

Jamia Williams and Dustin Fife

# The weaponization of professionalism

Abolishing unwritten rules and unknowable work cultures

This article marks the launch of *Academic Library Workers in Conversation*, a new bi-monthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the frontlines. This issue's conversation with Jamia Williams focuses on professionalism and how libraries refuse to get out of their own way.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Jamia Williams (JW):** The idea of professionalism often comes up in conversations. Dustin, I wanted to talk to you about the weaponization of professionalism, and I realize that there are layers to this concept. The notion of professionalism brings to mind communication styles, dress codes, email etiquette, collegiality, boundary setting, and so much more.

One of the times that I can remember when my professionalism was in question started when I asked my supervisor, “What is the dress code?” I asked this question because I saw people wearing different types of clothing, and I wanted to ensure that I was not the one to violate the rules since I know that as a Black woman, I am being watched. I was told it was business casual, and an explanation of what business casual means occurred soon after. The way my supervisor explained this to me was confusing and made me think she didn't think I knew the definition of business casual.

I wish I could say this was my last encounter where my professionalism was in question, but it was not. I think the idea of professionalism is a slippery slope, especially when it comes to communication via email. People's tone and intentions can be misconstrued. As someone that was called “disrespectful and harsh” via email, it has been terrifying and disappointing navigating the rules of “email etiquette” in academic libraries.

Dustin, what are your thoughts on the idea of professionalism?

**Dustin Fife (DF):** Jamia, I think it is kind to call professionalism a “slippery slope,” I can think of much harsher and more disrespectful terms that I would use. As a White man in academia, I have seen professionalism used to police people, without it ever being used to regulate me. In librarianship, I have only ever seen it used to control people, rather than elevate them. Professionalism is the cudgel of the status quo that is wielded selectively and subjectively. I'm sure it is clear that I am not a fan of “professionalism” as it currently exists,

---

Jamia Williams is health sciences librarian at SUNY Brockport, email: [jwilliams@brockport.edu](mailto:jwilliams@brockport.edu), and Dustin Fife is college librarian at Colorado College, email: [dfife@coloradocollege.edu](mailto:dfife@coloradocollege.edu).

© 2022 Jamia Williams and Dustin Fife

and I believe that is because I have never seen it deployed in a way that benefits people directly, rather than just the institution or administration. I recently witnessed a colleague bemoan the loss of “professionalism,” then immediately and aggressively play “devil’s advocate” to undercut valid points that coworkers were making about the historical problems with these concepts. To me that was the ultimate embodiment of professionalism in libraries. For that colleague, professionalism is whatever they say it is in the moment, and not something that is actually attainable.

Just reading that you, as a Black woman, know that you are being watched and that professionalism is one of the tools of surveillance, makes me wonder if there is anything salvageable about the concept of professionalism. I know I want to foster kindness and collaboration in my own workspaces, but it is not clear to me what role “professionalism” plays in that. So I would start from there; by asking you, is there anything useful about professionalism that helps library workers to begin with?

**JW:** Wow! Such a great question. In my opinion, there isn’t anything useful about the idea of professionalism and how it is used in academic libraries. Abolish professionalism! I second what you said about fostering a workplace where kindness and collaboration are the centers of our interactions. When we lead with kindness, it is not a tool used to police or demean someone; it is used to engage with someone in a meaningful way. So I think it is time to go beyond this idea of professionalism.

For me, the idea of professionalism as an early-career librarian has been problematic because it has erased my past career experiences. People think of “early career” and assume someone’s first career. Before becoming a librarian, I had an entire career. My life experiences and past work experiences accompany me to any job. Therefore, this needs to be considered, and people need to get to know the folks coming into their libraries before making assumptions.

Professionalism is used as a gatekeeping mechanism by people who have an urge to control people. I feel like so many people working in academic libraries have not healed from their own professional trauma, so they find a way to hurt others. As the saying goes, “hurt people hurt people.” So if people don’t dress a certain way or don’t speak a certain way, or don’t look a certain way, then it is a problem. I wish that there weren’t these unwritten rules that we all had to navigate. I would love the space to imagine something different.

Dustin, do you have any thoughts on what it would look like if academic libraries got rid of the idea of professionalism?

**DF:** Abolish professionalism! And to be clear, by kindness, Jamia, I assume neither of us are talking about the “niceness” that destroys lives by never confronting oppression or resisting the status quo. That type of “niceness” is the epitome of our current systems of professionalism.

I can imagine a way forward without professionalism because I have seen glimpses of it in my career. I have had the opportunity to work on projects with teams that modeled a better way. In those groups we were allowed to define our shared values and our working parameters. They were not defined by just one or two of us, but through consensus we created working terms. We said things such as “we value collaboration, honest feedback, and elevating new voices.” Importantly, we didn’t stop there, we defined as a group what those ideas meant to us, and what they did not mean.

I mentioned someone playing “devil’s advocate” earlier. It always sticks with me that in one of those situations we agreed that the practice of disagreeing just for the sake of disagree-

ing was not honest feedback, but intellectual dishonesty. A way to say things you thought without having to take responsibility. This type of value-driven collaboration is the way to move beyond professionalism in my experience. A way to move beyond meaningless gate-keeping to inclusive practice.

What do you think of that type of intentionality rather than the amorphous specter of professionalism, Jamia?

**JW:** Dustin, I love this type of intentionality because it honors people for their individuality and what they bring to the table. This intentionality helps create an environment where people are not trying to guess expectations or norms. This should lead people to reflect on what they need and how they like to be supported.

I do not like it when someone says “to play devil’s advocate,” this phrase puts me on edge. You were so right that this is used as a way to disagree, just to disagree. I understand that conflict will happen, so being conflict-avoidant is not helpful either. I think that academic libraries should lean into the notion that conflict will occur. However, I understand that stereotype threat has stopped me from speaking my truth in the past because I didn’t want to be seen as angry. Therefore, I had to realize that I wouldn’t get what I needed if I didn’t speak up. I don’t think people realize the extra labor that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), along with other marginalized people working in academic libraries, carry in the name of professionalism.

Dustin, where do we go from here?

**DF:** We start with something you said earlier. Even within this short conversation, it is clear that we must abolish professionalism in the academic library. It is a set of mostly unwritten rules that are imbued with toxicity and White supremacy. We must abandon the vague ideas that support only the institution and the privileged, in order to build something that is effable and able to elevate the diverse communities in the library. Professionalism is a system begging people to fail. Manya Whitaker, in her incredible book *Public School Equity*, notes that “school policies should be designed to facilitate success, not in anticipation of failure.”<sup>1</sup> Strict codes marginalize and lack trust, unwritten codes are impossible and demoralizing. Both of these systems can claim equality for all involved through equal treatment, but they ignore equity and the way that the systems penalize anyone who does not look like me. Abolish professionalism in favor of shared values and sincere commitment to each other while at work.

This is hard, because unwritten rules are easy. The status quo will always protect and replicate itself and it takes no effort from you or me. But to move forward, we cannot make small adjustments to rancid systems. We have to start from scratch, and we have to build together. I’ve seen people be punished for the way they dress, the way they speak, the way they look, and even the way they smell. That is what professionalism is, it is utter arbitrariness. The only way forward is starting over completely.

I know that seems improbable, but it is the only way. Any final thoughts on professionalism, Jamia?

**JW:** I want to end with the notion that abolishing professionalism might be considered radical and unrealistic. But it is possible, I have seen it when collaborating with others from different academic libraries. There is freedom when people don’t have to worry about the way in which they show up. Seeing someone feel comfortable letting their guard down is

inspiring and motivating.

I hope that we truly look at how professionalism is weaponized and how it is used to control and isolate those who do not comply. A question that needs to be considered is why is this concept important to academic libraries? If you answer that we have always done it this way or they need to learn how things are done here, then the root is cultural assimilation. Therefore, professionalism must be abolished, and we must create an environment of kindness, inclusivity, and collaboration. If academic libraries want to be champions of diversity, this is where it begins. ✍

## Note

1. Manya Whitaker, *Public School Equity: Educational Leadership for Justice* (New York: Norton, 2022).