised, especially by those who clearly believe they deserve their own, but most of us in academia think we are smart. Otherwise, to accept wages for intellectual work would raise ethical issues. Publication provides a revealing opportunity to invite others to measure the dimension and product of our intelligence. Those who know more may point out that we know less. The resulting dialog advances the course of knowledge. I find it rewarding, exciting, and valuable to engage in this process at the highest level I can manage.

About the author

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The truth about research

Research that precedes publication is easier for librarians than for teaching faculty. The national anthem of academic librarians might be a dirge about the lack of time to do research. Librarians claim they must “be on the desk” or, worse, in a meeting and thus cannot undertake any intellectual activity more profound than answering reference questions. Let me hasten to assert that I, too, believe that working with patrons is our highest priority, but it is not always our greatest intellectual challenge or opportunity. Further, our ability to serve patrons must be fueled by some measure of original thought.

The knowledge and associations that accrue to academic librarians, as insiders in a research library, far outweigh any disadvantage of less free time. We know how to use information resources more powerfully and efficiently than do our colleagues in the classrooms, and we all have friends to help. Also, our experience assisting others with their inquiries is useful in forming and addressing our own research goals.

Finding the time

Because it looms so large in the array of excuses for not publishing, the issue of free time deserves a bit more consideration. Everybody has 24 hours each day to spend as they must or will. I find time for research on evenings and weekends. I place private activities in no array of value on any scale (so long as they are legal) and I believe those with family and similar obligations must certainly have considered their effect on professional opportunities. The ability to think ahead is surely needed by those who wish to be paid for their thoughts. So, too, is the ability to adapt to circumstances that are less than ideal and to create opportunities. If academic careers were easy, everyone would want one.

Those for whom finding time for research is too difficult may learn that the substance of anything worth serious intellectual consideration is even more difficult. A relentlessly effective, but apparently unpopular, way to discover if one has time for scholarship is to begin a project and then see how time can be found. Far more popular among academic librarians is to complain that there is no time, so nothing can be undertaken.

Library administrators can often provide help through flexible scheduling, sabbaticals, administrative leave, and even material rewards for scholarly achievement. Colleagues who have experience and contacts can serve as mentors.

A valuable development in recent years is a growing view that patrons should schedule their access to academic librarians rather than expect us all to be in the library, waiting to answer questions at any time. An appointment-based concept of availability benefits everyone, including patrons. By appointment, they may encounter librarians who are more prepared than distracted, and librarians can schedule their time more effectively.

Finally, we can find more time for research by using less time talking to each other—both in library meetings and at professional gatherings. In construction work, the principle that only one person can be in charge is clearly established. Meetings at a job site are few and brief. Participatory management is useful in academia, but it needs to be more efficient and realistic.

We know we spend too much time in meetings. We need, simply, to stop—stop calling meetings, stop attending them, stop listening to “presentations” that could better be distributed in advance or not given at all, and stop droning on ourselves. To paraphrase a rhetorical question from the 1960s, “What if they had a meeting and nobody came?”

How useful are conferences?

Finally, we need to take a hard look at conferences (as much as we love them) and question their efficiency and value and the quality of the information conveyed at them. Conferences are great places to gossip, and scholarship is often lonely, but we should consider where a few days of our time will earn better results. It is hard to focus responsibility for results on attendees at a conference, but easy to identify who should be associated with the success or failure of published research. This issue is really about responsibility.

As members of the academic community, librarians can and should embrace the responsibility that such membership entails. ■

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