

LIBRARIANS AND UNIONS: DEFINING AND PROTECTING PROFESSIONAL VALUES

by

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Abstract

In this article, the relationship between the professional values of librarians and the benefits that accrue in unionization is explored. These benefits include process-based benefits, including the protections of tenure, fair workload, job security, and due process in the form of contractually agreed upon grievance procedures. Also discussed are value-based benefits in the form of open communication, academic and intellectual freedom, and a collegial relationship with teaching faculty.

Economists and politicians remind us that union membership has been in steady decline for the last two decades. From 1983 through 1996, the number of American workers covered by union contracts has declined from 23.3% to 16.2% of American workers (United States, 1997). What is less frequently noted is the rise in the number of employees covered by collective bargaining agreements in the service industries and most markedly among technical and professional workers, including librarians. In 1986, 25.6% of professional librarians, archivists, and curators were covered by a collective bargaining contract; in 1991, 30% were covered; and in 1996, 32.7% of us were working in a unionized workplace (Hirsch, 1997). Between 1986 and 1996, over 14,000 of us became part of a collective bargaining unit. The purpose of this discussion is to shed some light on why librarians join, and sometimes form, unions and why this increase of interest in collective bargaining is a positive response to many perceived negative influences in our working environment. In particular, I wish to discuss the values embedded in the profession of librarianship and how they are affected and, I believe, complemented by collective action.

Why Unionize?

Although there is a growing body of research on the effects of unionization on libraries and librarians, there is very little on the precipitating causes of union formation in libraries. This is probably because we seldom form self-contained, library-only, units. The majority of unionized libraries are part of larger organizational unions, mostly within public agencies and public educational institutions. The participation of librarians in the initial drive is easily overlooked. In professional bargaining, however, there are some universal motivations that can easily be extrapolated to include librarians, including both external conditions that

facilitate public-sector unionization (primarily legal) and internal environmental factors which produce sufficient dissatisfaction to warrant union formation.

The national and state legal environment in which librarians and other professionals form unions is discussed at length in many useful books and articles (e.g., Arnold, 1998 and Mortimer, 1978). The liberalization of statutory and administrative law of the 1970's was far friendlier to unionization in the public sector than it was toward the private sector. Many faculty librarians in private colleges and universities were either decertified or unionization efforts were suspended following the *Yeshiva* decision in 1980 (*National Labor Relations Board v. Yeshiva*, 1980).

The primary internal reasons for forming a union are to increase the strength of the bargaining position of employees with employers on economic issues, including compensation and benefits, work-load issues, job security, and fairness and due process in the resolution of grievances. There are underlying reasons, however, that are worth stating and speak to the responses to a working environment that is increasingly unfriendly to professional work. Most union drives are about a lack of mutual respect and the breakdown of common values between management and employees. Susan Schurman, the Executive Director of the George Meany Center of Labor Studies wrote in a case study of unionization, "Most union drives are about justice, fairness, and dignity, not about the particulars of compensation and benefits per se." (Von Hoffman, 1998). In fact, the national unions rarely initiate unionization. Typically, employees become dissatisfied and offended and after a great deal of thought and talk, invite unions to discuss further action.

This perceived breakdown of respect and institutional fairness can manifest itself in a variety of substantive ways, including the degradation of salaries and medical benefits, the hiring of paraprofessionals to perform professional work, a grievance

process that favors management prerogatives, and a disdain for collegial decision-making. A correlate of this is a breakdown in communication between the employees and management. The decrease in funding for most public organizations over the last 20 years has engendered a siege mentality in many administrative ranks, a mindset that often devalues input from the employees. Given the reluctance of professionals to join unions, the amount of internal unhappiness must reach a critical level before significant action is taken.

Librarians and Unions

Unionization invariably takes place in a negative working environment. It does not take place by accident or by conspiracy. There are, however, many positive outcomes of unionization both for the employer and the employees. There is a natural synergy, I believe, between librarians and the activities of collective bargaining, particularly when librarians share the bargaining unit with other professionals. I am most familiar with the model of college and university faculty unions, so much of the discussion that follows will draw on this experience. I think what is true for a faculty union is also true for other models, e.g., elementary and secondary education and public agencies that employ professionals. Except for large public libraries, most librarians will be part of a mixed-unit, combined with other groups that share a "commonality of interests." These can include professionals and paraprofessionals, non-teaching academic professionals, or all employees defined as "faculty" which often includes librarians. A process of negotiation and the application of labor law determine the unit, but generally all positions which are managerial, executive, or administratively confidential can be excluded. Although many supervisory librarians might consider themselves managerial, the lack of significant control over budgets, hiring, and firing may place them in the bargaining unit. The definition of the term "managerial" can vary widely from state to state and even from employer to employer. The final arbiter is usually the state labor board for non-federal public employees or the NLRB for federal and private employer workers. After the determination of the unit, an election by the unit members must be held to decide who will represent the unit.

Process-based Benefits

Often librarians find themselves unionized because of their small representation in the election vote in a mixed-unit. The unit of which I am a member contains approximately 600 teaching faculty with 17 librarians. However, there are significant advantages (and a few disadvantages that I will discuss later) that accrue to us because of this affiliation and an alignment of common values that aids significantly in the performance of our jobs. These benefits can be divided into two categories I call process-based and value-based. Process-based benefits are the customary rights for which unions are usually formed, i.e. the right to bargain

collectively for salary, benefits, working conditions, and fair grievance procedures. There is significant evidence that within the public sector unionized librarians earn more than non-unionized librarians (Belman and Heywood, 1997; Hirsch, 1997; and Ackerman, 1980-81). Formal grievance processes aid significantly in not only the perception but also the reality of due process when disputes or perceptions of unfair treatment arise. According to Fryxell (1992), "grievance systems are valuable in assuring adherence to the contract, but also add flexibility in ad hoc negotiation of unforeseen issues, protecting unilateral investments in the job, and may serve an important symbolic role in promoting trust." This perception of trust can positively influence employee attitudes toward the workplace in general and management specifically.

Procedurally, collective bargaining also has positive outcomes for management:

- Increase in honest communication: one common reason given for unionization is the "no-one-listens-to-us" complaint. Unionization not only facilitates communication, it requires it.
- Multi-year agreements allow for longer range budgeting and planning.
- The union is the usual arbiter of the determination of a valid grievance. This rids the administration of the onerous task of adjudicating every complaint.

Value-based Benefits

Unlike many professional groups, librarians engage in a great deal of collective and interdependent work: no department can work effectively or efficiently without the support and input from all other departments. This proclivity toward mutual collegial support provides a natural synergy with collective bargaining. When other professional groups are added to the unit, particularly teaching faculty, we expand and improve the communication and mutual support across a much wider base. We have common needs and responsibilities and the contract serves to confirm these.

Unique to librarians is the value of intellectual freedom, and the right of our patrons and communities to have unfettered access to information. Libraries also have the responsibility to "challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (American Library Association, 1996). The principle of academic freedom as promulgated by the American Association of University Professors provides for these same rights but given to us instead of by us (American Association of University Professors, "1940 Statement", 1995). In a curious (but telling) element, both the Library Bill of Rights, which defines the principles of intellectual freedom, and the March 1998 Draft of Ann Symons' Presidential Intellectual Freedom Statement (ALA: Libraries: An American Value, 1998), it is libraries that are the providers for the environment in which intellectual freedom can flourish, not librarians. The fundamental statement of professional values for our profession does not name us as the

practitioners of that profession but rather speaks of the institutions in which we work. The principles of academic freedom, together with the Joint Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians (American Association of University Professors, "Joint Statement", 1995) speak directly to the individual and our responsibilities to our teaching colleagues and ourselves:

College and university librarians share the professional concerns of faculty members. Academic freedom, for example, is indispensable to librarians because they are the trustees of knowledge with the responsibility of ensuring the availability of ideas, no matter how controversial, so that teachers may freely teach and students may freely learn. (AAUP, "Joint Statement," 1995)

Collective bargaining provides a statement of values, congruent to our own, that speaks to our needs as individuals, our right to speak freely in the practice of our profession, and our right to publish the results of our research.

Tenure is a complementary and necessary value to academic and intellectual freedom. There has been a great deal of debate, both public and private, on the necessity of tenure in the modern university, with many proclaiming its dysfunctionality and obsolescence. The most common argument is that tenure displaces merit with seniority and severely limits the flexibility of administrators to accommodate rapid changes in financial climate and programmatic needs. The first assumption assumes that merit and productivity cannot be assured unless administrators are free to fire and discipline without restraint, which considering the global esteem with which American colleges and universities are regarded seems fatuous. The second part of the statement is absolutely true. Tenure puts a significant brake on the implementation of management fads and trends, of which there has been an explosion in the last few decades. Tenure forces administrations to consider carefully why and how they displace faculty and academic programs.

Another argument which appears in academic (and, increasingly, popular) literature is that tenure is no longer needed because academic freedom is no longer a value at risk. McCarthyism is long dead and academic administrators would never consider stifling open debate and the exchange of unpopular ideas in the classroom or in published (paper or electronic) opinion in the library. Librarians are far more tuned into censorship and political correctness than most teaching faculty, for as the AAUP states, we hold the responsibility of ensuring the ready availability of ideas. I know from personal experience that not every academic institution fully appreciates that responsibility. There have been two grievances in the last several years that involved the rights of librarians and teaching faculty to speak openly about their views both in the classroom and at the reference desk. Academic freedom and due process won in both cases (*Silva v. USNH*, 1994).

However, it is not sufficient just to espouse the values of academic and intellectual freedom. These values must be secured contractually. Academic freedom is the cornerstone of every AAUP collective bargaining contract. In the UNH contract, the recognition of academic freedom as "essential" follows immediately after the legal recognition of the chapter and its right to bargain collectively, and the description of the membership. This clause binds the trustees of the university to "their continuing commitment to the principles of academic freedom and its protections as provided in the AAUP Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom" (University System of New Hampshire, 1995). The contract also provides for the process of redress when these principles are violated.

In an ideal working environment, contractual agreements would not be necessary. Educational institutions are not, nor ever were, perfect, and the climate has been undergoing a steady and not altogether desirable change. Librarians need collective bargaining agreements to retain some security in their working lives. Modern colleges and universities are moving away from collegial models of internal governance. According to Dye and Bing (1990), "in its place are hierarchical models of governance, which rely on subordination rather than on equality. All individuals in a hierarchical system must acknowledge superior powers, for diversity within a hierarchical structure can create chaos. For this reason, a common goal of those at the top of the hierarchy is to extend control over as many of the hierarchical layers as possible." Rhoades (1998) sees the economic restructuring of labor in the U.S. mirrored in the university. Highly managed administrative professionals are increasingly directing the work of faculty and there is a steady increase in the reliance on part-time employees.

Librarians are facing an added trend in that there is an increased reliance on technology occurring both in the cataloging of library collections and in the accessing of electronic information. Increased automation has decreased the amount of skilled judgment needed to perform many jobs. This has been particularly true in technical services: work once performed only by professional librarians is now routinely done by paraprofessionals. This makes economic sense for the administration: paraprofessionals are less expensive to employ. However, the values that professional librarians bring to their work, are missing. Inherent in these values is service to the profession as well as the individual institution. We are not only employees of the library, we are part of a profession with a rich history and shared ethics. By contractually defining our status, unions protect our standing as highly educated academic professionals separated by function and responsibilities from nonlibrarians.

Why Not Unionize?

Although I have not promised a balanced view of librarians and unions, it seems only fair to offer some reasons why librarians should not participate in collective bargaining. These include:

- You have excellent parking facilities at a reasonable cost.
- You feel that you can do better financially and professionally by bargaining individually for raises, promotions, and better working conditions.
- You feel that the hierarchy works more efficiently than collegiality in decision-making.
- There is an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between the librarians and the administration.
- You feel that the interests of librarians will be subordinated to the interests of the teaching faculty in the bargaining process.

In this last point, there is some truth to this fear. Librarians and teaching faculties do not share the same day-to-day work loads and responsibilities and it is easy for the minority to be overlooked in the interests of the majority.

My answer to this is to stay involved in the work of the union and voice your concerns often and loudly if necessary. Although I do not represent the library faculty in my work on the negotiating team or the executive committee, I frequently raise questions about policies or positions that do not take the needs of librarians into account. I also act as a union liaison to the library and, hopefully, remind us that there is a significant "community of interest" that exists between us. We can learn as much from our colleagues in the classroom as they can learn from us. Collective bargaining offers the best common ground for us to work together.

Summary

Collective bargaining, then, speaks to three values that we as librarians hold: collective and cooperative decision making, academic and intellectual freedom, and the right of due process. These three principles are at the heart of AAUP collective bargaining contracts. They comprise the values that are the easiest for academic administrators to chip away at in the interest of

financial and administrative flexibility. (My experience has led me to believe that "flexibility" is a euphemism for "whatever we want to do when we want to do it.") Contracts do produce significant constraints as that is their purpose. They also produce trust. Mark Blum (1989), in a workshop on negotiations for The Education Division of SLA, stated it well when he wrote, "Negotiation is a process through which bargaining power may be used to build shared commitment to common objectives and to advance worthy principles and values, as well as to advance specific interests." (In my experience, collective bargaining is often used in higher education.)

There are two more benefits to collective bargaining that are worth mentioning. First, unions are volunteer organizations. Although the executive committee is elected, volunteers do most of the real work of unions. All of the grievance work in my chapter is volunteer work by faculty, with a librarian as the chair. The library faculty also elects a representative to the chapter collective bargaining caucus. If you want to be involved, there are numerous opportunities. By becoming a part of the work, we not only expand our knowledge of what is going on in the work of the teaching faculty, but provide the teaching faculty with more insight and understanding of what we do and its intrinsic value to the professorate and the teaching mission of the institution.

Second, we provide a flattened, more collegial, governance structure than exists in our own workplaces. Libraries are essentially hierarchical places, and with a few notable exceptions, have remained bureaucratically unchanged for the last hundred years. The movement away from librarianship into the management ranks largely determines the measure of our professional success. Unions, however, do not recognize rank or position in the work of negotiation or grievance mediation. Commitment and willingness to work are valued, not titles or numbers of people supervised. These, too, are values that all of us should share.

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