

# LIBRARY ISSUES

## BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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### Opening Channels of Communication

by Richard M. Dougherty

Whenever trouble erupts in a campus library or on the campus itself, a consultant is often hired to assess the situation; the reports that materialize from such occasions invariably cite communication breakdowns as one culprit for the troubles. Criticizing provosts by faculty and library directors by library staff has probably always been popular since the early days of higher education. When allegations arise that administrators have “failed to communicate,” this is commonly code for “I don’t agree with what you are saying or doing.” It is simply easier to mask confrontation by blaming someone else for a failure to communicate. Nevertheless, failures to communicate are too frequent.

Library directors and campus provosts have something in common. Both must serve and communicate with many diverse constituencies including library staff, faculty, alumni, students, and a whole bevy of campus administrators. Therefore, this article is addressed not just to academic administrators and library directors; it is also addressed to library staff because effective library/campus communications is very dependent on library staff doing their part.

#### Communication Problems and Job Dissatisfaction

Communication problems can occur at any level on a campus or even within a university system. For example, a recent report issued by a working group of University of California officials pointed out the need for better two-way communications between the campuses and the Office of the University President (UCOP). This group noted that a two-way flow of information between

the campuses and UCOP rather than a top-down ‘headquarters’-style communication was needed in order to “...sustain the health of the university’s federal administrative system...”<sup>1</sup> The same can be said for an individual campus or within campus units such as the library.

Communication issues are often at the heart of job dissatisfaction issues. While most faculty members and librarians are happy with their situations, there is always a level of dissatisfaction that can be identified on most campuses. A recent survey of librarians noted that about 70 percent of the 1,209 participating academic librarians reported that they are either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their jobs. But this same survey also revealed that aside from inadequate salaries, the chief source of job dissatisfaction is “incompetent management/lack of support.”<sup>2</sup> Survey respondents leveled their criticisms not only at library leadership but at institutional leaders as well.

Anger and frustration among some librarians toward library directors has emerged as the subject of discussions on several librarian-managed blogs. Here are only small sampling of posts I’ve recently encountered. Many of them, naturally, are posted anonymously.

I’m always wary of people who want to be in charge. The kind of people who spend their careers angling for a directorship (and here I’m especially thinking of academic libraries) are often the least qualified academic librarians. They’re the ones who speak management jargon and are impressed by the latest business fads and want to force their business change upon us.

...the Peter Principle. As faddish as it might have been, I can say it’s been true of every single library director I’ve ever worked for. (That’d be

six of them.) One level beyond their peak of competence, each of them failed as leaders.

Managers who aren't ... effective leaders create rules to deal with difficult situations instead doing the tough work required to really solve them.

Too often managers who, despite their lack of knowledge of what goes on in the library or the professional work that makes things happen, seem to feel that non-administrative librarians are little more than paraprofessionals who should have little say in how things are done, and thus are given little opportunity to exercise professional judgment in their work.

Reading these posts, I find myself saying "better two-way communication would help or even solve these problems."

It is also important to point out that a library director is often out in front of their staff regarding the need for change. In some cases the director is even too far out in front and that too can result in poor communications and cause tension to erupt between the director and the staff.

### **Old Problem, New Again**

Librarians using blog post and associated comments to criticize library directors and university administrators might be characterized as malcontents, but they merely demonstrate the use of a new technology to achieve an age-old practice. What used to be said privately on the telephone or at a professional meeting to a few, can now be spread almost instantaneously across the Internet to many. Today's technology has given disgruntled staff the opportunity to vent their anger and frustration without feeling any fear of reprisal.

Not that criticism is new. For example, nearly 35 years ago an article appeared in the literature, authored by two prominent library directors of that period, Arthur McAnally and Robert Downs, about this issue. They wrote about the rapid rate of turnover among library directors—half of the directorships had changed within the past three years—and identified tension between library directors and their staffs as one cause.<sup>†††</sup> The

growing consensus was that top-down management was no longer acceptable to many library staff. Phrases such as "benevolent and beloved administrators" and "father image" were commonly used to describe the management styles of library directors at that time, indicating a paternalism that no longer exists; we are in an era of empowerment which ironically gives greater scope for complaints.

### **Managerial Competence Imperatives for Baby Boomers**

During the 1970s libraries were also beginning to adopt computer technology to operate basic library processes. This trend toward greater computerization of library functions was also drawing attention to the need for drastic changes in libraries. Often junior staff members understood the potential of these new tools and could see the need to introduce them, while their senior administrators seemed reluctant or unwilling to move ahead. The growing pressures to introduce changes to internal operations contributed to the tension that existed between library staff and library directors at some libraries. A new generation of leadership was needed. So began the era of the Baby Boomer.

But now it is time for baby-boomer directors and provosts to develop a better understanding of their colleagues from younger generations, such as Gen X and Gen Y. The value systems are again somewhat different, and what academic leaders may know of traditional forms of communication and motivation is possibly not as appealing to the newer generations. So once again, it's channels of communication that are affected.

### **Provosts Aren't Exempt**

Not all provosts are successful communicators either. It is still not unusual to hear provosts described as being aloof and detached from their campus constituencies—the library being one of them.

It is true that many provosts are not particularly concerned about what goes on in the campus libraries so long as complaints from faculty or deans don't reach their offices. Such a laissez-faire attitude, however, can and does boomerang, as it did in a

recent incident: Not long ago a provost called me asking for advice. He said his campus library's staff was in near insurrection. He thought his librarian had been doing a fine job since he had arrived on campus, so he was quite shocked when the library's staff voted no confidence in the director and sent a delegation to the provost's office asking him to intercede in their behalf. Clearly the provost hadn't been paying close attention to what was going on in the library. In fact, I learned the provost rarely took time to meet with the library director even though the director regularly asked for meetings.

The unfortunate reality was that the provost thought he had too much on his plate to be concerned about communicating with the library staff and their director. However, the "benign neglect" turns out not to be so benign, and now the provost is faced with a time- and energy-consuming dilemma of what to do. Is the situation retrievable? Are the staff allegations valid or are the staff merely resisting the changes that the director is striving to introduce? After all, the provost informed me that he himself had encouraged the new director to be innovative. Now the provost is confronted by a delegation of staff who are accusing the director of not communicating with them and insisting that he control the introduction of new service initiatives. There are no easy answers available to this provost. He now has to rearrange his already busy schedule to deal with the situation.

While this provost spent a great deal of time meeting with campus deans and directors, he understandably devoted most of his time to the deans of the largest schools. However, any provost who doesn't create open and clear channels of communication with deans and directors does so at his/her own peril. It is not unusual for a new provost to underestimate the complexity of the administrative challenges he/she will face. Since many provosts rise from the ranks of the faculty without a great deal of prior management experience, it should come as no surprise that they often underestimate the complexities of campus library systems. Past work

experience with over fifteen provosts has led me to conclude that the provost's position is arguably the most difficult on campus. In retrospect, I would posit that the most successful provosts were not only smart and politically astute, but more importantly, they were excellent listeners and consummate communicators.

### Strategies and Tools for Communication

Both provosts and library directors must serve diverse campus constituencies. For this very reason, I'd argue that successful library directors, like provosts, had better be smart, politically savvy, and excellent communicators. Because of the similarities that they both face in meeting the challenges of their positions, I'd like to suggest some commonsense strategies and tools that provosts can use to ensure that channels of communication are open and free-flowing among staff, deans and faculty.

- Commit to transparent leadership. Have frequent meetings of the Council of Deans or analogous group and be sure the library director is included. Create meeting environments that contribute to the exchange of meaningful issues and ideas. Criticism should be encouraged, not discouraged. Be forthcoming, as situations allow, in openly and honestly sharing information both up and down the organization.
- Make special efforts to maintain open two-way communications between the offices of the provost and the library director. The provost should ensure that the library director is aware of budget/enrollment/political problems that impact what is possible to do in the library; the director then needs to ensure that librarians are aware, for example, that there is a direct connection between enrollment and available resources. The library director also needs to ensure that the provost's office is aware of what is happening in the library and possible problems that loom on the horizon.
- Create environments in which faculty and staff feel free to communicate with administrators. Mechanisms

such as e-mail, online newsletters, and blogs should be available to all. It is essential, however, that all who use them know when to use them and when not to. For example, e-mail is very good for making announcements, but poor for discussing problems, especially with a director, and where there is any possibility, even remotely, for misinterpretation. As a rule of thumb, a complaining e-mail should go to only one person, the person who can address the issue. E-mail should not be used to take action on severe problems that need immediate attention. When there is a crisis or emergency, people have to go and talk to each other about it and figure out what to do right then and there.

- Provide opportunities for affected faculty and staff to contribute their ideas to proposed changes to the organization. It is more than a cliché that "people do not resist change; people resist being changed." Those who are actively involved in the planning of a change are more likely to accept the change once implemented. Those given a role in shaping the work environment are more likely to support and sustain the environment than those who are not initially involved.
- Allow sufficient time to explore options, compare alternatives, and consider the consequences when changes are proposed. If faculty and staff are really involved in a planning process, there should be opportunities to explore options and alternative approaches, and to consider possible consequences.
- Never forget that the real experts on campus and in the library may be among faculty and staff and not the administrators. By the time a person becomes a provost or a library director he or she is no longer an expert at what was his or her specialty. Management's challenge and responsibility is to find ways to tap into that knowledge and to encourage and support initiatives from the staff, professional and otherwise.
- Be up front about having to say "no" occasionally to new ideas

and proposed initiatives, but always make the effort to explain why an idea or a proposal can't be pursued. Do not always say "no," however, especially without thinking things through; avoid creating a "no" culture on campus or in the library. Work hard at figuring out ways to say "yes"—even if it is only a partial "yes."

- Try not to announce changes/decisions out of the blue without anyone understanding why they are being made. Even when they disagree, people are more accepting if they understand the rationale behind the decision.
- Give credit when and where it is due. Whenever someone on campus compliments the work of a faculty member or library staff member to an administrator, the administrator should make a special effort to pass along the comment to the appropriate party. For example, if a member of the library's staff or a member of the faculty did something notable or went beyond the call of duty, then send that person a hand-written thank-you note.
- Provide support and resources that will help faculty and staff to perform at the highest levels. This is an important responsibility of a provost or a library director. This could mean a mentoring program, both for new library directors (either internally by an experienced administrator from another area, or from another library director) and for new librarians. One might ask whether the campus or the library itself offers an appropriate range of faculty and staff development and mentoring programs.

### Library Staff Must Play Their Part

Working librarians must also keep in mind that two-way communication doesn't stop at the provost's or library director's offices. The library's staff members must also accept their share of responsibilities if the library is to create a healthy work environment in which communications can flow freely and openly.

The most insightful library staff members normally recognize the

constraints and pressure under which their directors work. They realize that being the director is harder than some may be willing to acknowledge. Many don't realize how time-consuming a director's job is. Or that the director may also serve on various university committees, or chair ALA committees, or consortia committees, or sit on editorial boards or be journal editors — or all of the above. All of this takes time and energy, and every time one goes out of town it probably takes a day to catch up for every day having been away.

In this era of rapid change when library staff members often must work under increasing stress, they need to realize that the typical library director must also cope with a great deal of stress. For example, in addition to working with library staff, a director must balance the needs of a provost, faculty and students (and their parents) and even alumni and donors—all of whom can be demanding on occasion. This might mean accepting that the director has to deal with competing needs for resources, and can't approve every new initiative; no one should take it personally—just try to make the initiative even better and more compelling so it can be resubmitted the following year

As self-serving as it may sound, the best interests of staff are served in making their director look good. (It is equally important that the director makes the provost look good in the eyes of the staff, faculty and other officials.) No, I am not talking about inflating the director's ego, but simply pointing out that the library itself will benefit if the "library's boat floats higher in the campus ocean." The library director is competing with many other departments for resources. When

library staff are positive about the library's administration as well as the services the library offers, the chances are that a positive buzz about the library will be generated. Top administrators want to put their budget dollars into the units that are producing the best results. Sometimes a positive buzz will translated into additional dollars for the library.

### Be Transparent; Be Authentic

In this age of turbulent developments on campuses, there is constant talk about the need for change. It is very easy for a new provost or library director to enter his/her new position on the platform of bringing about change. While discussion of change can be refreshing follow through is essential once the provost or director takes office. And above all, don't talk about the need for change if you are not willing to change yourself. Too often people assume "change" is something that applies only to someone else. Be prepared to learn—or at least understand—any new technology that you expect the faculty or library staff to master and use.

But probably the greatest challenge facing campus administrators in the days ahead will be in finding ways to accommodate the values and behaviors of the incoming generation of faculty and staff. If one doesn't pay close attention to the characteristics of this generation, communication breakdowns are inevitable. What is important to this new generation in relation to a job can vary greatly from what older generation academics think the "youngsters" should care about and how they should be spending their time.

In communications with younger colleagues follow two principles:

be transparent; be authentic. Today successful leaders need to be more transparent and have more open communication styles. They must be willing to allow staff to share in information and strategies that were once considered for the provost's/director's eyes and ears only. Successful leaders need to be authentic and honest with their staff. That doesn't mean share every detail of every issue and decision with staff, but share those details when possible. If asked a question that can't be answered because of privacy or confidentiality concerns, be authentic and simply indicate that you are privy to information that can't yet be shared. Staff may not like it, but they respect you more for your honesty.

The differences between successful leadership and communication strategies of today and those of earlier generations are pronounced. Today's provosts and library directors need to make every effort to develop a thorough understanding of how these differences will impact campus affairs, campus leadership, and effective communications.

—The author thanks all the LI contributing editors for turning this article into a truly collaborative effort.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Report of the Working Group on the Roles of the Office of the President. Governance Committee of the Board of Regents. University of California. January 8, 2008

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Richard Albanses, "LI Series 'Job Satisfaction:' Take This Job and Love It," *Library Journal*, February 1, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur M. McAnally and Robert Downs, "The Changing Role of Directors of University Libraries," *College and Research Libraries*, vol. 34 no. 2 (March 1973) 103-125.



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