

Onboarding from the Ground Up

Creating a Community for New Academic Professionals

Northern Arizona University is a public research university of 28,000 students with the main Flagstaff Mountain Campus located in Flagstaff, Arizona. The Cline Library serves the entire Flagstaff campus.¹ Prior to 1983, librarians and archivists at Northern Arizona University were classified as faculty. In 1983, the Arizona Board of Regents created new employment categories for librarians and library paraprofessionals: Academic Professionals, Service Professionals, and Classified Staff.²

Academic Professionals (APs) are non-classified employees with research or teaching programs who require professional and intellectual freedom such as librarians, museum curators, and researchers. At Northern Arizona University, the only employees classified as APs are librarians and archivists. This new classification of APs formed the Council of Academic Professionals (CAP), which acts as the employees' governing body, similar to a Faculty Senate. The work of Cline Library APs is governed by the *Handbook for Academic Professionals*.³

While the AP employment category is a different employment category than faculty member, the AP continuing status and promotion process is modeled on faculty tenure requirements in terms of professional development, scholarly, creative, and service activities. In 2019, in the absence of standardized promotion guidelines, CAP created new criteria for their continuing status and promotion rubric, which were approved by the Office of the Provost.

Putting a Plan into Place

As of spring 2024, Cline Library is staffed by 45 full-time and part-time employees; 25 of the employees, including the dean and university librarian, are classified as APs (librarians or archivists). Thirteen librarians and archivists were hired between 2019 and 2024. In that same time frame, four of the 13 moved on to new institutions. The highest period of turnover occurred between 2021 and 2022, when three of five newly hired librarians left Cline Library. In short, Cline Library has seen a fair bit of librarian turnover in a short period of time.

The authors were hired between 2019 and 2021 in different units: Content and Discovery Services (CDS), Research and Instruction Services (RIS), and Special Collections and Archives (SCA). Another CDS librarian and two librarians from a fourth unit, User Services and Experience (USX), were also hired during this time and have since moved on from Cline Library to pursue other opportunities. Feeling isolated within their disparate departments (isolation was also exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic) and intimidated by the newly revised continuing status and promotion requirements, the new APs decided it was a good idea to share information and compare notes. Informal Zoom meetings led the new APs

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to begin documenting their onboarding experiences and comparing what their different supervisors had told them, revealing that they had significant knowledge gaps and similar questions to bring to library leadership.

Paradoxically, the library was in the process of hiring more new APs, and so resolving questions about onboarding of newly hired librarians and archivists was not seen as an immediate priority. Newly hired APs decided to address their issues proactively and collaboratively; they formed a Teams group channel for ongoing discussion, advice, and support. This channel led to the creation of an informal group called the New AP Group.

Creating an Onboarding System

Before creation of the informal New AP Group, AP onboarding was a finite two-week process consisting of a flood of meetings and information. Supervisors and administrators followed a standardized one-page onboarding spreadsheet. Often, new hires were not given access to this spreadsheet and thus did not know what they were meant to do during their first several weeks on the job. Many found this approach to onboarding unhelpful or, worse, isolating. Additionally, each library unit and supervisor had a different approach to onboarding beyond the spreadsheet. More seasoned librarians and archivists, including members of library leadership, shared similar stories of their own onboarding at Cline Library. Two tenured librarians and one member of the New AP Group formed a working group within CAP to tackle the formidable project of overhauling the AP onboarding process.

This group collected notes and documentation from the New AP Group members, communicated with leadership responsible for the current onboarding processes, and interviewed various CAP members. They also reached out to librarians at other institutions who were similarly evaluating their own onboarding in order to gather best practices.

The product of this effort was a much-expanded onboarding spreadsheet with ten tabs, one for each library staff member involved in the process. Gone were a finite two weeks of overwhelming meetings. Now a new hire would be given a full year to get up to speed and acclimate to the library culture. Some new features of the onboarding spreadsheet included mandatory first-year performance reviews with a supervisor and meetings with CAP subcommittees including the Committee of Academic Professional Status (COAPS), a peer performance review committee. New APs have full access to their onboarding spreadsheet in a shared drive as relevant parties (supervisors, mentors, leadership) complete their sections, so they can keep track of their progress, take ownership of what they need to learn, and ensure that no procedures fall through the cracks. The onboarding spreadsheet also serves as documentation for future reference.

None of the three members of the onboarding working group were in formal leadership roles with any authority over other APs. Rather, this group focused on approaching the project from the perspective of the employees who depended on an effective onboarding process, while integrating what library supervisors and leaders appreciated about the old system. The revised onboarding spreadsheet was adopted in spring 2022 and is now maintained by staff in the Dean's Office. A new onboarding spreadsheet is deployed for each new hire, and staff who play a role in onboarding receive an email about which sections they are expected to complete.

Creating a Cohort (and Another Committee)

The New AP Group was an excellent informal peer-support network. However, the group came to understand that to accomplish their goals, they needed to become a recognized entity within the CAP subcommittee structure. The group decided to formalize this committee for many reasons: to provide a formal structure for peer-to-peer group mentoring, organizational shift, recognition, and ongoing changes to continuing status and promotion. Recognition from those in power conveys legitimacy and validates work—giving name to something confers existence. Additionally, tenure criteria include the categories of professional service and mentoring, coaching, or teaching. This committee would fulfill these requirements.

In 2022, one member of the New AP Group drafted a proposal to formalize the group as a subcommittee within CAP. The proposal was intentionally written to align with Northern Arizona University's strategic "Elevating Excellence" plan and the Cline Library operational and strategic plans. The proposal stated that purpose and responsibilities of the newly named Committee of New Academic Professionals (CNAPS) would be the following:

The Committee of New Academic Professionals meets as needed to provide support, promote collaboration, and advocate for initiatives, policies, and procedures that improve the experiences, competences, and scholarly pursuits of new Academic Professionals. Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Assists in the cultural, interpersonal, and practical onboarding of new APs.
2. Identifies and develops partnership opportunities between new APs in order to build cross-unit collaboration and improve the Cline Library's scholarly output.
3. Identifies and promotes opportunities for new AP professional development and growth.
4. Advocates for the needs of new APs within CAP and the Cline Library.

Membership of CNAPS is compulsory for all newly hired APs who have yet to achieve continuing status and the rank of associate librarian or archivist. However, the level with which a new AP engages with the group is voluntary, depending on their needs and level of interest.

Developing a Mentoring System

During the informal review of AP onboarding procedures, some CAP members noted that when they started in their roles they were assigned a departmental mentor, typically a more experienced AP. However, most new APs were not assigned a mentor when they began at Cline Library. Those APs who had a mentor reported that it greatly assisted them in learning about their responsibilities and the requirements for APs as a distinct category of employees. Thus, one of the changes recommended for AP onboarding was to create a formal mentorship role—the CAP Buddy—to help orient new APs to CAP and CAP subcommittees and the expectations of APs in Cline Library during onboarding.

The CAP Buddy role was further clarified in fall 2022 when a program description outlining expectations and a timeline for the mentoring program for review by CAP were developed. First, the program description formalized the CAP Buddy program as a one-year, one-on-one peer mentoring program for APs. The program description further specifies that a CAP

Buddy helps to familiarize new APs with the functions and governance of the CAP and its subcommittees. A CAP Buddy helps to orient a new AP to the policies and procedures that govern their work, their performance evaluation, and their career progression within Cline Library, as articulated in the *Handbook for Academic Professionals*. Additionally, the CAP Buddy shares information on relevant opportunities for professional development, service, scholarship, and creative activities for APs, helping new APs explore options to progress in their careers.

CAP has adopted the Buddy program as a formal library mentorship program. Nonetheless, since its inception in spring 2022, the CAP Buddy program has provided support to six new APs. While CAP is still in the process of developing evaluation tools for the CAP Buddy program, informal feedback suggests that it has largely helped new APs understand their role in the library more readily. This outcome is supported by available research on mentorship in academic library settings. A 2020 review of the literature on mentorship programs in academic libraries indicates that library mentorship programs, while highly variable in their structure, goals, and assessment, are nonetheless typically associated with valuable outcomes for participants.⁴ One 2019 study suggests that mentoring “serves as a conduit to career development and psychosocial support to developing leaders for future vacant leadership positions.”⁵

Conclusion: Leading the Way

CNAPS members are seeing the fruits of their labor take shape, and they’re motivated to keep pushing forward. Each year, CAP hosts elections for officer roles and subcommittee memberships, and CNAPS members run for leadership roles and committee appointments. As of this writing, CNAPS members occupy the roles of CAP chair, chair-elect, and parliamentarian, plus membership on the Committee for Academic Professional Policies and Procedures (PPC), COAPS, and campus-wide groups such as Faculty Senate and University Undergraduate Committee.

The chair-elect is responsible for chairing the PPC. PPC is arguably the workhorse of CAP, responsible for updating documentation, bylaws, the *Handbook for Academic Professionals*, and other policies. As such, PPC is also the body responsible for reviewing the criteria for promotion and continuing status every three years. Having members of CNAPS on this committee during the criteria review process ensured that the document revisions reflected the needs of APs who are currently using these tools to evaluate themselves as they work toward continuing status and promotion for the first time.

CNAPS work is ongoing and iterative to the current needs of the group. In fall 2024, three CNAPS members (the authors of this article) will apply for continuing and status. CNAPS invited colleagues who had already gone through the process to talk to the group and advise on promotion-packet content. With three new APs recently hired in spring 2024, the promotion and continuing status criteria for APs approved in 2019 are currently under revision by the CAP, in part to incorporate feedback from new APs and CNAPS regarding these documents.

Despite the efforts to more clearly define the CAP Buddy mentorship program described above, most library mentorship is still informal, and some units and individual APs are more experienced with mentorship than others. As members of CAP and CNAPS, the authors

hope to encourage and develop mentorship in the library by providing training for mentors or formalizing the mentoring process.

CNAPS strives to encourage participation by being practical and relevant to its members. Committee members have collaborated on publications and presentations, set working meetings to develop and write their annual goals documents and self-reviews, and solicited experienced APs to advise on and review promotion packets. CNAPS continues to advocate for clearer and improved policies and procedures for promotion, evaluation, and onboarding guidelines for all Northern Arizona University APs. ❧

Notes

1. While the Flagstaff Mountain Campus is the main campus, Northern Arizona University has campuses throughout Arizona: <https://nau.edu/statewide-campuses/>.

2. Arizona Board of Regents, “Conditions of Service for Academic Professionals,” policy manual, last updated September 27, 2018, <https://public.powerdms.com/ABOR/documents/1499267>.

3. The Council of Academic Professionals Policies and Procedures Committee, *Handbook for Academic Professionals* (Flagstaff: Cline Library, Northern Arizona University, May 8, 2001), https://library.nau.edu/documents/Handbook_for_Academic_Professionals.pdf.

4. Allison Leaming Malecki and Mimmo Bonanni, “Mentorship Programs in Academic Libraries,” *Public Services Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (February 21, 2020): 35–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2019.1701613>.

5. Alyse Jordan, “An Examination of Formal Mentoring Relationships in Librarianship,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 45, no. 6 (November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.102068>.