

## **Returning to the Ranks: Towards an Holistic Career Path in Academic Librarianship**

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### ***Abstract***

Having the policies and procedures for individuals to easily move into and out of term-limited, administrative positions supports a holistic view of an academic career path. While this is normative for our academic colleagues, it is less common for academic librarians. Typically, librarians in administrative positions (chief librarians for example) either stay in those roles, seek other similar roles, or retire from those roles. Returning to the ranks is surprisingly rare and not well-enabled through transparent processes. This paper explores the experiences of four chief librarians who returned to the ranks following term appointments. It examines the resultant issues and makes recommendations on how to improve the situation. The conclusions offer advice for universities, libraries, and librarian administrators.

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### ***Keywords***

academic librarianship; employment conditions; administration; term appointments; chief librarians; academic status

### ***Introduction***

Unlike our academic colleagues, librarians have limited traditions and policies that support those in administrative roles returning to the ranks following their term appointments. Typically, an administrative appointment is a permanent exit from the front line profession. Administrative librarians either stay in the role, move to another administrative appointment, or retire. This is especially true for the most senior position: the chief librarian (or university librarian or the library dean). A more holistic career path for librarians would see administrative appointments as part of a natural and cyclical progression: as a stage, not a destination.

However, this is not currently the case. Why is returning to the ranks so rare, and what are the obstacles involved? What are the experiences of those who have returned to the ranks following an administrative role? Finally, what needs to change in order to facilitate a career cycle more typical of other academics?

The lack of a full academic career cycle creates a separation between librarians and their colleagues in administrative appointments. Tensions and suspicions that are unhealthy for academic librarianship have resulted, fuelling the belief that management and administrative roles are to be avoided, even scorned. The scenario creates career paths that diverge at a certain point and never, or rarely, re-integrate. Finally, by reinforcing the old and discarded notion that leadership is inextricably tied to senior positions, this situation fundamentally misunderstands the nature of management and leadership in contemporary organizations.

This paper explores returning to the ranks by examining the recent experiences of four Canadian chief librarians who stepped down from their senior administrative roles and reclaimed professional roles at their respective libraries. These individuals (one of whom is myself) made this choice voluntarily and, as of May 2014, three of the four were still working in these roles. In order to allow these individuals to be frank and forthcoming about their experiences, I have kept their identities confidential. The observations discussed in this paper draw from their experiences and feedback.

### ***Term Appointments***

Academic status for librarians is relatively new, which is part of the reason we have arrived at this state. Even now the status of librarians across Canada is mixed. Some are full colleagues; others have parallel but different rights and responsibilities; still others have staff roles with some elements of academic status; and finally, some – most notably in Quebec – are considered staff with quite different employment conditions from faculty. The status of librarians on campus reflects, to a certain extent, upon the status of the senior library administrator, and this has an impact on HR policy.

The University of Guelph is a useful example of how mixed conditions can occur. Librarians at Guelph have had true faculty status since the 1970s. A number of librarians have served as chair of the Faculty Association; currently, a librarian serves as the chair of the Negotiating Committee. Librarians share an employment contract with faculty, have the equivalent of tenure, and have clear academic, as well as professional, responsibilities and obligations. However, in 1995 when I arrived as chief librarian, the senior role was a permanent appointment and not a term appointment, unlike those of my peers around the academic administration tables.

This mismatch was problematic, and soon after I started I requested that my position be converted into a term appointment to match those of the deans, the associate vice presidents, and the vice presidents. I stepped down as chief

librarian in 2012 because my second term was over and I did not wish to seek a third term (an open search is required after two terms). While giving up a permanent appointment and moving to a term appointment may not seem to have been in my best interests, it was important that the chief librarian be, and be seen to be, on the same basis as the other academic administrators. This was not a symbolic decision: it recognized the dominant academic culture and how it has affected relationships and decision making.

Chief librarians in Canada hold either term or permanent appointments. However, even where term appointments are the norm, there is still a lack of policy, procedures, or expectations that a chief librarian could return to the ranks and assume responsibilities that are suitable, achievable, and valuable to both the library and the university. One of the most unfortunate outcomes of this situation is that the chief librarians remain in their positions until they retire. The problem here is not that these people are not effective contributors in these roles, but that not **all** of them are effective contributors. Some, frankly, are simply counting the months (or years) until their retirement. In the meantime, their leadership engagement has long since waned. As a result, their organizations can atrophy and their staff can become quite bitter. Waiting for the chief librarian to retire before a library can adopt a new direction is not effective succession planning.

Of course, term appointments have some negative impacts. They can lead to revolving doors and short-term thinking. Second terms can be viewed as "lame duck" periods where few major initiatives are possible. Staff can be resistant to change, knowing that the term will end and they will start afresh with a new person. However, this is the model we use for other academic administrators, and it has served the institution well, if not perfectly.

### ***Professional De-skilling and Appropriate Roles***

A significant concern about moving into management roles, particularly the most senior role, is that of professional de-skilling. The focus of the senior role is intense: chief librarian roles are complex and university administration is all-encompassing. While these are very exciting roles with tremendous rewards, they are demanding. They are also increasingly more about university administration than they are about library administration. While chief librarians advocate for the library and librarians, they can also often see more clearly, or with less bias, the larger university picture. As a result, chief librarians are objective actors who are regularly called upon for broader involvement in university affairs. The role is comprehensive and tends to preclude focused engagement with professional activities (i.e., the disciplinary work of being a librarian).

This is, however, not generally true of our academic colleagues. Here are some personal examples: the current provost at Guelph, Maureen Mancuso, and the current president, Alastair Summerlee, are recent 3M Teaching Awards winners. Both maintain active teaching roles, and Summerlee has a robust and successful

research program. A former provost, Iain Campbell, was an internationally respected researcher who maintained an active research program during his entire time in the role and has returned to the ranks only to further extend his research reputation.

Some chief librarians teach in library schools (where that is possible); some write articles or give lectures; a very few continue to do research, and even fewer still continue professional tasks like collections or technology work. For the most part, chief librarians become full-time, exclusive administrators.

But to what roles should librarians who have completed their appointments return? Those I interviewed will attest, as will I, that they are no longer able to serve on a reference desk, catalogue anything, or understand the collections needs of specific academic departments. Neither the library nor the university would be well served by asking them to do any of these things. The challenge is not to define a cookie-cutter expectation of returning to a predetermined role, nor is it to create a unique, and perhaps unnecessary, job to accommodate a person who seems to lack any viable skills outside administration. The proliferation of "special assistant to the provost" or similar roles emerged largely because organizations did not know what to do with academic administrators stepping down, and those administrators did not know what to do either. They had lost, some time ago perhaps, their professional status, and now they had lost their administrative status as well.

Returning to the ranks does not always mean returning to the library, just as other academic administrators do not necessarily return to their academic departments. While creating a special role for the sole obligation of keeping someone busy is very undesirable, former chief librarians often have unique and valuable skill sets that can be exploited. Such was the case with one of the individuals interviewed. At the time of her return, issues of records management, recent privacy legislation, and institutional policy were at the forefront of campus discussions. This individual was well suited to implement a new unit that would respond to these new requirements. This role, although external to the library, meshed well with the professional and administrative expertise of the former chief librarian and allowed her to work with her library colleagues as a peer. When returning to the ranks, the timely availability of such a role is obviously not assured. In this case, while timing and need intersected, luck accounted more for the outcome than planning. However, the individual thrived in the position and provided a valuable contribution to the university.

### ***Relationships with Professional Colleagues***

Becoming a "colleague" after having been the "boss" can be difficult. Upon returning to the ranks, one of the interviewees specifically asked to be located to one of the regional campuses rather than the central campus. Creating a physical distance from new chief librarian was important to this person as a means of

minimizing any perceived interference and establishing a new identity as a professional.

However, as those interviewed noted, staff remembered that they were once "the boss" and had exercised considerable authority over their professional lives. Performance or disciplinary decisions made while in an administrative position may affect professional present and future relationships. In fact, concerns about future impacts on collegial relationships might even cause incumbents to temper their actions or decisions.

After stepping down from their administrative positions, some interviewees voiced their opinions about contentious issues only cautiously because they did not want to compromise the role of the chief librarian or imply access to confidential information. Withholding their expertise in this way creates a personally unsatisfying situation that is also likely to be detrimental to the library.

As long as returning to the ranks is not normative, unease will remain about how the former administrators are viewed by their new peers and how colleagues will choose to engage with each other.

### ***Compensation***

An appropriate compensation policy must be in place before a return to the ranks can be expected of chief librarians. Adjusting compensation to reflect a new set of responsibilities while acknowledging seniority and expertise is difficult in the absence of such a policy.

Depending on the compensation practices or policies, a former chief librarian might be an expensive salary line. Policies need to be established to provide compensation that attracts candidates to the administrative position and ensures competitive salaries afterwards. However, this puts pressure on the library and also may later complicate an individual's collegial relationships if the compensation after the term is disproportionately large.

In one case, the salary line for the former chief librarian resided in the office of the vice president, not the library. While this insulated the library from a large salary obligation, the position and the salary disappeared when this librarian left or retired. This was a bridging strategy that provided a short-term solution rather than a long-term resource.

In other cases, the administrative role was compensated with a stipend that could be removed when the term ended. As long as the base salary remained aligned with base librarian salaries (e.g., ATB increases, merit), returning to the ranks required only a transparent adjustment. In one case, however, senior administrators took voluntary pay freezes to acknowledge financial constraints while librarians (and faculty) did not. The result was a significant differential

between the base salaries of administrators and those of faculty or librarians. Additional adjustments were necessary to resolve this inequity.

### ***Planning Ahead***

Of the four individuals discussed, one person was unique in being very clear from the beginning of his first term as chief librarian that he would at some point return to the ranks. As a result, he planned his exit and professional future throughout his administrative career. It was important to him that he not "stay too long" in the administrative role, and this sentiment is shared by others. Too many have seen effective leaders and administrators gradually lose their enthusiasm and commitment. They became jaded or disengaged, abdicating their responsibilities but not their positions. Hiring chief librarians earlier in their careers (i.e., when they are younger) increases the time to retirement, and sustaining productive employment becomes more of an issue. Without term appointments and adequate policies for post-administrative roles, this situation could result in long-term appointments that reflect the negative consequences noted before. Given the demise of mandatory retirement, these positions might be "locked up" for many years, creating barriers on the career paths of others.

Because this individual knew he was returning to the ranks from the beginning (he served two full terms), he purposefully maintained an active interest and involvement in the work central to his professional expertise. This allowed him to take on a role in government documents and information policy that directly corresponded to his core interests and expertise at the end of his final term. That such a role was available was fortuitous. In other circumstances, the library might have had other plans for the role (e.g., a new external hire or an internal opportunity); however, in this case, employment obligations and appropriate expertise aligned favourably.

### ***Transition Leave***

While all the individuals interviewed had access to transition leave, the time periods varied greatly (from one to two years or, in one case, just six months, even though deans in that institution get a one-year transition leave). In all situations, this leave was viewed as essential for transitioning back into a professional role. Despite their attempts to remain current in their field, all expressed a concern that the field had changed in significant ways. Even with transition leave, some former administrators will simply be unable to re-tool or catch up.

Transition leave was viewed as most effective when it was closely aligned with the role to which the former chief librarian was returning. Where the role was known in advance, the individual was able to focus the leave on those aspects of the profession (e.g., collection development, teaching). While all the individuals interviewed felt they adapted well to their new responsibilities (whether known in

advance or not), all cited the leave as essential to their ability to re-enter the ranks.

### ***Relationship with the New Chief Librarian***

How does the former chief librarian interact with the new chief librarian? On one hand, the former chief librarian is now simply another librarian in the professional complement. On the other hand, they have knowledge, concerns, and awareness, often at a deep and personal level, which they share with the new incumbent.

In one of the cases examined, the new chief librarian deliberately sought advice from the former chief librarian. The two required a protocol (or understanding) about how to discuss (or avoid) confidential or sensitive information, particularly information pertaining to union-management issues or previous cases involving disciplinary action. Without established protocol, a relationship of this sort may be seen by others as permitting preferential access to information or insights. The former chief librarian must maintain collegial relationships with professional peers while still providing assistance to the new chief librarian, if that is requested.

Assuming that one's previous experience as chief librarian is relevant to the current situation is, in some ways, problematic. The temptation to say "If I was still the chief librarian I would have ....." could clearly undermine the authority or credibility of the incumbent. Former chief librarians have a responsibility to support the new chief librarian in a way that is very different from their colleagues. Former chief librarians hold some power and influence, and must exercise these thoughtfully and ethically. In some cases, their caution might be viewed (or felt) as withholding expertise, while in other cases it is simply in recognition of the special obligations or responsibilities of the role.

### ***Returning to the Union***

An interesting adjustment that is a feature of returning to the ranks is returning to (or joining for the first time) the union. Often library administrators have been out of scope for many years. While I would characterize my relations with faculty unions during my administrative roles as cordial and productive, maintaining such positive relations required effort on my part to see things "from the other side." Being part of "management" provides a different and more holistic view of the institution and its challenges. In particular, as chief information officer (CIO) and chief librarian, I was involved in the work of nearly all academic and administrative areas. The union, as is its mandate, takes a more focused view of the academy: a view centered on faculty and their employment rights and obligations.

At this stage (five months as a union member again), I am still uncomfortable with the strident position my union takes on issues that I see in a more nuanced way. I wrestle with the tension between shared governance and collective bargaining,

and I certainly cannot accept the general rhetoric that characterizes senior administrators as uncaring and manipulative. Whether this means my administrative roles have co-opted me or I simply have a deeper insight into the workings of a university is a matter for others to decide. The point may simply be that having administrators return to the ranks and work within the union may bring a broader view of the university, its challenges, and its opportunities.

### ***Negotiating the Re-entry***

Where little or no policy exists regarding a return to the ranks, the re-entry process is often a negotiation between the individual and the provost. Not only does this introduce variable practices over time and succeeds (or not) based on the relationship between the two, it also effectively removes the library from outcomes that directly impact it. This model tends to respect administrative allegiances and isolates the library from planning.

In one case, the return was a multi-way negotiation among the library, the provost, an academic program, and the individual. The benefits and drawbacks were openly discussed and assessed. Personal as well as institutional interests were considered.

Where advance consideration has afforded a return through documented policy or practice, the individuals can have a more open and transparent process that involves the library in the outcomes. Effective policy is the foundation for effective planning and financial management.

### ***Recommendations***

What needs to change to make moving in and out of senior administrator roles more palatable and effective?

From the university perspective, I would argue that all librarians should have true faculty status and that all chief librarians have academic appointments with term limits. This creates alignment with academic administrators and invokes human resource policies that support librarians in the same way academics are supported. In addition, budgets need to be constructed such that complement and financial issues do not preclude a chief librarian returning to the ranks. For example, compensation should be based on a base salary plus an administrative stipend such that it can be easily adjusted following the term. Transition leave is key to providing time for adjustments and re-entry. Finally, policies and options regarding a return to the ranks should be known to administrative candidates prior to their appointment.

From the library perspective, long-term planning must include the possibility that chief librarians will move into an appropriate position following their terms and that their skills will need to be matched with opportunities. This also means that when a chief librarian is hired, search committees and the search process should

recognize that they are hiring an academic colleague as well as an administrator. Clearly the size of the library has an effect. Larger libraries likely have more flexibility to accommodate a former chief librarian; smaller libraries might struggle with more limited options. In the latter case, the returning librarian might be more of a burden than a resource and might create more resentment among colleagues as opportunities are more limited.

There are implications for the individual as well. The incumbent chief librarian, anticipating the end of the term, should maintain a professional profile, keep up disciplinary interests and pursue to some extent their research or teaching engagement. All academic librarians, whether administrators or not, are "scholar practitioners." Maintaining both those roles is the balance we all face in our work.

## **Conclusion**

All those interviewed expressed a genuine desire to contribute, and not merely drift into retirement, following the end of their administrative terms. One echoed Sheryl Sandberg's advice given as part of her TED talk: "Don't leave before you leave." The end of their administrative careers was not the end of their professional careers.

Although all four of the individuals were able to return to the ranks in a manner that was beneficial to them, the libraries, and the universities, none of them were guided and supported by a comprehensive body of existing policies or procedures. In each case, the processes and negotiations were unique and established for the specific instance. On one level this is appropriate. The circumstances of each administrative appointment are different and the solutions should reflect this. On the other hand, having advance knowledge and expectations of how the transition will occur would make the process less arbitrary and perhaps encourage others to enter management or administration.

There has been a recent trend revealing significant difficulties in hiring associate chief librarians and managers. Current employment and promotion policies offer few incentives for moving into management and administration. Librarians can progress through the ranks with satisfactory compensation and none of the perceived problems of management roles. A more supportive policy and reward structure that facilitates returning to the ranks might encourage librarians to explore management and administrative roles without feeling that they are somehow "leaving the profession."

The more librarians, libraries, and their institutions view the role of the chief librarian (or any administrative appointment) as a stage rather than a final destination, the more academic librarians will resemble our academic colleagues and their career traditions. In doing so, librarians will view moving into and out of administrative roles as part of a normal career path. The result will be a more holistic view of the profession and of the important and diverse roles within it.