Library Staff Morale in the Academic Hierarchy

Pennsylvania Library Association webinar
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Presenters:
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Today’s talk:

Abstract: Academic librarians have increasingly gone public with their experiences of low morale and burnout, yet less attention has been paid to the workplace experiences of library staff. As Kaetrena Davis Kendrick notes in her work on the persistent harm of low morale among librarians, “the cost of silence can be high.” Our research team includes library staff, former library staff, a recent MLS grad and MLIS student, and librarians. Through 34 structured interviews with academic library staff nationwide, we seek to demonstrate how organizational culture, library hierarchies, and management style affect staff morale. In this webinar, we present our findings establishing that efforts to address equity in compensation, provide professional growth opportunities, and create more collegial work environments can all improve staff morale. Finally, we suggest how you can make changes in your own libraries to assess and improve morale across staff hierarchies.
We’ll address:

➢ Why we’re interested in staff experiences
➢ Our research process
➢ Who we talked with
➢ What they’re saying
➢ What we’ll do next
Learning objectives:

1. Reflect on staff roles in academic hierarchies in order to better advocate for academic library staff.

2. Gain a better understanding of how the divide between administrators/librarians and staff can impact staff morale.

3. Understand the impact of professional development and career support on academic library staff morale.
Background, Methods, and Interviews:
The inspiration:

Kendrick’s paper on low librarian morale →

We found other work on librarian morale or burnout...

...but no one was looking at staff morale!

Natalia and Ann got talking...
Our initial questions:

➢ Librarians with an MLIS sometimes work in staff roles... yet few staff make it to librarian roles. How easy is it to make this jump?
➢ What chances do staff have for engaging work at their role within the hierarchy?
➢ What happens if you want to “rise up the ranks” and take on more complex work, but can’t?
➢ Does library structure play a role in staff morale?
➢ Why so few studies on staff? Librarians are not the only ones running the library, and in many ways are less essential than staff.
Developing our project:

- Natalia and Ann invited Celia to provide qualitative support.
- Natalia drew on her experience as staff, and invited Bonita to share her staff perspective as well.
- We won a statewide (LAUC) grant to buy software, hire a student to transcribe, and provide small gifts to interviewees.
- We applied for and received human subjects/IRB approval.
Recruitment

We emailed *external* library listservs and state associations, and screened interested interviewees to ensure they matched our target group.

On campuses where the word spread, we had to turn people away!

We completed 34 interviews, and each participant received a $25 gift card to Powell’s Bookstore for their time.
Leading the interviews:

Colleague Dori Hsiao graciously let us try a test interview with her.

We interviewed by phone or Google Meet in May-June 2020 (during the pandemic shutdowns!).

One person asked questions and the other took notes/asked follow-up questions.

“Semi-structured” interviews meant that we had a set of questions, but flexed to staff interests.
Demographics: region and institution

Staff came from 23 colleges/universities in 16 states.

Public institutions were overrepresented

Enrollment & Carnegie classifications show larger institutions were also overrepresented
Respondent demographics

**Gender:**
- 29 female
- 4 male
- 2 NB

**Race:**
- 29 white
- 5 staff of color*

* Staff of color self-identified
Black, African, Asian, Latinx/South American descent
From interview to transcript:

We recorded audio on two devices, to avoid data loss, then transferred to secure Box folder.

Student Tara van Hoorn transcribed the interviews, highlighting areas that might be identifying.

We then reviewed each transcript for format, and redacted identifying information, to produce a clean final transcript for coding.
Coding themes

We used MaxQDA, a qualitative software, to highlight quotes of interest and explore themes.

Each of us took a separate area, letting us dive deeply into the theme we were working on.
Findings:
1. The librarian-staff divide

A disconnect between staff and librarians caused frustration amongst staff. This was exacerbated when librarians held faculty status.

- Staff try to structure their work and influence their organization, but are often blocked by librarians. While some librarians are collaborative, others are dismissive, cherry-pick the good tasks, and dump “lower status” work on staff.
- Staff felt satisfied when they could work with librarians as peers on a team project.
- Staff appreciated that this project focused on staff experiences. Being seen and validated matters tremendously.

“I think that morale is pretty low among our staff. They really feel that there’s a faculty-staff divide, for one.” -Joseph
2. The impact of management

Staff with low morale were often in toxic settings or had micromanaging or unsupportive bosses.

Yet **feeling supported by and connected with an immediate boss** was critical for high morale. Managers who support staff growth and autonomy are crucial, as is transparent communication from management at all levels. As Opal commented:

“My boss is very uplifting. He doesn’t seem to have a big ego, he just wants to get things working, to have everyone happy… he’s always asking what he can do to help us, and not meddling unless we ask for help. So we’re really free to grow, I gotta say.” -Opal
3. The impacts of family and education

**Education:** The majority of staff we interviewed had an advanced degree, or were in a graduate degree program. Staff saw education as necessary—but it didn’t guarantee career progression!

**Caregiving:** A majority of staff had a spouse or kids, and family needs often impacted their career choices.

**Class:** Many staff brought up ways that class impacted their career—either smoothing it, or challenging it through e.g. student loans:

“Our director has volunteered to help me find scholarship money because I couldn’t get any more loans to go back to school… I do wanna go back if I can get the financial assistance.” - Linda
4. The impact of hierarchy

We expected a direct relationship between place in the hierarchy and morale. Instead, morale depended more on organizational factors such as the ability to progress, workload, respect, and funding for new hires.

“The person who was applying for the [librarian] job said ‘Well, how long do I sit at the reference desk?’ and they said ‘You’ll never sit there more than two hours. We would never do that to you!’

“And I was thinking, what am I? Every person who’s pissed off at the world, I’m dealing with them 8 hours a day. And you can’t handle it for two hours?” -Amy
RECOMMENDATIONS: How to strengthen library staff morale

➢ Foster respectful peer collaboration between staff and librarians.
➢ Fight for fair pay and classification.
➢ Provide job security and flexible schedules that allow for caregiving.
➢ Provide professional development funds and paid conference leave.
➢ Ask staff for and use their comments on potential library changes.
➢ Invite staff to collaborate on committees and library initiatives.
➢ Ensure that those who can’t afford an MLIS can still advance.
➢ Provide pleasant, well-lit workplaces and access to campus amenities.
➢ Be a good teammate -- fill your own darn copier tray!
Next steps:

➢ Share out this webinar (and our ACRL poster)
➢ Finish our literature review (we welcome suggestions!)
➢ Develop one or more publications
Themes to explore...

➢ Dig further into staff experiences in the academic library
➢ Explore staff vs. librarian vs. faculty roles
➢ Consider what causes engagement vs. discouragement
➢ Look at staff opportunities for growth and development
➢ Explore how class and finances impact staff growth
➢ “Hierarchical microaggressions”: snubbing vs inclusion
➢ The impact of organizational (dys)function on staff
Further reading


See also: our ACRL poster

### LibraryStaffLife: Improving Staff Morale in Academic Libraries

**Intro:** Others have studied librarian morale, but no one was looking at staff!

**Method:** We interviewed 34 academic library staff from 23 institutions by phone or online in May-June 2020, transcribed, and coded in MaxQDA.

**Findings:**
- The strangleholds of hierarchies
- The librarian/staff divide
- Need for prof. dev. support
- Manager advocacy is central!

#### WHAT STAFF WANT EVERYONE TO KNOW!

On the divide: “Librarians can protect themselves [from COVID], but we clerks could be out there interfacing with the students and touching everything, and they were willing to have that happen to us.”

On good management: “He’s the boss I’ve been waiting for my whole life... he’s very uplifting and he knows he’s putting a lot of money into people to get their training... we’re doing really well since he got here.”

“I don’t know that I’m as much of a fighter as some of my awesome supervisors have been.”

On career growth: “Until I retire or die, there’s not gonna be another staff supervisor position... I’ve either got to quit or die... the only way they could move is to move sideways. They can’t move up.”

#### Ways to Systemically Break Down the Divide:

- Include staff in committees and leadership
- Foster peer collaboration between librarians and staff
- Fight for fair pay and classification for all staff
- Pitch in: fill your own darn copier tray!
- Provide professional development funds
- Share prospective changes and then use staff feedback
- Ensure that those who can’t afford an MLIS can still advance

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Thanks to
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Tara van Hooorn

Check out our webinar: [https://is.gd/PaLA_UCBMoraleTalk](https://is.gd/PaLA_UCBMoraleTalk)

Questions? Email library.staffmorale@berkeley.edu
Thank you!

Slides:  
http://is.gd/LibraryStaffMoraleFindings

Recording:  
https://is.gd/PaLA_UCBMoraleTalk

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Photo credit: Johema
QUESTIONS?

* We encourage staff to ask the first few questions!

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