

Individual and Collective Action: Advocating for Academic Librarians' Rights from Within and Outside of the Bargaining Unit

Melanie Mills, Western University

Emily Drabinski, Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies

Abstract

Today, the majority of academic librarians working in the post-secondary sector in Canada and the United States have academic status. These librarians are typically hired into roles that include pathways to permanence (i.e., continuing- or tenure-track positions), workloads that formally recognize research and service, and access to benefits on par with faculty, including research and study leaves. Librarians in these settings are often represented by their university or college faculty bargaining unit. Some, although not all, are unionized. On many campuses, librarians are included in the same collective bargaining unit as teaching and research faculty, while in others, librarians have their own bargaining unit. Still yet, there are college and university settings where librarians are not recognized as academic staff and as such they must actively advocate for the rights and recognition that so many of their peers across North America enjoy. This advocacy work takes place at both the individual and collective levels.

The essay shares the experiences of one Canadian and one American academic librarian who each offer their own, distinct perspectives of having held bargaining unit librarian appointments with academic status and permanence, and later, appointments as library administrators. As is the case with their faculty peers, librarians typically relinquish, formally and informally, their active membership in and representation by the faculty association and/or collective bargaining unit when they take on administrative posts in academia, especially at the senior leadership level. In this essay, the authors offer suggested strategies to help academic librarians resist corporate practices that erode their individual and collective autonomy and employment stability, and which are misaligned with academic librarians' core professional values and principles (e.g., academic and intellectual freedom, uncensored access to information, collegial governance). The experiences of these two librarians, who have each engaged in advocacy work from both within and outside of the collective bargaining unit, will be explored in relation to the wider context of collective action, unionization, and the overall employment conditions of academic librarians in Canada and the United States.

Keywords academic librarians; collective action; labour action

Action individuelle et collective : défendre les droits des bibliothécaires universitaires à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de l'unité de négociation

Melanie Mills, Université Western

Emily Drabinski, Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies

Résumé

Aujourd'hui, la majorité des bibliothécaires universitaires travaillant dans le secteur postsecondaire au Canada et aux États-Unis ont un statut universitaire. Ces bibliothécaires sont généralement embauchés dans des postes qui incluent des voies vers la permanence (c.-à-d. des postes permanents ou menant à la permanence), avec des charges de travail qui reconnaissent officiellement la recherche et le service, et l'accès à des avantages équivalents à ceux du personnel académique, y compris des congés de recherche et d'études. Les bibliothécaires dans ces contextes sont souvent représentés par l'unité de négociation de leur université ou de leur collège. Certains, mais pas tous, sont syndiqués. Sur de nombreux campus, les bibliothécaires font partie de la même unité de négociation collective que les professeurs et les chercheurs, tandis que sur d'autres, les bibliothécaires ont leur propre unité de négociation. Pourtant, dans certains collèges et universités, les bibliothécaires ne sont pas reconnus comme des membres du personnel académique et, en tant que tels, ils doivent activement défendre les droits et la reconnaissance dont jouissent tant de leurs pairs en Amérique du Nord. Ce travail de défense s'effectue à la fois au niveau individuel et au niveau collectif.

L'essai présente les expériences d'une bibliothécaire universitaire canadienne et d'une bibliothécaire universitaire américaine qui offrent chacune leur propre point de vue sur le fait d'avoir occupé un poste de bibliothécaire au sein d'une unité de négociation avec un statut universitaire et une permanence, et plus tard, un poste d'administratrice de bibliothèque. Comme c'est le cas pour leurs pairs enseignants, les bibliothécaires renoncent généralement, officiellement et officieusement, à leur adhésion active et à leur représentation par l'association du personnel académique et/ou l'unité de négociation collective lorsqu'ils occupent des postes administratifs dans le monde universitaire, en particulier au niveau de la haute direction. Dans cet essai, les auteures proposent des stratégies pour aider les bibliothécaires universitaires à résister aux pratiques du monde administratif qui érodent leur autonomie individuelle et collective et la stabilité de leur emploi, et qui ne sont pas conformes aux valeurs et principes professionnels fondamentaux des bibliothécaires universitaires (par exemple, la liberté académique et intellectuelle, l'accès non censuré à l'information, la gouvernance collégiale). Les expériences de ces deux bibliothécaires, qui se sont engagées dans des activités de défense des droits à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de l'unité de négociation collective, seront examinées dans le contexte plus large de l'action collective, de la syndicalisation et des conditions d'emploi générales des bibliothécaires universitaires au Canada et aux États-Unis.

Mots-clés bibliothécaires universitaires; action collective; action syndicale

Introduction

Working as a librarian in higher education has never been an uncomplicated pursuit. Both the profession at-large and practitioners alike have long had to contend with widely held and predominantly inaccurate assumptions about our work, our qualifications, and our capacity to engage in teaching, research, and service deeply and meaningfully. The degree to which library and information professionals must confront these challenges on college and university campuses varies considerably from institution to institution and is influenced in no small measure by the formal and structural recognition afforded, or not, to librarians as academic staff.

Many academic librarians working in the post-secondary sector in Canada and the United States today hold academic status appointments and are represented by their college or university faculty association. It is estimated that most of North America's academic librarians work in environments where librarians hold academic status (Fleming-May & Douglas, 2014; Walters, 2016). With structural recognition of their role and function as full partners and active contributors to the academic enterprise (e.g., research and service formally recognized as components of their workload, access to benefits including research and study leave), academic librarians participate in institutional and collegial governance on their campuses and are actively engaged in and directly contribute to the core missions of teaching and learning, and research and scholarship.

That said, there are campuses in Canada and the United States where academic librarians are not recognized as academic staff, but instead "occupy [the] liminal space between faculty and clerical staff" (Leebaw & Logsdon, 2020, para. 3). In these increasingly neoliberal settings, academic librarians must navigate the rigid hierarchical structures and organizational cultures of colleges and universities that function counter to the foundational principles and values of librarianship (American Library Association, 2024; Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians, 2012). Imagine trying to build and promote a library collection, or design library curriculum, programming, or services in-step with faculty peers whose work and contributions are constructed on the foundational premise of academic and intellectual freedom, but absent the very protections those freedoms afford. "Librarians and archivists need academic freedom (...) for the same reasons as other academics, including (...) in the exercise of their professional judgment" (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2021, p. 3).

Over and above these existing systemic barriers, structural restrictions to academic librarians' ability to deliver information resources, services, and

programming are on the rise in both Canada and the United States. For example, in some regions in the United States today, librarians' work that is connected to equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and social justice is being explicitly restricted and outright censored, legislatively (Lederman, 2023; Woodcock, 2023). This is a deeply concerning trend that runs counter to recent advances toward greater equity and inclusivity in the profession, including revisions to core competences and LIS education guidelines as identified by leading national and international library associations (American Library Association, 2021; Chu et al., 2022).

Further complicating the already complex environment in which academic librarians practice are career progression considerations for academic librarians who wish to move into formal managerial or leadership roles, especially those at the senior leadership level. To move into the administrative ranks, academic librarians must typically relinquish their seat in the faculty association or union. While giving up one's place in the bargaining unit is common and a well-established practice for academic administrators, this condition of participation in higher education leadership restricts library leaders' own academic and intellectual freedom and in doing so, their ability to directly support the full and holistic practice of librarianship on their campuses. Library administrators who would otherwise publicly support advocacy efforts aligned with the freedom to read, for example, might be encouraged by academic administrators outside of the library to allow considerations such as recruitment and donor relations to take precedence over robust campus dialogue and education related to censorship and inclusion in library collections and programming. Where academic librarians might take a firm stance on privacy and surveillance in the library's physical and digital spaces, college and university leadership may prioritize campus and cyber security efforts deployed across all areas of campus operations, physical and digital, with little to no appetite to consider librarians' disciplinary knowledge and expertise on how such interventions infringe upon individuals' rights to privacy.

The following observational essay shares the experiences of two academic librarians, one in Canada and one in the United States, who have each experienced working as professional academic librarians and as library administrators, both from within and beyond the boundaries of the bargaining unit. The authors share their perspectives on having held academic status librarian appointments with permanence (i.e., tenure or continuing appointment) as well as appointments as academic library administrators outside of unions. With a focus on individual and collective action, suggested strategies are offered to resist organizational practices that erode academic librarians' autonomy, academic, and intellectual freedom.

About the Authors

Melanie Mills is an Associate Librarian at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada, where she has worked as an academic librarian for twenty years. Librarians at Western are members of the University of Western Ontario Faculty Association, Librarians & Archivists (UWOFA-LA), an independent bargaining unit associated with the wider faculty association on campus. In her early career, Melanie was an outreach and liaison librarian, before moving into formal administrative roles within the UWOFA-LA bargaining unit. In 2016, she left Western University to become a library director at a small, liberal arts affiliate college (Huron University College). At this institution, academic librarians are not recognized as academic staff. Though at Huron the role of 'chief librarian' (i.e., library director) is a full and voting member of Academic Council, along with "the President, the Deans, all full professors, assistant professors, and other members of the full-time faculty" (Bill PR28, 2020, "Academic Council," para. 2), in practice the role is not afforded the rights, responsibilities, or academic privileges of faculty, be those within the ranks of academic administration or outside of it. Librarians at all ranks on this campus are not recognized as academic staff and are excluded from the faculty association and bargaining unit. Provisions common for librarians on most other Canadian college and university campuses, including formal recognition of and support to actively engage in research and service work, as well as access to research and study leaves, to name only a few examples, are inaccessible and structurally excluded from the employment provisions for academic librarians at this institution. In 2022, Melanie returned to Western University and to the UWOFA-LA bargaining unit after competing for a continuing (i.e., tenured) appointment as an Associate Librarian and director of the Faculty of Information & Media Studies Graduate Library.

Emily Drabinski is an Associate Professor at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies in Queens, New York. Prior to this position, Emily was an academic librarian for more than twenty years. She spent the first four years of her career at Sarah Lawrence College, a non-union private liberal arts school just north of New York City. In 2004, Emily moved to Long Island University, Brooklyn, home to the first private higher education faculty union in the United States. Following a strike in 2012, she was elected to the Executive Board of the Long Island University Faculty Federation (LIUFF), the bargaining unit for faculty and librarians, and was secretary of the union in 2016 when the faculty was locked out at the end of contract negotiations, the first such action in U.S. higher education history. Emily served a brief term as President of Long Island University Faculty Federation (LIUFF) until taking a position as a unionized library faculty

member at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She had just stepped into the role of Interim Chief Librarian, an administrative position outside the bargaining unit, when the COVID-19 pandemic began. After two years, Emily returned to her union library faculty position until joining the teaching faculty at Queens College, part of the Professional Staff Congress of CUNY, part of New York State United Teachers/American Federation of Teachers.

Our Perspectives and Experiences on Collective Action

Emily

During library school, I worked at the New York Public Library in the organization's Librarian Trainee program. In return for tuition support, I performed librarian work including staffing the reference desk, teaching computer workshops, and developing library programming for a salary significantly lower than that paid to degreed professional staff. This was where I first learned of the standard collective bargaining tactic of reducing benefits for future members of the bargaining union to secure contract wins for workers already on the job. This tactic of undercutting the future results in what are called tiered contracts, where those with seniority experience significantly better contract terms than those more recently hired. Arriving in a position where such decisions had been made significantly challenged my sense of solidarity with my union siblings.

Following itinerant and short-term positions as a looseleaf legal filer, night supervisor, and database indexer, I obtained my first professional position as a reference librarian at Sarah Lawrence College. This was a non-union position and the pay and vacation time reflected that. In my fourth year, the college experienced a small surplus and called a meeting with all faculty and staff to get feedback on how best to distribute this small pot of money. Faculty rightly pointed out that their starting salaries were well below the metro New York City market and pushed for the funds to be used to boost those numbers. As a librarian making \$20,000 less than an assistant professor with as much a right to a market-rate wage, this argument was less persuasive. When the surplus was distributed to faculty only, I went on the market for a union position.

I began my career at Long Island University, Brooklyn, with a 33% salary increase and a trebling of my annual leave. It was my first experience with the profound difference a union can make in securing equitable pay and working conditions for everyone in the bargaining unit. This is not to say the union guarantees it. LIUFF members consisted of "all professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, adjunct professors, adjunct associate professors,

adjunct assistant professors, adjunct instructors, professional librarians, guidance counselors, department chairs, and all persons teaching courses for academic credit" (Long Island University Faculty Federation, 2022, p. 4), though contingent faculty had nowhere near the workplace advantages that full-timers enjoyed. And while the collective agreement set salary floors, administration could always pay more, something they never did for librarians. At one of my first union meetings, the president included a salary grid in his report to show the numbers of individuals in a range of salary bands. One person on the faculty was paid the smallest full time faculty salary in the unit. That person was me.

In 2011, LIUFF went on strike. The primary issues were related to health care premiums and salary, typical issues in bargaining conversations. The strike was brief, lasting just three days, but one learns quickly out on the picket line. It is possible to organize a mass action, to get hundreds of people to take personally risky and expensive actions together. The contract that emerged was not enough for many of us. Another benefit of collective action is raised expectations. I wanted more.

Following the strike, I ran for secretary of the union. In my experience, librarians often find themselves in such roles, taking the minutes and typing up the agenda. This comes with the pink-collar territory. I was serving in this role in 2016 when I received an email from a library colleague on the bargaining team alerting me that we would be locked out by our employer that Friday, just before the U.S. Labor Day weekend. At the end of the week, all LIUFF members were blocked from campus, access to email and course management systems was suspended, and salary and health insurance were canceled. I was a part of the first lockout of higher education faculty in the history of the United States.

Twelve days of action followed. We planned and executed rallies and marches, conducted mutual aid events including an unemployment insurance sign up fair, and talked to each other constantly about what we wanted and how we might get it. I learned how to obtain a police permit and how to use a bullhorn to amplify my voice. (It's not automatic — you still need to project.) When the university administration finally relented, ending the lockout and agreeing to continued bargaining, I understood in a bone-deep way what collective power is, how to build it, and how to wield it. I also understood that what we can demand, and win, is directly related to the collective power we've built. That means we must always be organizing for power in order to be ready to meet the moment.

Melanie

Like Emily, I began my career with various precarious and short-term contracts. My first full time position post-MLIS was as a contractually limited and underemployed library staff member working in a faculty-based library. The role was a backfill for the liaison librarian who was serving in an interim leadership position for the year. I recognized entirely the circumstances of the opportunity: that the organization had elected not to replace the professional librarian with a term-based professional appointment but instead with a contract paraprofessional position. Although the contract offered neither the title nor pay of a professional academic librarian, the work and experience were that of an academic librarian and I was eager to gain that experience. Further, as a new graduate with substantial student debt, I didn't have the luxury of holding out for another opportunity. I needed full-time work and I needed an income. I took the job.

At the start of that one-year contract in 2003, librarians and archivists at Western University were not yet unionized nor included as members of a bargaining unit on campus. By the time my contract ended, they would certify as a union with the Ontario Labour Board, becoming their own bargaining unit. UWOFALA had its first collective agreement in place two years later.

In the early days of our inaugural and subsequent collective agreements, I became an active member of the union. I served on the bargaining unit's workload committee and later as chair and chief steward for UWOFALA, a role which included a seat on the wider faculty association's board and executive. Active engagement in service work related to the bargaining unit offered a path to become knowledgeable about the full scope of the collective agreement: how it shaped and defined working conditions for academic librarians on our campus, and to fully understand the breadth of our newly won rights and responsibilities as academic staff.

Following the end of the term of our bargaining unit's second collective agreement and after a period of contract negotiations that did not result in sufficient progress for the membership, UWOFALA went on strike in September 2011. It was the first collective action taken by academic staff on our campus and to date, remains the only time faculty association members have been on strike at Western. Although we are more than a decade out from that round of bargaining and I am only newly returned to the bargaining unit after a period of more than five years away, my own recollections about our membership's labour action in 2011 are positive.

In 2011, UWOFALA was resolved to leverage its collective power "in pursuit of members' (...) shared interests" (Oxford, 2015, para. 1). At the time, academic librarians and archivists at Western University were among the lowest paid in the

province, with their pay approximately 20% below the provincial average (Travis, 2011). Because we were already undervalued, literally and figuratively, we had very little to lose and much to gain in exercising our bargaining rights. Our labour action and the 18-day legal strike by UWOFA-LA in 2011 resulted in tangible financial investments in compensation for our members (University of Western Ontario Faculty Association, 2011). Regrettably those largely one-time investments did little to address the structural compensation inadequacies for Western's librarians and archivists and the issue of fair and reasonable compensation persists as an employment equity concern and core bargaining priority for UWOFA-LA members more than a decade later. Further, the size of our bargaining unit continues to erode. In 2011 when librarians and archivists at Western went on strike, we were 51 members strong. Today, UWOFA-LA has a membership of 44 (a reduction of 14% in the last 12 years) with no recognition of or commitment to maintaining the current complement of librarians and archivists on our campus in future. And this in a context where enrolment growth at the institution is projected to increase by 40% by the year 2030 (Western University, 2023). The need for collective action to preserve the place and power of the library in higher education on our campus has never been greater. This is a shared and sector wide concern, as data suggest that academic libraries are losing a disproportionate number of staff compared to other parts of the university (Kim, 2023; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2022).

On Deciding to Leave, and Return to the Bargaining Unit

Melanie

The decision to leave my appointment as a librarian with continuing appointment at Western University was not something I made lightly in 2016. I recognized fully the position and privilege of employment stability, of academic and intellectual freedom, and of the power of the collective that I would be sacrificing to pursue my career goals, given that librarians at Western's affiliate university colleges were not recognized as academic staff. At the same time and in that moment in my life and career, I was limited in what opportunities I could explore. I had a spouse and young children; we were all firmly established in our professional, educational, and social communities. When an opportunity to take on a permanent library director role at Huron University College arose, an opportunity that would allow me to pursue my career goals with minimal-to-no disruption to my home life, it was exceedingly compelling. As were the terms of the appointment, which immediately boosted both my salary and my personal time off by 30%.

The final consideration that cemented my decision to leave my faculty status librarian appointment for a library directorship outside of a bargaining unit pertains to the context within which I entered my library director role. During my appointment negotiations, I inquired about the academic status of librarians on campus. When I learned that librarians at Huron did not have academic status, I shared both the current state of the sector and the benefits of formally recognizing librarians as academic staff on campus; that academic status was foundational for librarians to be able to contribute fully to the core missions of teaching and learning, and research and scholarship on campus, and further, that it was a retention consideration. In response, I was able to negotiate research and service work as formal components of my appointment, despite neither being included in the scope of the role as it was initially designed. Further, although campus faculty were not unionized when I joined the institution, I was assured that if faculty organized in future, and that if it was their collective will for librarians to be included in the faculty bargaining unit, that university administration would support that direction. And with that, I left Western and my position within the UWOFA-LA bargaining unit (and union) for the administrative role of director of library and learning services at Huron.

While I enjoyed very much the full scope and accountabilities of the library directorship at an affiliate university college and felt both equipped to take on the work and to execute library operations and strategy capably, I came to understand that in taking on that appointment and in relinquishing a role with academic status, in that particular environment, that I had unwittingly forfeited the foundational conditions requisite for a holistic, values-based approach to the practice of academic librarianship. I no longer had academic or intellectual freedom and the institution's communications staff were dispatched to remind me of this. I was discouraged from and was told to direct my team not to speak publicly in open forums on campus. I was explicitly reminded of the organizational hierarchy and my place in it, and this at a time when announcements of unplanned administrative staff departures were being made routinely, and many of these impacting colleagues in administrative roles at the director level.

Assurances that had been made to me with respect to librarians' future inclusion in the faculty association were abandoned by the institution's senior leadership during the negotiations that preceded the certification of the Huron University College Faculty Association (HUCFA) as a union in February 2019 (Huron University College Faculty Association, 2023), despite faculty support for the inclusion of their academic librarian colleagues in the bargaining unit.

The cumulative impact of these experiences had a chilling effect on me personally and professionally. Absent academic status, formal recognition as academic leader, and the genuine protection of the bargaining unit, my role and the library's political standing on campus were markedly diminished, as were my confidence and capacity to fully execute the responsibilities of my position as a library administrator and professional academic librarian. I began actively pursuing opportunities on other campuses not long into my tenure at Huron. In 2022, a library director role at Western was advertised; I applied, competed for the role, and ultimately accepted an appointment at the Faculty of Information & Media Studies (FIMS). I resigned from my role at Huron, and returned to an academic status, continuing (i.e., tenured) library director appointment within the UWOFA-LA bargaining unit at Western in August of that year.

Today, I am a proud advocate for libraries and librarians and fully recognize the privilege of my position as an academic librarian and library administrator represented by a bargaining unit. I believe that advocacy for the critical work of libraries and for the contributions of library workers and academic librarians in higher education is a shared responsibility. That said, those of us fortunate enough to be in positions with academic and intellectual freedom and employment stability have a duty to lead the work of advocating, strongly, for libraries and library staff at all levels, on our campuses. This is a responsibility I will never again take for granted.

Emily

In March 2020, I agreed to step into a position as Interim Chief Librarian at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. This was my first position as an administrator and my first time out of a bargaining unit in a dozen years. Just days prior to my official start date, the COVID-19 pandemic began to hit New York City with devastating consequences. For my first official meeting, I invited colleagues to join me in my office or via video to discuss the library's response. Even though we knew a virus was circulating, most of us met in person. It's difficult to remember how little we knew then; how much uncertainty guided our decision making. Soon after, multiple staff members reported their infections. I will always regret gathering us in that room together, the last time many of us would see each other in person for more than a year.

In my management role, I was able to accomplish some things that would have been difficult from my seat as a librarian with academic status. I was authorized to make decisions about resources, so was able to ensure that my colleagues had the tools necessary to work from home, including office chairs and technology. Because I had a seat at various administrative tables, I was able to push for all library

workers to remain on the payroll during the initial months of the crisis. And, importantly, I was able to enforce the contract. In three cases, I was able to move people into different contract titles that better fit the work they did in the library. Contract enforcement is something all library administrators can and should prioritize.

The position also meant responsibility for the structure of the organization. I had inherited a hierarchical structure that had some librarians in supervisory roles directing the work of other librarians. This is a common structure in academic libraries, one that obscures the autonomy and intellectual freedom that is a hallmark of teaching faculty life. Such a reporting structure undermines the role of librarians with academic status. A small committee of librarians took on the work of developing a departmental structure that matched the structure of other academic departments on campus. This was important faculty governance work.

While the management position afforded multiple opportunities to make good things happen, there were also significant challenges to my commitments to library workers. The relationship between management and labour is a structured antagonism. While not always conflictual, that antagonism sits at the heart of the relationship. As the university moved toward reopening physical spaces, I found myself sitting between an upper administration that abruptly pushed to open the physical library in June 2021 and academic librarians and library staff demanding that we move more deliberately in line with a health and safety plan developed by a university-wide committee of library workers in contract titles. As someone in a management role, I advocated for the management position, becoming the antagonist I'd spent a decade organizing against.

After two years, the Graduate Center hired a permanent Chief Librarian. I had applied and hoped to continue in the role. I believed then and continue to believe that having people in management positions with organized labour experience matters. We know how important it is to enforce contracts and know what that can mean for the wages and working conditions of our colleagues. Following a months-long process, the university opted for another candidate. I was placed back on my faculty line and had my salary cut by \$50,000, the premium that had been added to my contract salary when I agreed to serve in the interim role. Like many before me, the interim appointment ended badly, with a rejection that felt both personal and like an indictment of my two years of service. Following a year back on my faculty librarian line, I took a position teaching at another campus in the CUNY system. Now that I have returned to the bargaining unit, I fully intend to stay here.

Advocating for Librarians' Rights, Lessons Learned and Suggested Strategies

Moving between union and non-union titles has been instructive and both of us have learned how crucial a union is in the fight to preserve professional recognition and autonomy for librarians. From our positions as titular leaders, we were able to make some positive change happen. At Huron, for example, advocacy efforts to improve role recognition and compensation alignment with the wider academic library sector garnered tangible outcomes, including two previously paraprofessional roles being reviewed and redefined, formally, as academic librarian appointments, among other wins in FTE staffing levels and compensation. The reality, however, is that these administrative roles require one to facilitate the policies of those we report to, even when those policies run counter to the mission and values of the library and librarianship.

Regardless of position, both sympathetic management and labour can turn to the contract as an advocacy tool. The contract is a document that legally limits the power of the employer. Wages and working conditions cannot be changed without a collective bargaining process that includes the worker voice. But the contract does not secure these rights without active enforcement of its terms. Librarians must exercise their rights to academic freedom, intellectual property, and collegial governance in order for the contract to be meaningful. And where these rights are abrogated, they must be vigorously defended through a meaningful grievance process. This is also a way of keeping colleagues connected to the union. When we see the collectively bargained contract being used to improve the lives of ourselves or our coworkers, the value of the union is impossible to miss. Whatever the role, actively looking for and responding to contract violations is a way of building the power necessary to preserve librarian rights.

In addition to the careful and forever work of contract adherence as a collective responsibility, so too is the labour of cultivating community and trust and mobilizing knowledge and networks. And this is as true for those of us fortunate enough to be employed in unionized roles with academic status as it is for those working in environments absent the rights or recognitions afforded to faculty librarians.

We cannot emphasize enough the power of finding allies with mutual goals and concerns and working in concert to solidify and strengthen the role of the library and the work and status of academic librarians on campus. Building strong, collegial, reciprocal relations with members of the college and university community who share the principles of academic and intellectual freedom, of equal and unmitigated access to information, of lifelong learning, is one such strategy. Take the recent and drastic rise of challenges to censor materials across North America's

libraries as one such example (American Library Association, 2023). While 'Freedom to Read' programming may not be as ubiquitous in academic libraries as it has been in the public library sector in the past, creating displays and cultivating dialogue with students and faculty on the question of access, censorship, legislation, and publishing is a fantastic way for academic librarians to openly practice their professional principles and values, while educating the wider campus community about librarians' distinct disciplinary knowledge and expertise.

Every college and university campus has a community of deeply passionate library champions. In our experience, academic librarians' natural inclination toward collaboration, information sharing, and organization positions us well to build community, and to find and activate networks of collective action across campus.

Taking advantage of and creating opportunities to work with others (even those, if not especially those, outside of the bargaining unit) is fundamental to building productive professional relationships. It is also essential for establishing and maintaining trust and for building solidarity. How can we do this? Actively participate in collegial governance. Regularly volunteer to contribute to the service work of your bargaining unit and/or union. If you are not unionized, look for intra- and inter-institutional initiatives or projects that will bring you into community with colleagues who share mutual goals and concerns. Build knowledge on your campus about academic librarians' work and the library's contributions to teaching, learning, and research. Do this all the time, not just in the months leading up to collective bargaining. Take the time to learn about allies' work and to look for ways to contribute and strengthen it.

Share information openly and transparently. For example, volunteer information to colleagues who are negotiating the terms of their appointments, including (gasp!) your salary and other monetary and non-monetary elements of your total compensation package. If your appointment includes a stipend, tell your colleagues what it is and whether you were able to negotiate more than the minimum. Knowledge is power, and improved working conditions for one will lead to improved working conditions for others. Conversely, the erosion of rights for one, or for all librarians at one institution, is an erosion of rights for us all.

Academic librarians' deep commitment to our professional values naturally positions us as champions and advocates for the critical work and contributions of colleges and universities to a democratic and just society. Our ability to practice academic librarianship holistically is not only strengthened and supported by the formal rights and responsibilities afforded to us when we are members of bargaining units or are in unionized roles as academic staff, but they also, largely, depend upon it.

The challenges facing librarians are shaped by forces beyond our institutions. As we develop strategies for responding to our situations, shared and distinct, we must also confront those forces. Winning an intellectual freedom policy for library faculty in a university where faculty autonomy has eroded is a limited win, even more so if a hostile board of governors or trustees moves to abandon the humanities. If the province or state opts to defund public education in earnest, the collectively bargained contract won't be enough to protect us. This is not to say that material wins in local contexts are not important. They are, both for the immediate protection they offer the individual library worker and as organizing tools. Every win demonstrates what is possible and pushes us to advocate for more. To secure the world we want, our fights must be connected to broader social movements that produce the terrain of the possible.

Conclusion

Because our career paths and collective labour experiences share much in common (i.e., we've both worked in precarious roles in our early careers where we were underemployed and underpaid; we've both held non-unionized as well as academic status librarian appointments; we both made the conscious decision to leave our unionized roles to take up formal library administrative posts, and subsequently have left them), our thoughts and reflections on the subject of the labour activism of post-secondary education workers and of academic librarians in particular largely align. We believe in the power of the collective. We have witnessed and contributed directly to collective action on our campuses and know that winning and defending the rights and responsibilities requisite for the holistic practice of academic librarianship requires vigilance, strong solidarity, community, and trust. We believe in the enduring value of libraries, academic librarians, and all library workers in a high-quality public education and in turn, a healthy democracy and fair and just society.

While it is true that much of the work relies upon the individual and collective action of library and information workers, including academic librarians themselves, practitioners and administrators alike can and should play an active role on campus in defending the rights and responsibilities of academic librarians as full and active members in academia. Ensuring that collective bargaining contracts are consistently adhered to by union members and university administrators through the enforcement of the contract is one example of how to prevent the erosion of librarians' individual and collective rights. Building trust and strong solidarity is another important strategy, and one that can be achieved by working closely with campus colleagues who share mutual goals and concerns, both within the library

and across campus. Sharing information and building knowledge locally and across the sector can also help to defend the work and role of academic libraries and librarians.

As a values-based, deeply ethical profession that is committed to education, equitable access to information, democracy, and intellectual freedom, academic librarians and library workers in all roles and at all levels of the organization have much to offer college and university communities, and especially so at this unprecedented time of social and economic division, an outcome of which is the erosion of strong and stable support for public education in and of itself.

Those of us in the privileged position of holding appointments with academic status on college and university campuses where librarians, archivists, library staff, and other information professionals are unionized have a duty to take up the work of defending the role of the library in higher education and the rights of library workers. Not only during periods of contract negotiations, but in our everyday work and practice. For those in roles outside of bargaining units or unions, you also have a role to play, though the work can and will at times be limited by the structural antagonism we cited earlier. For our part, we fully intend to maintain our values-based, ethical approach to librarianship and library leadership, no matter our role or title. We commit to continue to advocate for the enduring relevance and meaningful contributions that academic librarians, college and university library workers, and campus libraries make to higher education in Canada and the United States, and we invite you to join us in this collective action.

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