

# Academic Librarians and the Pursuit of Tenure: The Support Group As a Strategy for Success

Jeannie P. Miller and Candace R. Benefiel

Faculty status with the accompanying quest for tenure is a fact of life for three out of four academic librarians, and achieving tenure is a tough proposition. Most librarians have not received extensive training in research methodology, their work schedules lack flexibility, and they usually have limited access to research funds. Given these constraints, the support and assistance of colleagues is crucial, and the establishment of an informal tenure support group can provide a mechanism for discussing common concerns and channeling efforts toward finding effective solutions.

**F**aculty status for academic librarians, like national politics, is one of those highly emotional, highly partisan topics that make life so interesting. As Bruce R. Kingma and Gillian M. McCombs stated in a recent article in *College & Research Libraries*, "Faculty status for academic librarians is a topic which has consumed the attention of the profession for the last forty years."<sup>1</sup> The pros and cons of faculty status have long been hotly debated, and the issue continues to draw comment from detractors and supporters. In November 1993, *College & Research Libraries News* contained an antifaculty status polemic from the late Rice University librarian Beth Shapiro,<sup>2</sup> and the following February saw a spirited defense from Fred Hill and Robert Hauptman from St. Cloud State University.<sup>3</sup> Reading the related literature, such as Stephen E. Atkins's over-

view of the subject in his book, *The Academic Library in the American University*,<sup>4</sup> makes one thing abundantly clear: This is not an issue on which academic librarians are ever likely to reach consensus.

Whether loved or loathed, faculty status is a daily fact of life for many, if not most, academic librarians. According to a 1987 study by Emily Werrell and Laura Sullivan, 79 percent of academic librarians have some form of faculty status,<sup>5</sup> as de-

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finied by the ACRL's "Standards for Faculty Status for College and University Librarians."<sup>6</sup> Although this figure may be on the high side, nonetheless, the implication remains that approximately three out of

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four academic librarians are faced with fulfilling tenure requirements.

Achieving tenure is a tough proposition, even under the best of circumstances. Although the goal is clear, expectations are not always clearly defined, so success is basically up to each individual. Most libraries with a tenure track for librarians require evidence of research and publication, but levels of support for these activities are, at best, limited and, at worst, non-existent. For example, a 1985 survey of academic librarians with faculty status revealed that 50 percent received no release time to pursue the scholarly activities that were required for tenure and promotion.<sup>7</sup> Librarians also face additional hurdles that are not shared by other university faculty. Most librarians have not received extensive training in research methodology, their work schedules lack flexibility, and they usually have limited access to research funds. In addition, many librarians, whether new from library school or with years of experience, find themselves facing a "sink-or-swim" mentality, wherein little help with fulfilling requirements or even assistance in interpreting the nature of the requirements is forthcoming. Although it may be convincingly argued that this attitude is an accurate reflection of the practices of many academic departments, it is nonetheless an added burden for librarians who have not been exposed to either the rigors or the mentoring inherent in most doctoral programs. Those who argue (and they have been numerous) that the MLS program as it currently exists is insufficient to prepare fledgling librarians for the difficulties of performing the research and publication expected of faculty on the tenure track do have considerable justification.

In recent years, the role of more experienced librarians as mentors to those newer in the profession has gained a great deal of support, and the positive effects of mentorship and role models cannot be overstated. Connie Van Fleet explored the variations in the basic approaches to

mentoring and provided references to articles on the responsibilities, benefits, and formal implementation of mentor-protege relationships in the library setting.<sup>8</sup> However, one problem with mentorship as a support mechanism is that, in many cases, new librarians are unable to find someone willing or able to assume the mentor

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role. For example, whereas a supervisor or department head may be the ideal choice in many situations, it is not uncommon to find a librarian in a supervisory role who has yet to attain tenure and therefore may not be the best source of advice in this area. Roma M. Harris points out another pitfall in the mentoring process. She states that "mentoring is, by definition, a special relationship within an organization. It extends only to a handpicked few the counseling, role modeling, and interest that might benefit every motivated young employee."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, even if a librarian on the tenure track is able to establish a sound and beneficial relationship with a mentor, he or she will still gain benefits from the opportunity to share experiences, problems, and ideas with others at the same level. Peer support can be an excellent addition to the arsenal of resources a librarian brings to the fight for tenure and promotion. This idea is supported in a recent special, Labor Day report in *USA Weekend* by best-selling author Stephen Covey.<sup>10</sup> He indicated that although mentoring was essential for advancing in the old, hierarchical organization, the constant change and turmoil of today's workplace has invalidated this premise. It seems that no one has time to be a mentor, so individuals are encouraged to compensate for this by "modeling" their behavior on that of a successful co-worker or by setting up "study groups" to share pertinent information.

With these considerations in mind, however, and given that neither the nature of education for librarianship nor the requirements of faculty status are likely to undergo radical or sudden change, the question of what tenure-track librarians can do to help themselves becomes overwhelmingly important.

### Proposed Solution

What is the solution? How can librarians initiate programs and activities that may give them the support and resources they need to fulfill ever-increasing requirements and demands for research, publication, and professional involvement? With these constraints, is it possible to fulfill the requirements for tenure and still satisfy job performance responsibilities? Undoubtedly, there are many answers, but one possible aid for untenured librarians fighting their way up the tenure track involves a mechanism for enlisting the mutual support and assistance of colleagues.

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The establishment of an informal tenure support group can provide an outlet for discussing common concerns and channeling the participants' energies toward finding effective solutions. The atmosphere of caring and sharing that results from a support group can remove one more hurdle in the tenure process and increase the productivity and success of each member.

### Establishment of a Tenure Support Group

Librarians in the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University are on tenure track and are expected to maintain high levels of job performance as

well as show evidence of professional activity and a continuous record of research and publication. Although formal methods of support and evaluation of promotion and tenure activities exist in the library, many untenured librarians felt a need for an informal means of sharing the experiences, problems, fears, and triumphs of the tenure process. In 1991, in response to this perceived need, a few untenured librarians started an informal monthly discussion group to address tenure and promotion topics.

This discussion group evolved into the Tenure Support Group, which has taken the form of a monthly "brown-bag" lunch meeting open to all librarians, tenured and untenured. Meetings are from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and if there is an invited speaker, an informal lunch precedes the presentation, followed by questions and discussion. The group is led by cochairs elected for one-year terms. The primary functions of the cochairs are to: organize the agenda for the year based on suggestions from the group; identify and invite speakers; publicize meetings on e-mail through internal library listservs; find answers to questions that arise during the meetings; and start up the group in the fall of each year. Although participation in the Tenure Support Group is not mandatory, it is recommended by both supervisors and the library's Committee on Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure as a valuable source of information on the tenure process and related topics and as a source of moral support throughout the years of pursuit of tenure.

### Role of the Tenure Support Group

The role of the Tenure Support Group is to provide: emotional support for faculty members currently on the tenure track; a forum to share practical ideas, discuss the resources of the institution, and positive strategies for success in the quest for tenure; speakers and information concerning the tenure process; an opportunity for people

to share current projects and to meet others who might be interested in either collaborating on projects or proofreading others' work; an opportunity to get a critical "first read" of works; and an opportunity to share "triumphs."

Although the group's membership consists almost entirely of untenured librarians, tenured library faculty are welcome to join the meetings and discussions, and frequently are invited to speak to the group as a means of making the mysteries of the tenure process and its requirements more understandable and less intimidating to newer, untenured librarians.

### Examples of Programs

Examples of topics that have been presented to the Tenure Support Group over the past six years include:

- *Overseas fellow experience:* A tenured librarian from the library faculty who was chosen to participate in an international project shared her experiences as an overseas fellow.

- *Evans Library tenure document:* Members of the library's Committee on Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure met with the group to discuss the tenure document, as well as the timetable and procedures of going up for tenure.

- *Participation in ALA committees:* Experienced librarians shared tips and strategies to enhance the conference experience and indicated that active participation in ALA committees was a good way to make a positive contribution to the profession and to identify possible peer reviewers.

- *ALA poster sessions:* Over the past fifteen years, Texas A&M librarians have presented almost one hundred posters at ALA conferences. Experienced librarians shared knowledge of procedures and insight in using this means of sharing research results. Although posters in and of themselves do not count heavily toward tenure, they can serve as the foundation for more extensive research and subsequent publication of a scholarly article.

- *Funds for research:* The Library Research Committee visited to explain various methods of getting university funding for research projects, especially through library research funds and university minigrants.

- *Random sampling:* A professor from the statistics department met with the group to discuss techniques of random sampling for statistical studies.

Members of the group were surveyed recently to suggest topics for future meetings. Some of the many worthwhile suggestions included: the mechanics of writing and submitting articles for publication; clarification of library policies on release time for professional development; how to select a mentor and develop a mentoring relationship; further instruction on statistical research methodologies; given the increasing emphasis on outstanding job performance, how librarians can use materials analogous to teaching portfolios to quantify job performance; and speakers from library schools.

### Tangible Benefits of Group Participation

A survey of the members of the Tenure Support Group revealed a number of tangible results from participation in the group. Members cited examples such as: getting a poster session accepted for presentation at ALA as well as subsequent publication of this research; using the lessons from the session on random samples to design a research project; acquiring funding for a research project; being appointed to an ALA committee and, in one case, becoming vice chair of an ALA committee; and finding a colleague with shared interests with whom to begin a research project. One former member who was recently awarded tenure used advice from a group meeting in organizing his personal tenure dossier. In addition, members felt that they had created an ongoing forum which gave the untenured library faculty a unified voice in issues relating to promotion and ten-

ure. The final “seal of approval” which marked the Tenure Support Group as a legitimate body was its recognition by the library administration in the Sterling C. Evans Library Employee Diversity Policy as an effective tool in the recruitment and retention of high-quality faculty.

### Positive Elements of Participation

Many of the group members also commented on positive elements of their participation in the group, citing feelings such as:

- being able to share common experiences and anxieties, which made them feel less alone in the struggle;
- enjoying the opportunity to meet colleagues from other parts of the library, networking and learning their concerns, especially those related to tenure;
- finding out projects on which others are working;
- sharing information and receiving suggestions, guidance, and help in generating new ideas for research;
  - finding an open forum for discussion in a relaxed, informal atmosphere;
  - receiving assistance from the group in focusing on professional development activities and helping members to become more involved;
  - providing a good place to find colleagues interested in collaborative efforts;
  - offering an opportunity to welcome new librarians and a place where new librarians can get acquainted with their colleagues;
  - hearing high-quality speakers who presented useful and timely information.

### Summary and Conclusion

The impact of the Tenure Support Group is not necessarily quantifiable in terms of success rate of librarians seeking tenure at Texas A&M University. In many cases, librarians “self-select” out of tenure review by pursuing opportunities at other

institutions rather than risk a negative outcome. What the Tenure Support Group can—and does—accomplish is to assist untenured librarians in maximizing their resources and improving their understanding of the tenure and promotion process. This is one of many factors in their successful negotiation of the process.

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The monthly meetings of the Tenure Support Group have provided a forum for the untenured librarians to explore issues and activities related to the promotion and tenure process. A true grassroots movement, initiated and organized by the rank-and-file librarians, the Tenure Support Group has given the untenured library faculty a unified voice in the library. Library administration has come to view the group as a significant and positive addition to the library culture, as shown by its recognition of the group’s positive contribution in retaining untenured librarians and preparing them for tenure review. Most librarians who have participated in the group’s meetings wholeheartedly endorse both the group’s activities and ideals. Achieving tenure is difficult under the best of circumstances, and feelings of isolation further contribute to this difficulty. Creating a group to bring together colleagues pursuing a common goal fosters collegiality, encourages excellence, and increases the possibility of a successful finish on the tenure track. However, there are no guarantees. The primary efforts of each faculty member must remain focused on the three peaks: professional performance, service to the profession, and most daunting, research and publication. Without assiduous devotion to these, attendance at monthly meetings of a tenure support group will not ensure a favorable outcome.

Notes

1. Bruce R. Kingma and Gillian M. McCombs, "The Opportunity Costs of Faculty Status for Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 6 (May 1995): 258-64.
2. Beth J. Shapiro, "The Myths Surrounding Faculty Status for Librarians," *College & Research Libraries News* 54 (Nov. 1993): 562-63.
3. Fred Hill and Robert Hauptman, "Faculty Status for Librarians? A Response," *College & Research Libraries News* 55 (Jan. 1994): 26.
4. Stephen E. Atkins, *The Academic Library in the American University* (Chicago: ALA, 1991).
5. Emily Werrell and Laura Sullivan, "Faculty Status for Academic Librarians: A Review of the Literature," *College & Research Libraries* 48 (Mar. 1987): 95-103.
6. ALA, "Standards for Faculty Status for College and University Librarians," quoted by William Miller, "Faculty Status in the College Library," in *College Librarianship*, eds. William Miller and D. Stephen Rockwood (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Pr., 1981), 122-23.
7. W. Bede Mitchell and L. Stanislava Swieszkowski, "Publication Requirements and Tenure Approval Rates: An Issue for Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 46 (May 1985): 249-55.
8. Connie Van Fleet, "Advising and Mentoring: Complimentary and Essential Roles," in *A Service Profession, a Service Commitment: A Festschrift in Honor of Charles D. Patterson*, eds. Charles D. Patterson, Connie Van Fleet, and Danny P. Wallace (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Pr., 1992), 155-77.
9. Roma M. Harris, "The Mentoring Trap: A Warning for Entry Level Librarians," *Library Journal* 118 (Oct. 1993): 37-39.
10. Stephen Covey, "How to Succeed in Today's Workplace," *USA Weekend* (Aug. 29-31, 1997): 4-5.