Deconstructing Faculty Status: Research and Assumptions

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Abstract

Arguments for faculty status have traditionally been based upon a comparative model: librarians want their roles to be compared to those of faculty, not administrators. The author of this article, however, finds almost no empirical research on the status, roles, and benefits of faculty, librarians, and administrators to support this model. She posits several alternative approaches to the faculty status issue.

Approximately half of all librarians currently employed by U.S. colleges and universities possess "faculty status."[1] Such librarians have been accorded a status equivalent to teaching faculty in terms of rights (notably tenure and participation in governance) and responsibilities (notably research and publishing). The advantages and disadvantages of faculty status have been debated in academic librarianship for years. Indeed, the issue is almost a professional obsession. College & Research Libraries published two nearly identical reviews of the literature on the subject in consecutive issues in 1987.[2]

Taken together, these writings reveal a concept or model of faculty status that is built on a series of logically connected assumptions. The basic assumptions are (1) that teaching faculty have certain roles and benefits, (2) that administrators or other college staff do not have these roles and benefits, and (3) that librarians who are not considered faculty will be considered administrators or staff and thus will not have these roles or benefits. For example, a librarian without faculty status will not be viewed as having an educational role and will not possess tenure.

The validity of these assumptions could be tested by comparing librarians with and librarians without faculty status: if those with faculty status had the specified roles and benefits and those without did not, then the assumed model is supported.

Research on faculty status in general is relatively sparse compared with the volume of opinion pieces (what should be done) and personal narratives (how we do it where I work). Moreover, research has not explicitly addressed this underlying model; neither has it considered questions lying outside the model.

The purpose of this review of research in librarianship and higher education is to critically examine each of the component role and benefit elements of the faculty status model to determine if its assumptions and logical connections are supported by empirical findings. A conclusion outlines the implications of the research results---and lack of results--and suggests alternative approaches to the faculty status issue.

Roles

One of the most common arguments for faculty status for librarians is that the role of a librarian is educational, more similar in nature to that of teaching faculty than to that of administrators.[3] There are four steps to the logic of this argument: (1) teaching or classroom faculty demonstrate a particular, defined role, (2) librarians demonstrate a particular, defined role, (3) administrators demonstrate a particular role, and (4) the role of librarians, while not identical to that of faculty, is more similar to faculty than to administrators.

The validity of this argument is dependent, of course, on the defined roles assigned to each player. Researchers have taken several approaches to studying this component of the model: comparing definitions of roles, studying perceptions of roles, and studying roles as practiced.

Comparing Defined Roles

In the first approach, the researcher defines the components of each role, then matches librarian components to faculty components. Several theoretical pieces have approached this from the librarian's side. According to David Sparks, the attributes of a profession are: a professional organization, a "technological monopoly" comprising a coherent knowledge base and restrictions on who may practice with that knowledge, and a code of ethics[4]. Academic librarians possess many of these attributes: the American Library Association, "library and information science" and the requirement of an ALA-accredited MLS to be an academic librarian, and a Library Bill of Rights (without formal enforcement, however). As a group, faculty also possess these attributes, and administrators, generally, do not. In a pair of opinion pieces David Peele and John Budd addressed the issue more directly. Peele argued that standing in a classroom, choosing course content, and determining and evaluating assignments define teaching[5]. These are "originating" activities, to which librarians "respond"; librarians, as responders, cannot be faculty. Budd, however, defined teaching as "imparting information," and characterized the elements of Peele's definition as "paraphernalia," or inessential attributes[6].

Budd and Peele's views of the faculty role, however, may be too limited. In 1972 Fremont Shull examined the complexity of the faculty role, concluding that it is not simply and solely "educational." He asserted that faculty roles are "severely fractionated," with multiple objectives and clients, and multiple task behaviors (routine or bureaucratic, engineered or programmed, professional or teaching, etc.)[7].

Comparing Perceived Roles

The second approach taken by researchers looking at faculty status has been to compare roles as participants and observers perceive them. M. Kathy Cook surveyed 50 percent of the teaching faculty at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Only 18 percent of respondents felt that librarians contributed "very little or nothing" to the instruction of students, 65 percent viewed librarians as "professionals," and 57 percent felt that librarians should have faculty status. On the other hand, only 25 percent viewed librarians as "faculty equal with teaching faculty," and 7 percent viewed librarians as clerical or nonprofessional staff[8]. At a smaller institution (Albion College), Larry Oberg et al. found very similar perceptions: 68 percent of faculty viewed

librarians as "professionals," 29 percent saw them as peers, and 64 percent thought librarians should have faculty status. "Insufficient teaching," however, was the reason most frequently cited by those Albion faculty who did not believe that librarians should be granted "tenure eligibility and faculty status."[9] Thomas English surveyed administrators at ARL institutions, reporting that the overall tenor of the administrators' remarks showed them to view librarians as distinct from faculty.[10]

This perception method was also used in a study of Department Chairs (here considered administrators) in nine high schools. Lynne Adduci et al. found no clear perception of goals and roles among these administrators; they concluded that the most important factor in self-definition was the high school principal's definition of the role, and were thus unable to make blanket assertions about the "administrative role."[11]

Comparing Actual Roles

The final approach that has been used is to examine the roles as practiced. Alan Bare sought to identify factors that determine library work group performance. Two types of work categories were typically inhabited by librarians: problem-solving/decision-making groups (committees, task forces), and individual problem-solving/professional service (reference).[12] Professional competence and effective group interaction were the most important determinants of performance (as rated by superiors), suggesting that the model of "loosely coupled" autonomy and informal collegiality often proposed for faculty is appropriate for librarians as well.[13] Patricia Kreitz and Annegret Ogden studied job responsibilities and satisfaction at the University of California system libraries, comparing the roles and responsibilities of academic librarians with those of support staff.[14] Their findings are more suggestive of the equation of administrators with librarians: the area of greatest "division of responsibilities" between librarians and library assistants was in management-related activities.

Problems with Past Research

Investigators using all three approaches tended to find the same relationship among the components of the role-based argument: if the faculty role is X, the librarian role is Y, and the administrator role is Z, then X equals Y, but Y does not equal Z and X does not equal Z. Each study, however, used a different definition for the roles examined, and the perception surveys did not test what respondents meant when they reacted to terms such as "professional" or "faculty equal with teaching faculty."

This lack of definitional consistency has two consequences for the attribute argument. First, almost any general statement can be made about librarians' "true" role. Second, almost no general statement will enjoy consistent empirical support. The lack of agreement among researchers on definitions suggests that "faculty role" and "librarian role" cannot be readily compared in broad terms. If this is true, researchers should employ an approach that seeks evidence to support more specific statements about roles. Not, "librarians are faculty," but, for example, "librarians convey information through personal contact."

Personal Benefits

The other component of the faculty status model is the benefits aspect. Faculty status is seen as entailing certain benefits; the logical development is this: faculty enjoy certain benefits and librarians with faculty status will also enjoy those benefits. The assumed corollary is that non-faculty members (particularly administrators) do not enjoy those benefits and librarians without faculty status do not enjoy those benefits. (The benefits of faculty status most often mentioned are higher salaries, greater academic freedom, greater collegiality among librarians and between librarians and faculty, and greater job satisfaction and lower stress.)[15]

To determine the validity of the above assumptions, three questions must be answered: Do faculty have these benefits? Do librarians with faculty status have these benefits? Do librarians without faculty status lack these benefits?

The major method of researching benefits is the simple descriptive study: How much pay or academic freedom do librarians, administrators, and faculty actually receive? How much collegiality, satisfaction, or stress is entailed in each job? Problems may arise in two areas of benefits analysis: data collection (for salaries and academic freedom) and variable definition (for collegiality, satisfaction, and stress).

Salaries

The definition of "salary" is relatively straightforward: a salary is a specific sum of money tendered by the institution to the individual. Because some institutions consider salaries a private matter, however many studies must rely on public data or data obtained by surveying practitioners.

One study using public data is that of Richard Meyer.[16] Meyer showed that salaries of faculty status librarians at Clemson University were statistically indistinguishable from faculty in most fields and that the salaries of librarians at 14 other faculty status institutions were comparable to those at Clemson. He concluded that faculty status had the effect of raising librarians' salaries to classroom-level faculty.

Judith Hegg surveyed librarians in four states (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska) and found that salaries were significantly higher in faculty status institutions.[17] On the other hand, Kompart and DiFelice's analysis of 36 surveys of librarians with faculty status found that reported salaries were generally lower than those of faculty, especially when length of contract (11 or 12 month, versus 9 month) was considered.[18] Another survey by Karen Smith et al. found salaries for tenured librarians only slightly higher than untenured librarians.[19]

Finally, one can reexamine a report done by Thomas English on specific economic benefits at ARL libraries divided by faculty status.[20] The chi-square test of association shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the two types of institutions in conferring most benefits investigated (pension, travel funds, research leaves, and sabbatical leaves). The only significant differences were that faculty status institutions were more likely to provide research funds, and non-faculty status institutions were more likely to provide tuition benefits.

Again, the logical chain is: faculty salaries are higher than those of librarians or administrators. Having faculty status will thus give librarians the benefit of higher salaries, equal to faculty. This assertation is supported by the research of Meyer and Hegg, but disputed by the work of Krompart and DiFelice, Smith, and English. In addition to this disagreement, two other problems limit the usefulness of past studies for validating the faculty status model: inter-institutional variance was not ruled out and salary data for administrators were not collected.

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is generally defined as the absence of external pressure designed to shape or change one's academic and ideological choices. Collecting data on this benefit can be problematic. If overt challenges to academic freedom, demonstrated by lawsuits, is the measure, the issue appears to be largely symbolic. For faculty, Sandra Holbrook and James Hearn found only 25 federal appellate court and Supreme Court decisions from the period 1957-1982 which involved academic freedom.[21] None of the cases concerned libraries. Measured in terms of frequency of mention, academic freedom is weakly represented in library literature. Patricia Rice found only 13 items published from 1956-1975 that mentioned academic freedom; for all but one, academic freedom was only one of a number of points raised.[22] Rice speculated that academic freedom is lost in the greater library profession's concern with "intellectual freedom." Gemma DeVinney pointed out that academic freedom is often seen by academic librarians as secondary to the freedom to develop library collections that will enable faculty and students to exercise their academic freedom.[23]

These speculations can be tested only through an examination of more subtle challenges to academic freedom than those resulting in lawsuits. One could, for example, conduct a perceptions study, comparing the relative perceived academic freedom of tenured faculty status librarians, untenured faculty-track librarians, and non-faculty librarians. Or one could examine challenges to library materials selection at faculty status and non-faculty status institutions, copying public and school library studies. Such studies have not yet appeared, rendering the academic freedom issue a weak argument for faculty status.

Satisfaction and Stress

Measuring job satisfaction and stress is more difficult than measuring salaries or number of lawsuits, but many research studies have addressed this issue for faculty, administrators, or librarians. Most of these studies focus on identifying causal variables. For faculty, Walter Gmelch et at. studied role definition, time constraints, and student interaction (among other variables); Larry Albertson and Dona Kagan examined dispositional stress; and George Richard and Thomas Krieshok compared stress and strain across faculty rank and gender.[24] For administrators, Carla Rasch et al. studied role-based versus task-based stressors.[25] For librarians, Miluse Soudek examined instructional esprit and organizational behavior (among other variables); Bette Ann Stead and Richard Scammell studied the relationship of role conflict and role clarity with job satisfaction.[26]

The problem with using these studies for the purpose at hand is that comparing their findings is difficult. For instance, do faculty members have less stress than administrators? Do librarians

with faculty status have more satisfaction than librarians without faculty status? A few studies, however, have compared groups: Robert Brown el al. showed that faculty had more stress team student-affairs staff on "role overload" and "responsibility" factors, while student-affairs staff had more "role insufficiency" stress.[27] John Olsgaard and F. William Summers compared faculty and administrators (deans and directors' in library schools.[28] Each group had different sources of stress; for administrators they were budget, faculty, and accreditation; for faculty, they were tenure and promotion, university administration, and the dean. On the other hand, Robert Blackburn et al. found no difference between university faculty and administrators on overall job satisfaction or job strain,[29] and Robert Boice et al. found that librarians and faculty had very similar time constraint complaints and patterns.[30]

One of the few studies to compare faculty status librarians with non-faculty status librarians on stress and satisfaction was that of Judith Hegg. While she found no differences in overall job satisfaction between the two groups, she did find significant differences on 6 (of 20) component dimensions. Librarians with faculty status had lower satisfaction on ability utilization, achievement, creativity, independence, responsibility, and working conditions. She hypothesized that faculty status librarians compared themselves to faculty and were dissatisfied.[31] Clearly, more comparative studies are needed to validate this particular benefits argument.

Collegiality

Collegiality is even harder to measure than stress and satisfaction, because defining and determining the "psychology" of an organization is more challenging than doing so for an individual. Once again, however, research is needed to confirm the argument that faculty are more collegial than administrators, and faculty status librarians are more collegial than non-faculty status librarians. In a single-group study, Bruce Harshbarger examined shared governance (among other factors) influencing faculty's commitment to an institution.[32] In a comparative study, Alan Bare found that work by administrators was organized mechanistically, while faculty put a greater emphasis on consultative leadership.[33]

Several library-oriented studies have yielded suggestive findings. Peter Olevnik compared faculty status and non-faculty status libraries on a bureaucracy-collegiality scale and found no association between the status accorded librarians and the type of organizational climate.[34] Dorothy Cieslicki's case study of Dickinson College appears to suggest the same lack of association.[35] On the other hand, two reviews of surveys, by Page Ackerman and by Janet Krompart and Aara DiFelice, found that librarians at faculty status institutions generally achieved collegiality at the institutional level, participating in college-wide governance with the same rights as teaching faculty.[36]

These studies suggest that faculty status librarians may experience less collegiality within the library than they do in the larger academic community, which in turn suggests that faculty status researchers should measure the degree of collegiality experienced by all parties at a university-wide level.

Problems with Past Research

This review of research addressing the personal benefits argument suggests several problem areas in the faculty status model. One assumed "faculty benefit" was found in smaller-than-imagined proportions (freedom from stress); another was found among librarians as well (collegiality); a third was nebulously defined and seldom measured (academic freedom); and a fourth yielded stubbornly mixed results (salaries). In sum, opinion pieces and other editorial writings based on the benefit assumptions of the model have weak or little demonstrated support in descriptive studies.

Institutional Benefits

A final argument for faculty status rests on the idea that having faculty status confers a benefit beyond the individual. Three components to this idea are: (1) that faculty status aids in the attraction and retention of librarians, (2) that faculty status makes a better library, and (3) that faculty status makes a better institution.[37]

Attraction and Retention

The attraction and retention component can be measured by answering three questions: What are the factors involved in faculty attraction and retention? Are they applicable to librarians? Are librarians more attracted to and better retained by faculty status institutions?

William Weiler and Bruce Harshbarger both studied the reasons that faculty leave institutions, finding personal factors and salaries to be important, as they have been shown to be in librarian studies.[38] Terje Manger and Ole-Johan Eikeland, on the other hand, found that salary had no significant influence on faculty retention, instead finding "collegial relations" to be the most important predictive factor.[39] Arden White and Nelda Rae Hernandez studied faculty in counselor education programs: only 8 percent of those leaving an academic position took another academic position; the rest retired, died, or left teaching.[40] These data would be especially useful to compare to librarian retention statistics, because librarians, like counselor education professionals, can leave faculty status institutions not only for non-faculty status institutions but also for nonacademic positions.

Unfortunately, little direct research on the effects of faculty status on attraction and retention has been carried out. (Janet Krompart and Aara DiFelice's review of surveys noted the absence of data on retention.)[41] A study by Joseph Jackson and R. Wilburn Clouse of classified ads in the Chronicle of Higher Education for mention of tenure yielded little meaningful data.[42] Of the administrators surveyed by English, 67 percent reported that recruitment concerns had been a factor in deciding to implement faculty status, but the survey did not elicit the results of the decision.[43]

A Better Library

Turning to the next point, it would be a powerful argument for faculty status to say that it resulted in a better library. This argument, however, requires a definition for "better library"---

which has proven difficult to establish. Robert Sewell, in assessing the benefits of faculty status at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, points out that in 1981-82, the U of I Library added more volume; per staff member than any other ARL library.[44] Smith's survey of tenured librarians (by definition, possessing faculty status) found that both professional involvement and job responsibilities ha, l increased with tenure.[45] Largely, however, this is an untouched area.

A Better Institution

A related argument for faculty status for librarians is that it benefits the parent institution. Once again, this has been difficult to demonstrate in research. Bruce Fleury argued that faculty status for librarian; results in better learning for student; because faculty status librarians help wean professors from lecture-textbook-required reading instructional methods, which do not contribute to critical thinking.[46] Guy Lyle's thesis that president.; are concerned with the symbolic effect of library policy on the college's reputation, might be said to support the argument for faculty status.[47] Administrators surveyed by English, however, disagreed: 60 percent found faculty status to be of "no advantage" to the institution, 34 percent found it to be of "some advantage," and 6 percent "considerable advantage.[48]

In a study that directly addressed the institutional benefits argument, Richard Meyer attempted to evaluate whether the requirements for faculty status diverted librarians from assisting faculty and, thus, negatively impacted institutional research productivity (as measured by the ratio of doctoral degrees to other degrees awarded).[49] He asserted that faculty status alone did not adversely affect "productivity," but that the number of articles published by librarians did. He concluded that "when faculty status requires librarians to publish, the diversion of their energy shows up in lost research productivity by other faculty as measured by doctorates awarded."[50] Unfortunately, Meyer's study has two fundamental flaws. The first is asserting a causal relationship based upon correlations. The second is the questionable selection of the doctoral degree ratio as a proxy for "productivity."

Problems with Past Research

Given the weak or nonexistent support for the institutional benefits argument, and the presence of contradictory evidence, librarians should hesitate before promoting faculty status on the grounds that it will help their institution. They may be not only overly optimistic in this assertion, but demonstrably wrong.

Alternatives

Taken together, the studies reviewed here do not support the traditional arguments underlying the faculty status model. The model is founded on an assumed equivalence between librarians and teaching faculty, an assumed lack of equivalence between librarians and administrators/staff, and the assumed benefits of faculty status for librarians, their libraries, and their institutions. None of the elements of this model is clearly supported by research within librarianship or higher education.

Research and writing based upon this model have been produced for 50-plus years. It is unlikely that one more study, one more examination, will suddenly supply the missing foundations. This leaves two not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives.

Selecting Significant Components

The first is to abandon the fight for faculty status as such. This need not be a negative option. Researchers and editorialists could reexamine the constituent components of faculty status to determine which are worth fighting for (and can be empirically supported). For example, if faculty can arrange their own work schedules, can or should librarians do the same? Does faculty status increase the productivity of librarians? Decrease job-related stress?

This deliberately fragmented approach permits more flexibility than the traditional approach to the faculty status issue. On some campuses, for example, librarian participation in faculty senates may be viewed as essential (or worth fighting for), while on others it may be seen as less important.

Building New Theories

While this first alternative steps forward from the conception of faculty status to its effects, the second alternative steps backward and looks at its theory. The traditional theories that serve as a framework for the model examined here are not the only possibilities. Alternatives exist and may well prove more fruitful and useful in organizing research and thinking on faculty status for librarians. In particular, both conventional organizational theory and feminist/alternative theories present possible approaches.

In organizational theory, two common behavioral "frames" have already been used to examine faculty status--the structural and the human resources.[51] The structural or bureaucratic model focuses on proper job definition (behind the "roles" arguments) and on the goals of the organization (behind "institutional benefits"). The human resources model focuses on the goals and needs of the individual in relation to those of the organization (behind "personal benefits").

Political and symbolic models, however, have not yet been used in this regard. For example, researchers could look further than the question of whether faculty status increases collegiality to whether it increases librarians' impact on institutional governance. (David Sparks alluded to this aspect by arguing that the demand for collegiality inherent in faculty status puts a strain on power relations both in the library and in the university.)[52] A political analysis may reveal that additional variables, such as institutional size, are important.[53]

Symbolic theories may already covertly underpin many of the pro-faculty status arguments. Symbolic theory might be stated thus: faculty status has importance in addition to or instead of the direct causal relationships assumed by human resources theory (faculty status causes happier librarians), structural theory (faculty status advances the goals of the organization), and political theory (faculty status helps librarians to compete in the university). From the symbolic perspective, a denial of faculty status to librarians may be a denial of the importance of the

library or the work of librarians. Librarians, therefore, may be viewed as seeking faculty status to incorporate themselves within the positive symbolic power enjoyed by teaching faculty,

Feminist research, or gender-sensitive analysis, may also prove a valuable approach. In 1963 Guy Lyle argued the reasonableness of faculty status (including a higher salary, sabbaticals, tenure, and appointments to college committees) for only select librarians.

I am all for the head librarian asserting the rights and privileges I have enumerated above and for the staff staying out of it. Library staffs which become deeply involved in problems of their own status tend to become obsessed with matters that are essentially personal. Librarianship is tyrannical enough without adding to it the strain of having to act like a professor.[54]

At the time of writing library directors were typically male and library staff typically female. Lyle does not use the words "men" and "women," but the logic of his assertions hinges on the assumptions that faculty status is a "strain" to staff but not to the director, and that faculty status is a "right and privilege" for the director but an "essentially personal" issue for staff.

The roles of men and women in the library profession--particularly the overrepresentation of men in administrative ranks---and the history and sociology of librarianship as a female-dominated profession are issues frequently addressed in library literature. Lacking, however, is an application of a gender-based theory to the issue of faculty status.

Conclusion

The traditional model, then, appears to be both unsupported by the evidence and excessively narrow. Abandoning a rigid adherence to the traditional model of faculty status and widening research and editorial perspectives to include alternative explanations and theories will provide a fresh beginning from which to examine the still-important issue of the status of librarians in academia.

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50. Ibid., p. 192.

51. See, for example, Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988); and Gareth Morgan, Images of Organization (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1986).

52. Sparks, "Academic Librarianship"; see also Mary Biggs, "Sources of Tension and Conflict Between Librarians and Faculty," Journal of Higher Education 52 (March-April 1981): 182-201.

53. See Hegg, "Faculty Status," who found that staff at larger libraries less often had faculty status.

54. Lyle, The President, p. 31.