COLLECTIVE BARGAINING, FACULTY ASSOCIATIONS, LIBRARIES

Pushing ahead: Advancing collective bargaining rights in the library

By Jennifer Dekker | From the Fall 2020 Issue

Well-resourced libraries are core to advancing the goals of the academy and the work of faculty and students. Often overlooked due to their small numbers, what challenges do librarians and archivists face in the workplace and how can we ensure they are supported?

Universities have an important role advancing the public interest. However, the contributions and concerns of academic librarians and archivists are often overlooked in such discussions, even in faculty unions. This may owe to our small numbers and distinctive responsibilities, but, despite this, we remain committed to advancing our rights to better defend the vital work of the university library. How do we accomplish this? Through collective bargaining.

Librarians and archivists work on behalf of communities to ensure reliable and fair infrastructure for delivering scholarly and educational resources; we make these available to the greatest number of people for the best cost and terms that we can negotiate; we carefully analyse and describe our collections so that those beyond our immediate communities can find unique and important materials; we build and preserve research collections; we protect intellectual freedom; and we are actively engaged in pushing back against unethical commercial publishers that prioritize profit over education and scholarship.

In this work, we have faced many challenges in recent years, including reductions in professional staffing, redistribution of professional work to lower-paid staff, outsourcing, and the implementation of flawed performance metrics.

This article outlines how faculty unions can proactively ensure that librarians and archivists have the conditions we need to facilitate our work. Many of these concerns are shared with professors and other academic staff because, in a highly interdependent system like a university, challenges to one group often have repercussions for others. With that in mind, this article provides a perspective based on my experience as an academic librarian in Ontario.

Governance: Who makes the decisions anyway?

Governance is concerned with decision-making, authority, and power. Who controls the university's resources? How are resources generated? Is control well-executed? Is decision-making shared with those who have

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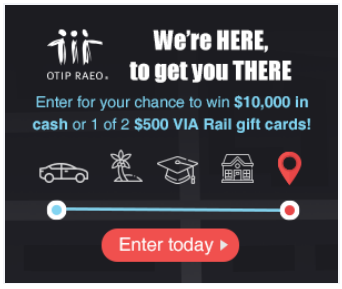

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expertise in educating students and performing scholarly activities, or is it primarily a management function?

Ontario universities are typically bicameral in their governance structures, meaning that management—delegated by a university's board of governors—shares some power over a limited number of resources with the rank and file, meaning professors, librarians, archivists, and other academic staff.

Access to decision-making is foundational because it ensures that librarians and archivists have meaningful control over our work. Like professors, librarians and archivists have expertise that management often lacks, as well as objectives that provide a counterbalance to those of the administration. Unlike management, the interests of rank and file workers go far beyond increasing institutional efficiency and intensifying control over university budgets. We express perspectives that favour the educational interests of students and the public, which, in the heavily commercialized sphere of scholarly production and dissemination, are perspectives that are becoming more and more important.

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There are substantial challenges with increasing governance rights, but among academic librarians and archivists, awareness, interest, and action toward this goal are growing. Recent works on the topic of library councils—equivalent to faculty councils—mirror the expansion in consciousness, with many demonstrating the importance of these councils being inclusive and accountable governing bodies that oversee library planning, policy, and budgets.[1] Unions and staff associations should pay special attention to this issue, as librarians and archivists have difficulty making progress on governance without the support of faculty and other professionals at the bargaining table. Is there a library council established in your collective agreement? How does it function? Do librarians and archivists feel it provides an authentic venue for shared governance? If not, can the union negotiate a stronger voice for librarians and archivists?

Complement: Pushing back against outsourcing

One of the most significant issues facing librarians and archivists at Ontario bargaining tables is the protection of our professional work. Like the full-time faculty complement, the number of librarians and archivists hired in universities is not increasing, even though student enrolment has grown significantly over the past decade. Unlike faculties, investment in academic libraries has been declining for decades. To compensate, professional responsibilities such as reference services, cataloguing, collection development, and even information literacy are now assigned to support staff, students, contract employees, and outsourced to private companies and extramural organizations. Contract negotiations should focus on increasing investment in academic libraries and maintaining the complement of librarians and archivists, ensuring that replacements are hired when people retire or leave the employer.

Outsourcing in academic libraries is widespread. Employers have devised clever substitutes for hiring librarians and archivists, especially when innovation is the order of the day (this usually implies doing something new, without increasing staffing). Among the many examples, collaborative projects are a growing concern. These often rely on for-profit companies and contract staff
to accomplish tasks previously performed by locally-hired librarians and archivists. Readers may be familiar with Omni, a new search platform shared by 14 Ontario university libraries. Omni is a commercial product created by a private company based in Israel called Ex Libris. In 2015, an enormous profit-oriented content provider, Proquest, acquired Ex Libris—I mention this detail because, in addition to concerns about outsourcing academic work to commercial entities, we should be wary of search bias in Omni that may push ProQuest results above other content.

Although academic libraries have relied on outside technology providers in the past, what is different today is the widespread, intentional, and simultaneous adoption of private technology to replace the work of academic librarians in so many Ontario universities. As the Ontario Council of University Libraries frames it, "radical collaboration" helps libraries "face the challenges of today – the transformation of scholarly communication and higher education, rapid developments in information technology, and declining or limited resources."

These collaborative projects mean that employers hire fewer librarians for collection development and cataloguing. Academic libraries also spend less on acquisitions, while relying more heavily on support staff for inter-library loans rather than purchasing material and having it on site. This strategy works in tandem with mandates in many university libraries that give preference to digital collections, meaning that fewer physical items are acquired. Whether digital content is actually preferred by students and faculty is debatable; a 2015 study by linguist Naomi S. Baron found that 92 per cent of US college students stated that they preferred reading print books to reading online. However, student, faculty, and librarian preference seem to matter little, as budgets decline and commercial contracts are an easy way to continue to provide collections without the obligations of hiring librarians and archivists.

Related to complement, some faculty association bargaining units in Ontario also include archivists, but this is far from universal. Unfortunately for many unions, changes to the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* in the 1990s made it very difficult to modify the scope of bargaining units to include new groups of members like archivists. This is an important issue—librarians and archivists perform similar work, but archivists may not have academic freedom if they are not members of a faculty association. If archivists can be fired for critiquing the employer or otherwise exercising academic freedom, this can actually weaken academic freedom for librarians

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and erode potential for solidarity between the two groups.

If your faculty association does not include archivists, what can you do to protect their academic freedom? Can you integrate them into your bargaining unit? Although it may not be possible to include a new group in the union, it might be possible to have archivist positions integrated into the bargaining unit through the librarian stream. That way, archivists can benefit from the intellectual and academic freedoms that are necessary to their work.

Deskilling: How do we protect expertise?

With the "performance" funding model introduced in the 2019 Ontario Budget, hundreds of millions of dollars in university funding is now threatened and could be cut. This reckless funding model will tie 80 per cent of university funding to market-based metrics and make year-to-year funding for universities far more difficult to plan for.

Since outsourcing and collaborative projects will not save universities enough money, and libraries are often perceived as an endless expense rather than good investments, professional librarian job descriptions are now under attack. Librarians who were previously specialists are now supporting a broad swath of faculty and departments with no regard for our educational backgrounds and expertise. This deskilling not only affects the quality of our working lives, but the quality of our library collections. It makes it challenging for students and faculty to access expert help when they need it.

Faculty unions should ensure that employers do not have the power to arbitrarily modify librarian and archivist job descriptions by ensuring that employees have significant input when their job descriptions are revised, and that our collective agreements have strong language that protects us from these changes. Library restructuring projects are often the red herring leading to changes in responsibilities, and grievances are rarely effective after the fact. Unions should be engaged from the start and should consider appointing a negotiator to work on behalf of librarians when restructuring is initiated. This could prevent individuals from being bullied into accepting changes that we know are not beneficial to our ourselves and our communities.

Performance metrics: How do you quantify obsession?

Elements of neoliberalism in higher education, including "performance" metrics, external ranking fetishes, and obsessions with quantification, have had deleterious effects on the working conditions of Ontario's academic librarians—just as they have on the working conditions of professors and other academic staff.

Recently, a few Canadian universities introduced an academic benchmarking tool called Uniforum (developed by private Australian firm Cubane Consulting). This tool has been imposed on librarians, archivists, and support staff at UBC, the University of Alberta, and at York University, as well as librarians at the University of Toronto. McMaster University also has a contract with the company. Different but equally oppressive tools for managing and measuring our work have been encouraged, including at the University of Ottawa where librarians and archivists were recently asked to capture all interactions with students, faculty, and the public in 15-minute increments.

Courageous colleagues have challenged these managerialist practices, but we must have the broader support of our unions and strength at the bargaining table to fight these initiatives. For example, librarians at the University of Toronto, supported by their faculty association, secured the settlement of a grievance stating that librarians at U of T will not be subject to Uniforum. Considering that Cubane has been applied to professor performance in countries outside of Canada, it would be wise to strengthen collective agreements now—not just for librarians and archivists—but for all members of the faculty association.

Scholarly activity: Who decides what research is important?

Although academic librarians and archivists support others in their research, we also require opportunities to engage in scholarly activities that have both personal and professional benefits. Scholarly activities are an important part of maintaining academic competence, sustaining interest in our work, expanding our professional and intellectual networks, and informing the expansion of and investment in library collections.

A major issue is that we frequently lack the time to develop independent research plans in between sabbatical leaves. Knowing this, administrators will suggest projects that would be useful to them. Consequently, many academic librarians fall into the trap of performing scholarship in the service of the employer.

Interestingly, research published in the 2013 article "Academic Librarians and Research: A Study of Canadian Library Administrator Perspectives" concluded that the head librarians at Canadian universities felt that academic librarians were not engaging enough in research. However, the paper neglected to discuss what types of research administrators prioritized. If what is most frequently encouraged primarily supports institutional goals, it is understandable that many professionals might not want to engage. There is room to improve many of our collective agreements so that librarians and archivists have increased opportunities, intellectual freedom, and support for scholarly activities. Can your faculty association negotiate a month each year for librarians and archivists to engage in scholarly activities? Is your collective agreement clear that librarians and archivists have the academic and intellectual freedom to pursue their own priorites and goals?

Salary: How do we address inequitable pay?

Academic librarian and archivist work has long been underpaid and undervalued compared to other male-dominated professions that require similar levels of education. A recent study by the Ontario Pay Equity Office, "Occupational Segregation, Skills, and the Gender Wage Gap," theorized that jobs emphasizing traditional

"female" attributes—such as interpersonal and communication skills—are negatively correlated to salary. This might explain why the gender pay gap persists in our field. A 2019 attempt to capture and promote the "competencies" of Canadian academic librarians by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries may have inadvertently overemphasized these same soft skills that seem to keep wages low.

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The salaries for academic librarians and archivists do not adequately compensate for the education costs required to become professionally qualified—tuition at U of T is now $12,000.00 a year for the Master of Information program. Low pay may also contribute to the lack of racial and socio-economic diversity in the profession, as suggested by Erin Schreiner in her 2017 article "Librarians and the Gender Pay Gap." Considering that librarians and archivists are a relatively small number of members in any bargaining unit, can your faculty association negotiate salaries that are on par with professors or develop a plan for achieving pay equity?

Conclusion

I have outlined some key issues that unions should consider when preparing collective bargaining for librarian and archivist members. Among them:

- Including librarians and archivists in the lead up to bargaining, both through ongoing consultation and, potentially, by including a representative on the bargaining team.
- Strengthening governance as a counterbalance to the rigid hierarchies and administrative authority that pervade academic library management.
- Protecting librarian and archivist complement and work to ensure our continued existence.
- Ensuring that archivists are included in bargaining units and that they have access to academic freedom.
- Fighting arbitrary changes that make librarian and archivist job descriptions more generic. This disadvantages students trying to access specialized supports and libraries and archives working to develop strong collections.
- Maintaining focus on improving collective agreement language to ensure that librarians and archivists can engage in scholarly activity and receive fair compensation for their work.

It is often said that an injury to one is an injury to all. In parallel, strengthening one group of workers, such as librarians and archivists, will strengthen others as well. We know that students, faculty, and the public rely on our labour. Protecting our work and enhancing our ability to defend the public interest in the ways that I have outlined will have benefits beyond our own numbers and collective bargaining is how we can achieve this.

Jennifer Dekker is a librarian at the University of Ottawa.

The article includes archivists, but archivists are not equally affected by all the issues covered. When I use academic librarians without including archivists, it is intentional.

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1. See Leona Jacobs, "Library Councils in Canadian Academic Libraries: A Summary of Responses" (Lethbridge, AB: University of Lethbridge, 2008), https://opus.uleth.ca/handle/10133/564; Canadian Association of University Teachers, "Librarians' Councils" (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of University Teachers, May 2014), https://www.caut.ca/about-us/caut-policy/lists/caut-policy-statements/policy-statement-on-library-councils; Tim Ribaric, "Collegial Self-Governance for Professional Librarians: The Establishment and Evolution of Library Council at Brock University," in *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice, 2014), 277–87; Patti Ryan, "'This Is Our Time:' Towards a Library Council at York University Libraries," November 2015, https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/30546; Eva Revitt and Sean Luyk, "Library Councils and Governance in Canadian University Libraries: A Critical Review," *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (2016): 60–79; Canadian Association of University Teachers, "Academic Status and Governance for Librarians" (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of University Teachers, November 2018 para. 3.3), https://www.caut.ca/about-us/caut-policy/lists/caut-policy-statements/policy-statement-on-academic-status-and-governance-for-librarians-at-canadian-universities-and-colleges; Eva Revitt and Sean Luyk, "The Role of Library Councils in Canadian Higher Education: An Exploratory Study," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue Canadienne d'enseignement Supérieur* 49, no. 1 (2019): 140–58; and others.

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