

Life at the table: The librarian perspective on the negotiating team

Tim Ribaric, Brock University

Carla Graebner, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

Across most jurisdictions in Canada, academic librarians are members of academic staff associations. Librarians participate in union activities including committee work and participation on union executives. Librarians also frequently contribute to collective bargaining through mobilizing colleagues, identifying bargaining priorities, and crafting collective agreement language. Their direct participation in bargaining as members of collective bargaining teams, however, is relatively rare. For those librarians who have participated in bargaining, how do their motivations and experiences differ from those of the faculty members that typically make up the bulk of these teams? This paper draws on interviews with ten academic librarians who have served on negotiating teams. It explores their experiences at the negotiating table, including identifying barriers and opportunities.

Keywords collective bargaining; librarian workload; parity; phenomenology

Retour d'expérience: le point de vue du bibliothécaire sur l'équipe de négociation

Tim Ribaric, Université Brock **Carla Graebner**, Université Simon Fraser

Résumé

Dans la plupart des territoires de compétence au Canada, les bibliothécaires du milieu de l'enseignement supérieur font partie d'associations de personnel académique. Les bibliothécaires participent aux activités du syndicat, notamment au travail en comité et en appui aux membres de l'exécutif. Les bibliothécaires collaborent aussi fréquemment à la négociation collective en mobilisant des collègues, en cernant les priorités en matière de négociation et en participant à la rédaction de la convention collective. Cependant, leur participation directe à la négociation en tant que membres des équipes de négociations collectives est relativement rare. Dans le cas des bibliothécaires qui ont participé aux négociations, en quoi leurs motivations et leurs expériences diffèrent-elles de celles des membres du corps professoral qui constituent généralement la plus grande partie de ces équipes? Cet article a été réalisé à partir d'entrevues menées auprès de dix bibliothécaires académiques qui ont fait partie d'équipes de négociation. Il explore leurs expériences à la table de négociation, notamment leur travail de repérage des obstacles et des opportunités.

Mots-clés négociations collectives; charge de travail des bibliothécaires; parité; phénoménologie

Introduction

Most faculty associations in Canada include librarians. Membership might also be composed of lab instructors, archivists or other groups that are part of the research and teaching enterprise of the university. To recognize this plurality of constituents, a more expansive name such as academic staff association is sometimes used. Whether certified as a union or not, faculty associations require service from members to thrive and actively represent the interests of the membership. Librarian engagement in service such as union committees and union executives, grievance, equity, and communications is not uncommon (Pash & Patterson, 2023; Barriage, 2016). In addition to commitments mentioned above, another vital union activity is collective bargaining. Librarians are proportionally less involved as members on the negotiation team compared with other association roles. Given that “librarians ... are likely to comprise only a small percentage of the bargaining unit for academic employees ... their concerns are not likely to be taken up by the whole group” (Harris, 1992, p. 112), and considering their strong track record of faculty association participation and the importance of advocating for their concerns, why don’t more librarians participate on negotiating teams? This research seeks to understand the experiences of librarians who have been on negotiating teams to better understand what may prevent fuller participation in this specific service activity.

Literature review

It is not hyperbole to say that librarians fulfil a unique role in Canadian post-secondary institutions. The work they do is distinct from what other academic staff members do, and librarians tend to be preoccupied with this recognition. “It’s a heady feeling, as a professional librarian, to be sought out by academic colleagues because of the skills one has. Librarians are recognized for their ability to assess and analyze, for their nuanced and diplomatic approaches and for their ability to unpack difficult situations and provide alternative solutions” (Wheeler et al., 2014, p. 181). Despite their distinctive roles, the drive towards parity with traditional faculty in terms of working conditions has been a recurring theme in the literature and advocacy efforts of librarians (Canadian Association of Research Librarians, 2021).

Librarians, and to a certain extent archivists, have been members of faculty associations for decades, in most cases dating back to original ratification votes. For example, Savage et al. (2012) describe the original priorities of the certification drive of the Brock University Faculty Association, including that “Librarians ... be defined as part of the bargaining unit” (p. 302). And in the original certification case

heard by the Ontario Labour Board in 1979 for the Laurentian University Faculty Association (LUFA), librarians were among the original members of the future union (Laurentian University Faculty Association v. Laurentian University of Sudbury, 1979). The LUFA collective agreement is unique in that a single contract applies to all members in contrast to most other faculty union contracts where rights and responsibilities specific to librarian members are written out in separate clauses. Laurentian University librarians therefore have full parity with traditional faculty (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2011).

In “Academic Librarians at the Table — Bargaining for Parity,” Kandiuk reported on the results of a 2013 survey of academic librarians. The research found that librarians’ presence on a union’s bargaining team was predicated on past practice or was required by the union’s constitution or by-laws, and that, “Securing a designated spot for librarians on the bargaining team is extremely important and may require proactive efforts on the part of librarians to modify existing union structures and governing documents” (Kandiuk, 2014, p. 206). By proactively engaging in the process and achieving gains during the negotiation process, librarians advance as a distinctive group of academic staff. Pash and Patterson (2023) explored librarian participation on Canadian faculty association executive committees and collective bargaining teams. They found that of 46 Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) member associations examined in the study, “Nearly half of these associations have either mandated spots on their associations’ executive committees for a librarian ... [and more] than a third do the same for the bargaining team” (Pash & Patterson, 2023, p. 10).

Given the potentially positive outcomes of participating in collective bargaining, why don’t more librarians participate? Both Kandiuk (2014) and Pash & Patterson (2023) discuss this question and identify time commitment as a major barrier. While traditional faculty members may receive relief from regular duties in the form of a course release, analogous release for librarians is more challenging because a librarian’s workload is not easily divided. Consequently, many librarians opt for financial compensation in the form of stipends as an alternative to workload release (Kandiuk, 2014, p. 205; Pash & Patterson, 2023, p. 9). Without clarity regarding workload release for librarians, it is nearly impossible to make time for union service. Often the only recourse is for a librarian to accept a stipend and perform union service as overtime.

Methodology

Using a phenomenological framework, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with academic librarians in Canada who have served on an academic association negotiating team. Interestingly, although we sought to understand participants' experiences and address them through common themes, some unexpected and divergent experiences were brought to light. We chose phenomenology because it is a framework for examining lived experiences and informing meaning from those experiences. Phenomenology "emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge" (Husserl, 1965, pp. 5-6). The use of phenomenological methods to understand the experiences of academic librarians has an established presence within library literature. This methodology was used by Kendrick & Damasco (2015) to investigate the experiences of self-described conservative librarians working in purportedly neutral library environments. Additionally, Kendrick employed phenomenology to elucidate the experiences of academic librarians and their perceptions of low morale in the workplace (2017) and Brundy (2014) similarly used phenomenology to analyze the experiences of academic librarians as they transitioned into management roles.

Although phenomenology is well established in qualitative research and has been used across disciplines, some care must be taken when employing this methodology. If an investigator is not cognizant of preconceived notions of the phenomenon they are studying, they risk the possibility of injecting biases into analyses. The process of acknowledging and addressing this pitfall and its negative consequences is referred to as bracketing (Given, 2008). In the current study, we achieved bracketing by focusing on intercoder reliability as well as engaging in careful and frequent discussions to minimize preconceived bias and manage this concern.

The interviews

Interviewees were selected based on past participation in activities organized by the CAUT Librarians' and Archivists' committee, including active participation in a CAUT Librarian-focused listserv or attending CAUT collective bargaining workshops. Participants had all served on the negotiation team for their respective unions. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in fall 2023 with English-speaking participants from Western Canada, Central Canada, and Atlantic Canada. Interviews were conducted online with both members of the researcher team. Transcripts were automatically generated by the online platform and the researcher team also took written notes for each interview. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes in

length and each participant was interviewed only once. The researcher team analyzed transcripts and notes using the Taguette platform to identify themes and corresponding passages or quotations (Rampin & Rampin, 2021). All identifying information — including names of workplaces, unions, working groups or committees — was removed. All participant data was destroyed after the final version of this article was produced.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the findings from the interviews. We identified six *constructive* themes that contributed positively to the librarian’s involvement on negotiation teams. They were associated with feelings of being appreciated, seen, and achieving collective bargaining gains despite the significant contributions these achievements necessitated. In contrast three dissenting themes were identified. Dissenting themes referred to situations and descriptions that created stress or alienation for librarians as they participated on negotiating teams and were ultimately associated with negative feelings such as regret or under-appreciation. The following sections present these themes along with passages from the interviews that typify the sentiment under discussion. Quotations have been modified to ensure anonymity and clarity.

Table 1: Constructive and Dissenting Themes

Constructive Themes
Librarians Doing Yeoman's Work
Bigger Picture Thinking / Altruism
Motivation for the Work is Intrinsic
Hearts and Minds are Won During Prep Work, Not at the Table
Point of Pride
Librarians Seek Novelty
Dissenting Themes
Differences in Work Lead to Differences in Priorities
Diminishing Returns
Librarians Overwork Themselves

Constructive themes

Librarians doing yeoman's work

All participants expressed the idea that librarians perform an outsized quantity of union service. Participants came to negotiating teams not as a first-time contribution in union service but as one of the concluding phases of a long trajectory of work with the faculty association, characterized by the metaphor of *Yeoman's work*. In naval service, a yeoman typically refers to an officer who has extensive clerical duties that focus heavily on logistics. A further implication is that the work is arduous but necessary. Yeoman's work might also be used to describe much of what librarians perform as part of their daily duties so it makes sense that this approach would likewise be applied to faculty association activities. Moreover, most participants had held positions on executive committees, up to and including vice-president, president, and grievance officer. They chaired committees and worked in other capacities to support collective bargaining initiatives. Their contributions included informal and unrecognized work between rounds of collective bargaining, such as canvassing librarians for priorities and maintaining running lists of bargaining language suggestions.

Participant comment (when describing why it is vital to have a librarian on a negotiating team): We are such a small, marginalized group of constituents, and I'm always very paranoid that if the university says we'll give you five parking spots if you get rid of the librarians from your membership, the rest of the faculty association will jump on that. I always have this [quote by Pierre] Trudeau about feel[ing] like a mouse sleeping next to an elephant in mind. I always feel like we need to show up doubly as hard.

Participant comment (when describing librarian work on negotiation team): We punch pretty well above our weight.

Bigger picture thinking / Altruism

The idea that librarians possess an understanding of what is at stake at on a larger scale — one that extends to the whole of the institution — surfaced in multiple interviews. This perspective is due, perhaps, to having diverse responsibilities and being accountable to different communities within the academic institution, much like union service itself. Work on the bargaining team was conducted with a degree of altruism; time spent in negotiations improves the working conditions for all members, not just the librarian constituency. This labour could be described as altruistic, as recollections from participants stressed that gains were not made for

self-interest, nor for the benefit of union members only, but to the benefit the university as a whole.

Participant comment: Some challenges weren't addressed in this iteration of bargaining, but I could see why because there were bigger problems afoot. I was able and capable to sort of subsume our [librarian] needs in the grander picture, which didn't alienate me too much from the rest of the team, but I still carry that around with me.

Participant comment: If you don't have representation on the bargaining team from everybody that the faculty association includes amongst its membership then they're going to get overlooked — because somebody has to hop up and remind folks that there are other issues at stake.

Motivation for the work is intrinsic

Many participants volunteered on bargaining teams knowing full well that it would likely create an extra burden on their time. As noted earlier, the common mechanism for recognition of service work above and beyond what is stipulated in routine duties and responsibilities is the course release. This provides a reliable calculus to both account for and compensate traditional faculty members' time. Finding a comparable method of release was very difficult for librarian members. In some cases, release time was not even an option. Quite often, librarians worked on their teams with the understanding that even their librarian colleagues would not fully understand and appreciate what was at stake.

Participant comment: I just have a general orientation toward progressive work, social justice and unions. I was raised to think that unions have a very important role in society and in the workplace, so I was already motivated coming in.

Participant comment: I have strong feelings about the benefits of a strong worker representation in places of work. I like the idea that the workplace should be a democratic institution. I like to feel like my union work is contributing in a small way towards that wider democratization of society.

Participant comment: I would just say that my involvement with the faculty association has been very beneficial. It's taught me about how the university works, how collegial governance works. I've learned a tremendous amount about labour law and collective agreements and things like that. So, I've really enjoyed serving for the faculty association.

Hearts and minds are won during prep work, not at the table

Interviews consistently centred on discussions about preparation and identifying negotiating priorities. Best practices were followed in that associations routinely did the groundwork before formal bargaining began. Common practice amongst most unions is conducting member surveys and organizing meetings with constituent groups ahead of formal negotiations. Participants recounted that these activities did a lot to give librarian negotiation team members agency over how they negotiated priorities at the table and during caucus discussions. Having done the pre-bargaining work, they could easily refer to priorities identified by their peers. This abundance of preparation enabled participants to speak confidently as bargaining team members.

Participant comment: There's usually a small group of us who will put our heads together and then actually just draft proposals based on what we've heard.

Participant comment: Yes, I must say that my association keeps a really strong process between negotiations, as well as developed practices around the negotiation time. A survey is conducted and notes from the previous set of negotiations outlining where the sticky points were and where the sort of gaps identified is retained.

Participant comment: Librarians and archivists, they have their own leadership, and they struck a bargaining committee to collect priorities from members. I know they did some surveys, and some town halls, and consulted in different ways to identify what the big issues were. And then they provided the bargaining team with a very concrete list, and they said it was roughly in priority order of what people wanted and what was important to them, and that was always guiding us in our proposals on our negotiations for librarians.

Participant comment: I should mention that between the rounds of negotiations, the librarians did go through a process, which we call an article review committee. This is a way to negotiate contract language outside of the typical bargaining process.

Participant comment: This time, we'll have a lot more things ready to present. And the bargaining team will be able to take the work that we've already done forward. I'm hoping that we'll be able to see a little more progress this time on some of the smaller issues that we couldn't address last time.

Participant comment: My God! We are so exhaustive and consultative in setting those bargaining priorities.

Point of pride

Interviews did not explicitly probe for emotive descriptions of the experience of being team members, but these arose organically. Participants often communicated feelings of pride and accomplishment when recalling experiences. Consistent with what was found in Pash & Patterson (2023), while there was rarely a designated librarian position on negotiating teams, many integrated themselves into faculty association affairs to the point that they were identified as good candidates. Participants described these feelings as a sense of professional accomplishment.

Participant comment: I was able to nudge the article even further in a direction where it would strengthen the collegial self-governance mechanisms that it outlined. In the grand scheme of things, that was the best victory I had.

Participant comment: I've been told that bargaining teams that have members from the librarian and archivists on their teams tend to be better organized. I don't know if the role of note taker always falls to the librarians or archivists, but in those cases where that role is formally designated to a librarian archivist, the notes are better.

Participant comment: When we get to the articles about librarian responsibilities, everyone looks at you when the team goes into caucus and says, "Okay, what's the problem here? What do you need changed?"

Librarians seek novelty and connections

Many participants became involved in negotiations as part of the academic service work expected of all academic staff in universities. Academic work environments afford a strong degree of autonomy and librarians can independently choose to engage in new opportunities. Wanting to try new things was often communicated in interviews. Participating in such union activities as collective bargaining gives librarians the opportunity to experience academic life outside of their day-to-day responsibilities. Interviewees also expressed interest in expanding their social and professional circles when contemplating work for the academic staff association.

Participant comment: I would be able to mix and develop relationships with more faculty members who are like-minded with respect to labour.

Participant comment: I wanted to find opportunities to work outside the library on committees or teams. I didn't want to be trapped in the library bubble. I wanted to go out and meet people in other parts of campus.

Participant comment: Starting with just my desire to meet people across campus and get involved with the campus community, that led me, deeper and deeper into the faculty association.

Dissenting themes

Differences in work lead to differences in priorities

Recollections of negotiation teams were occasionally negative. These primarily surfaced in recognition of the differences of how traditional faculty members work compared to the conditions of employment for librarians. Librarians have collective agreement articles that separate them from traditional faculty members. These differences can lead to misunderstandings between the groups as each may be unaware of what the other truly needs. Librarians can appreciate the responsibilities of faculty life: teaching, research, and service commitments. Yet librarians felt that the reverse is not always the case. Librarians' professional practice (time spent on duties that are not research or service) is not analogous to the work of many traditional faculty members. This lack of understanding tends to isolate librarians. In some cases, this creates a situation where librarians are only engaged in negotiation on library-specific clauses as opposed to working on the whole contract. This arrangement eroded solidarity within the faculty association.

Participant comment (when describing bargaining sessions where the employer varies its bargaining team members): They don't bring their whole bargaining team to the library days. They bring different people because their bargaining team is huge, and they have deans on it, and I guess they can't be bothered to talk about library stuff.

Participant comment: We have to feed our proposals to the chief negotiator and try to make sure he understands them, and he can represent them, and he doesn't do as good of a job as we would if we were just allowed to talk about them.

Participant comment: There's sort of that frustration of listening to somebody negotiate issues that they don't really understand.

Participant comment: I think the CAUT documentation regarding librarian and archivist participation is often overlooked. And, although a librarian and or archivist may sit at the Executive table, it's not often that issues specific to the library or archives come to the Executive for discussion. So, when it comes to bargaining, I think, unless there's a librarian present, that any specific issues that might touch on the work we do is overlooked.

Participant comment: Librarians occupy an odd space in the academy in terms of faculty status, I think, because what we do is not well-understood. Educating our own bargaining colleagues is just as important as it is to sit across the table from administration and make our points.

Participant comment (when describing release time): And that was a bit tricky because if you're a prof, and you're getting bought out of a course, the employer can hire a sessional or adjunct to replace you. But they can't hire half a librarian or a 10-hour-a-week librarian so the workload and figuring out how your job can continue and not putting too much on your colleagues while you're doing union work, I found a real challenge.... That was probably one of the most challenging things, and probably the thing that would make me really pause about doing it again.

Librarians overwork themselves

Another theme that surfaced was that librarians willingly overwork themselves. In many cases, librarians will agree to take on added responsibilities and work overtime but will come perilously close to burnout while doing so. When possible, participants took overload payment in lieu of a course release and committed to doing more than what is normally required during negotiations. Participants also volunteered when other librarian colleagues failed to do so. While all librarians experienced a net benefit from having a librarian participate in union service, the work fell disproportionately on a few shoulders.

Participant comment: The union would have been willing to negotiate a 25% reduction in responsibilities for the period of the negotiations. The other option was to provide me with a stipend, which is what I opted for just because my responsibilities are hard to compartmentalize in that way. And it was just

simpler. And it did mean that I was working in the evenings a little bit more than I would have otherwise. But I was willing to do that.

Participant comment: Well, the members of the team get release time or a stipend. I've always chosen the stipends because it's very hard to do release time for a librarian. It's not like a faculty member who might get a course buyout. I've always just taken the stipend.

Participant comment (when describing release time): It's pretty unsatisfactory, but it's certainly better than nothing. I mean, extra money doesn't help you do the job.

Participant comment: So, what this means is, that there's perhaps two or three of us that are constantly volunteering for roles, which I think might alienate some of our colleagues.

Diminishing returns

Interviewees recognized that pragmatism was a driving force behind their participation in bargaining. The work undertaken during bargaining is often invisible to colleagues. It is frequently stressful, and the reward can be disproportionate to the effort put in to achieve the eventual outcome. The bargaining process is often incremental — meaningful gains often occur only after several rounds of bargaining and can take years to achieve, so any gains at the table may appear inconsequential. As a result, some participants indicated that any gain, large or small, were often obtained at an emotional or mental cost. And efforts by librarians to achieve gains that would benefit all members were not always recognized. The importance of having a librarian present during negotiations was emphasized but often presented with a degree of weariness.

Participant comment: We've done some things. I don't know how effective it's been. It's obviously better than not having a librarian at the table.

Participant comment (when asked if a librarian should be assigned to a negotiating team): I mean, I wouldn't do it myself. I don't think it's a good use of time.

Participant comment: From [year] onward, we reactivated that committee and then developed a firm list of librarian priorities that we passed on to the Bargaining committee. In over the last ten years, we've transitioned from a very informal, I don't want to say old boys' network, but you know that kind of

informal. The people running the faculty association knew everyone. They had this long institutional memory too. Now we're more professional. We have more documented procedures in place. We're developing very clear lists of priorities. And so, it's a very different environment now.

Discussion

This investigation yielded data that reinforces themes in previously published literature while also identifying gaps in published works. Describing the lived experiences of librarians who participated in collective bargaining adds a fresh methodological perspective to existing studies where collective agreements were reviewed and statistics analyzed. The interviews unearthed unifying themes and prompted further questions.

Faculty perceptions of librarians/library work

A common notion was that librarians struggled to communicate the value of their professional work to their traditional faculty colleagues. We observed that by increasing participation in association activities, librarians often felt a commensurate increase in standing amongst faculty members, perhaps because both librarians and academic staff members were engaged in similar work and shared the common experience of collective bargaining. Participants also expressed pride in their association work. Investigating faculty members' perceptions of librarian contributions at the negotiating table would be a logical follow up to this study.

The pursuit of parity

Research on the working conditions of academic librarians often focuses on how their rights and responsibilities are constructed in contrast to those of traditional faculty members. The experiences described by the participants in this study confirm this is an area of continuing tension and should be explored further both by researchers and academic unions.

By way of example, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) released *Bargaining for Parity for Librarians & Archivists*, focusing on the unique working conditions of archivists and librarians (CAUT, 2021). The advisory devoted a large amount of text to provisions for librarians to work off-campus — the assumption being that the default place for librarians to work is at the library. In contrast, when it comes to faculty expectations and workplace norms, traditional faculty receive no similar guidelines as to where they spend their time except for office hours, classroom instruction and in-person meetings.

A final observation is that disparities in working conditions continue to exist and parity with faculty members is a singular goal amongst librarians participating in collective bargaining. All participants emphasized this. While we anticipated discussion of university administration, concerns regarding de-professionalization, and even desire to bolster and enrich the library reputation within the institution, participants did not discuss these topics to any great extent. Rather, librarians cared about autonomy, and how this autonomy is recognized.

Conclusion

Librarians are typically the smallest group within their respective academic staff associations. In addition, their work is fundamentally different from traditional faculty members. This combination creates a formidable challenge for librarian participation in association service work, as effort needs to be spent on advocating for understanding the librarian plight in addition to the primary task of working towards association goals.

This study sought to examine this dynamic as it plays out during the important process of collective bargaining and how it affects librarian enthusiasm to engage in this type of work. By speaking with librarians with experience in collective bargaining, several thematic challenges emerged which need to be overcome to ensure that participation is both meaningful and useful. These were, however, offset by positive themes which indicated that participation in collective bargaining made the process fulfilling despite the challenges. Associations could see higher levels of participation from librarian members if they are able to balance these opposing forces.

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