

2011

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Recommended Citation

Blessinger, Kelly D. and Costello, Gina, "The Effect of Economic Recession on Institutional Support for Tenure-Track Librarians in ARL Institutions" (2011). *Faculty Publications*. 43.

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The Effect of Economic Recession on Institutional Support for Tenure-Track Librarians in ARL Institutions

by Kelly Blessinger and Gina Costello

Available online 31 May 2011

The objective of this study was to reveal how the national economic recession has affected the nature and extent of support for tenure track librarians at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions. The authors surveyed 43 ARL Deans and University Librarians to discover the criteria for achieving tenure and the current institutional support for tenure-related activities. All of the responding libraries reported experiencing at least moderate reductions in their overall budgets, with the majority indicating increased workloads for faculty and reductions to monetary support for professional development. Despite this adversity, the survey indicated that the expectations for achieving tenure for librarians in the areas of research and service have not changed.

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INTRODUCTION

The present poor state of the economy has significantly affected higher education and academic libraries throughout the United States. Neither private nor state funded schools have been immune to this crisis. Private schools have been watching their endowments shrink while state legislatures are facing budget shortfalls. That decrease in funding has led to hiring freezes, reduction or elimination of collection development funding, reduction of services, and job loss. Some libraries have also been forced to reduce or cut funding allotted for librarians to attend regional and national conferences or to pursue professional development opportunities. In addition, university-wide hiring freezes and the resulting unfilled positions have led to more job responsibilities for the current work force and possibly less time to devote to promotion and tenure activities. While these reductions may be necessary measures due to the current economic climate, many tenure-track librarians at academic institutions are still expected to be active in professional organizations and scholarship regardless of funding availability. This paper examines how the administrations at tenure-granting institutions in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) perceive the effect of the nationwide recession on their libraries.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While the authors found many articles in the literature about changes to library operations due to budget cuts, there were few articles that addressed what impact, if any, institutional budget cuts had directly on tenure-track librarians. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) standards for faculty status for college and university libraries state that "Librarians should be promoted in rank based on their professional proficiency and effectiveness (performance, service, and scholarship) consistent with stated campus goals".¹ In times of economic stability, support for tenure-related activities such as scholarly publishing and service are often readily available. University libraries, much like their academic department counterparts, place an emphasis on funding and supporting tenure-track faculty in their professional service and development endeavors, sometimes over their tenured colleagues. It behooves the library to support and retain these budding scholars and professionals. However, if library budgets are strained and funds are not as readily available during difficult economic times, are travel and professional development allotments reduced? If travel funds are not available, then are tenure-track librarians still obligated to fulfill oftentimes costly service obligations? If institutional budget cuts force layoffs or hiring freezes leave positions unfilled, would the remaining workforce be expected to "fill the gap" their colleagues left rather than focus on their own scholarship and service?

The authors theorized that a number of ARL institutions would be facing moderate to substantial budget cuts that would affect their ability to fully support their tenure-track faculty in their research and service requirements. This reduction would be due to a decrease in monetary support for non-essential activities, such as professional travel, as well as an increased workload resulting in a lack of time for scholarship. To test this hypothesis, the authors surveyed Deans and University Librarians at 43 ARL institutions where librarians are required to fulfill obligations in research and service to achieve promotion and tenure to determine the following:

- 1) To what extent is the current state of the U.S. economy affecting the libraries' ability to support service opportunities for ARL tenure-track faculty librarians?
- 2) How are libraries dealing with these cuts in regard to tenure-track library faculty?
- 3) Are tenure-track librarians facing an increased workload due to layoffs and job elimination leaving less time for scholarship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evidence of how academic institutions have been adversely affected by the United States economic recession is readily available in the literature. The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), which reports on more than 800 U.S. and Canadian colleges and universities, reported an average loss of 18.7% of endowment funds in institutions in 2009.² Meanwhile, 65% of state institutions faced mid-year budget cuts in 2009, with 44% of these in states where governors have planned cuts or no increase in funding in fiscal year 2010.³

The state of California has been particularly hard hit. Budget cuts in 2009 at the University of California at Berkeley Libraries reached 18%, totaling more than \$4 million. The library lost 30 full time employees, and the student worker budget was cut by 25%.⁴ In 2010, the Stanford University Libraries had to contend with a 15% reduction in budget. This included losing 58 full-time positions, over 30 layoffs, and the closure of 26 open positions. The Stanford Libraries were also forced to reduce collection development allocations and end funding for most staff travel.⁵ On the other side of the country, the state of Florida is not faring much better. A recent survey of the state's library administrators revealed that "all of the reporting SULs [State University Libraries] with the exception of Florida Atlantic University (FAU) have had staff positions frozen during the past two years and five libraries have lost positions".⁶ It was also noted in this article that all these cuts were happening concurrently with an increase in door counts and circulation statistics. Other ARL libraries in the literature challenged with budget cuts include Yale, Cornell, Emory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Tennessee, and the University of Washington.^{7,8}

The faculty status of academic librarians in is a topic that has been widely discussed in the literature of the profession.⁹⁻¹² While a 2001 ACRL study indicated that the majority of academic librarians are afforded at least partial faculty status, less than half (43.6%) of academic librarians responded that they were covered by the same tenure policies as other faculty at their institutions. For library faculty covered by the same policies, this generally means "an emphasis on publishing and presenting papers at conferences, service to the profession and professional development and service to the university and the community".¹³

Conference attendance and participation in professional organizations allow librarians opportunities to learn new concepts and share ideas, stay current with their profession, and develop strong professional networks. "Not only do librarians gain new insights by attending and presenting at national conferences, some types of research may require traveling to gather data, to learn new procedures or systems or to gain access to unique collections".¹⁴ Additionally, participation in governance in professional organizations chapters and divisions allows librarians the opportunity to hone leadership skills that they may not have the opportunity to develop at their home institutions. Dean of the

University of Washington Libraries, Betsy Wilson, acknowledged that "cutting travel and staff development support will restrict participation in national professional associations and in our librarians' ability to maintain currency and relationships that can lead to innovation and improved programs".⁸

The ACRL Statement on Professional Development states that "Colleges and universities should demonstrate their commitment to personal mastery and continuous learning, e.g. through financial support, administrative leave, and/or flexible work schedules for academic librarians engaged in learning activities".¹⁵ A 1989 survey sent to ARL libraries indicated that all of the institutions provided some monetary support to attend professional conferences and that over 90% of the libraries surveyed considered participation in professional organizations an expectation of their librarians' job duties.¹⁶ It is worthwhile to note, however, that service and involvement in professional organizations to achieve promotion and tenure is not "cost-neutral".¹⁷ The library bears not only the financial burden of funding individuals to attend conferences and professional development activities, but also the loss of productivity while the librarian is away.

At the 2009 ACRL conference in Seattle, attendees were asked to complete a survey about what they considered the greatest challenges for themselves and for the profession. "More than 1,300 individuals responded to the survey, and their answers overwhelmingly indicated that funding constraints, budget cutbacks, and declining support for and increasing costs of academic/research libraries are the most challenging issues..." One respondent indicated that "budget cuts/hiring freezes have resulted in an inability to pursue desired projects/materials due to lacks of funds, and more work for us as vacancies are not filled".⁷ The lack of information about how the efforts of tenure-track librarians toward achieving tenure are affected by university library budget constraints prompted the authors to develop a survey for administrators at ARL libraries with faculty tenure status.

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The study detailed in this article was designed to discover how ARL libraries are supporting tenure-track librarians during tough economic times.

METHODOLOGY

The authors consulted ARL Spec Kit 257: The M.L.S. Hiring Requirement (June 2000) and communicated with an ARL representative when deciding which libraries to survey. Forty-two (38%) of the 111 academic ARL libraries responding to the Spec Kit 257 survey indicated that librarians were awarded tenure at their institutions. The authors identified one other library that instituted tenure status since the Spec Kit 257 survey, the University of Louisville, which was also not an ARL member at the time of the initial survey.

The authors checked the institutions' Websites and recorded contact information for the Dean or University Librarian at the 43 institutions in a spreadsheet. All emails requesting survey participation were addressed directly to the Dean or University Librarian and sent individually. The initial email was sent in May 2010 and participants were given three weeks to complete the survey. A week before the completion date, the authors sent a reminder about the survey to all

institutions who had not yet responded to the initial request. The authors received requests from two individuals to extend the deadline, so the survey was not closed until June 2010. The authors elected to use the Basic¹⁸ version of Zoomerang survey software, which was suitable for this relatively small survey instrument and finite number of possible respondents. Using software to create and host the survey instrument saved the authors' time developing a custom online form and locating it on the Web. In addition most online survey software requires minimal technical skills and no long term commitment.

The survey instrument, which is included as Appendix A, was developed by the authors and reviewed by the Dean, the Associate Dean, the Assistant Dean, and a tenured librarian at Louisiana State University Libraries. The survey questions relate to the expectations each institution has for tenure-track librarians and the institutional support available. The instrument consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Closed-ended Likert scale questions asked respondents to rank activities in importance, and multiple choice answers allowed respondents to choose the most appropriate answer or answers provided. Most questions also included an "Other, please specify" option for respondents to provide additional feedback.

RESULTS

The authors received responses from 25 of the 43 institutions contacted, representing a 58% response rate. The responses included 23 institutions in the contiguous United States, one from Canada, and the University of Hawaii. The geographic distribution of the responses from the contiguous United States included a 35% response from colleges in the Midwest, 26% from the West, 26% from the South and 13% from the Northeast.¹⁹

The overall responses indicated that 44% of their libraries had moderate budget reductions (defined as less than 5%), 40% had substantial budget reductions (defined as 5–10%) and 16% of responding libraries reported extensive budget reductions of over 10%. All regions except the Northeast indicated that at least one institution in their area received a 10% or greater budget cut in the past year. The Northeast was the only region reporting that no libraries in its region had received more than a 5% budget cut. Half of the institutions reporting from the Midwest had dealt with a 5–10% cut, while this same budget cut affected 33% of those in the West and 17% of those in the South. Of the reporting institutions, 16 (64%) stated that they had between 5 and 15 librarians currently on the tenure-track. Nine university libraries (36%) stated that they had between 15 to more than 20 librarians on promotion and tenure schedules.

Respondents were asked to rank (1–7) the importance of specific activities toward achieving promotion and tenure at their libraries. Seventy six percent of institutions indicated that "publishing in national journals" was the most important activity for tenure and promotion at their libraries. The activities ranking in places two and three ("serve on national organizations committees" and "give presentations at conferences") both would be aided by institutional benefits including paid leave and monetary travel support. All reporting libraries stated that they are currently providing paid leave for faculty to attend conferences.

"While many institutions have been forced to reduce librarians travel budgets due to cuts, only one school, in the south, indicated that it no longer provided any monetary support for professional travel."

While many institutions have been forced to reduce librarians travel budgets due to cuts, only one school, in the south, indicated that it no longer provided any monetary support for professional travel.

This school also noted, however, that it had experienced extensive budget cuts of 10% or greater. Fifty-two percent of the institutions indicated that travel and conference funds had been reduced in some way. When participants were asked what the expectations for service were if little or no institutional support for conferences and professional development was available, 44% of libraries indicated that, "it was still required to achieve tenure," while 22% indicated that it was "expected but not required." Some institutions strived to keep funding levels for tenure-track faculty intact, such as one institution that noted, "We have tried to sustain travel and research funds to support faculty's ability to meet the requirements for professional involvement." Another institution indicated they had increased their stipends for travel but were providing less paid leave.

When asked the question "How has the recession and subsequent budget cuts to your university affected the library's support for tenure-related activities?," 62% reported that librarians' job duties have increased, leaving less time for service and scholarship. In response to whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "Budget cuts have necessitated layoffs or left positions unfilled at my library, and tenure-track librarians have or will assume job responsibilities and additional duties that would usually be performed by others" 28% of respondents "strongly agreed" while 36% "somewhat agreed" or "agreed" and 32% "disagreed." One institution indicated that this was not relevant to their situation.

When respondents were asked what changes they had implemented in their libraries to make up for the loss of funding for tenure support, 87% stated that they had either begun in-house training or had started using webinars or other online training to help keep faculty current in the profession. Some institutions have made other arrangements for participation in professional organizations, such as one that indicated, "We have video conferencing equipment available which is used frequently for members of the state library association committees." Thirty-nine percent of institutions responded that they had prioritized funding for tenure-track faculty. Ten institutions (40%) indicated that they hadn't cut any funding for tenure-track faculty, and three indicated that they were not planning on making any changes.

None of the 25 libraries responding indicated that there would be any lessening, either officially or unofficially, in their expectations of service and professional development for promotion and tenure during the economic downturn. One school in the Northeast stated that:

There are no changes in tenure requirements for librarians because they are treated similarly [sic] to teaching faculty. While funds for travel are more limited, faculty are expected to invest on their own as well as receiving funds from [sic] the university. During the six years to prepare for tenure, there will probably be various fluctuations in the economy with more funds in some years.

Similar sentiments were expressed by a university in the South which stated that, "The economy does not affect our requirements or expectations." A school in the Midwest indicated, "[the tenure requirements] Will not be lessened, [sic] but may be accomplished other ways—by presenting in webinars and will be using more of own money. Also, funding will be used to support untenured librarians." One school in the West indicated that their tenure requirements had increased over the past year and a half despite economic pressures.

DISCUSSION

One impetus for investigating how the poor economic situation in the U.S. was affecting tenure-track librarians was the budget cuts the authors' own ARL library had been experiencing over the 18 months prior to the start of this project. The authors made the assumption that since ACRL, ARL, and ALA (American Library Association) had issued statements acknowledging the global economic crisis, and national news reports warned of widespread budget problems throughout a multitude of states, that budget crises were widespread.^{20,21} The survey results do indicate that most libraries are facing some budget cuts.

However, the authors were somewhat surprised that the economic downturn had not affected the budgets of ARL libraries more severely. In question eight, ten respondents (43%) indicated that their institutions had experienced “No loss of funding” for tenure support.

While this still leaves 57% of ARL tenure-track librarians funding affected, it is not as widespread as the authors had feared. The authors acknowledge that ARL libraries, often located at their state’s “flagship” university, may feel budget constraints much later or less severely than other university libraries in the state. A survey of non-ARL tenure-granting institutions may yield a different set of results and could make an interesting follow-up study.

“ten respondents (43%) indicated that their institutions had experienced “No loss of funding” for tenure support.”

The survey results indicate that the university libraries in the Northeast have thus far experienced fewer budget cuts than institutions in other parts of the U.S. One could infer that the lessened budget cuts to libraries in the Northeast indicate more support of higher education in general. However, fewer libraries in the area responded to this survey, so the results may not be indicative of a trend. In general, responding ARL libraries in the west suffered greater budget reductions than any other region.

An overwhelming number (76%) of the respondents ranked “publishing in national journals” as the number one activity for achieving tenure, which confirms that scholarship holds more significance than service for tenure at ARL libraries. However the majority of responding institutions also reported that librarians’ job duties have increased, and that budget cuts necessitated layoffs or left positions unfilled during the economic downturn. As a result, tenure-track librarians have or will assume job responsibilities that would usually be performed by others, and the time for scholarship may be less available than in the past. Respondents chose “committee service with national organizations” (37%) and “presenting at conferences” (28%) as the two second most important activities for achieving tenure. Most of these activities require travel, which can be quite costly for any faculty member, but especially for new librarians who may be paying for graduate student loans and getting established in their careers.

Current or future reductions in benefits such as travel allotments prompted nine libraries to offer in-house training and 11 to offer webinars and online training to make up for the loss of funding for tenure support. This trend will likely continue as long as the recession affects higher education and may prompt administrators to regard virtual conference attendance and online training with more significance on a librarian’s vita. It may also signify a trend in the predominant way that librarians communicate for committee work if less travel and conference-going occur. Low cost virtual conferences like the “ACRL/LLAMA Spring Virtual Institute “Doing Well by Doing Good”: Entrepreneurial Leadership for Librarians” (<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/events/springvirtualinstitute.cfm>) and subsidized professional development opportunities like the ACRL Scholarly Communications 101 Roadshows (<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/issues/scholcomm/roadshow.cfm>) may become increasingly popular for convenience and cost-savings.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging that the economic recession has had a negative impact on library funding, the authors sought to reveal how budget reductions at tenure-granting ARL institutions have affected the

nature and extent of support for tenure-track librarians. This research explored ARL Libraries administrators’ expectations for tenure-track faculty, institutional support for tenure-related activities, and the effect of the recession on tenure support.

Despite over half of the responding institutions reporting that tenure-track librarians were facing increased job duties and reduced support for travel, the expectations toward research and service have remained unchanged. These results point to a generally high expectation of ARL Libraries administrators for tenure-track librarians to maintain a similar level of service activity as their counterparts who were granted tenure in presumably better economic times.

While opportunities other than national conference attendance and professional travel are available for professional development, the authors assert that this and other service-oriented activities are essential elements of the profession. The effects of reductions in support for service-oriented activities for tenure-track librarians may not be felt or recognized for many years. Conference attendance and professional service, such as committee appointments, provide librarians the opportunity to network, to learn from their colleagues, and to gain leadership experience. Librarians on the tenure-track who need opportunities to grow in the profession will likely be the most affected by reductions in travel and professional development budgets.

“The popularity of virtual meetings and asynchronous professional development may signal a re-thinking in what constitutes service and its applicability toward achievement of tenure status.”

The popularity of virtual meetings and asynchronous professional development may signal a re-thinking in what constitutes service and its applicability toward achievement of tenure status. Virtual poster sessions and pre-recorded presentations may soon be regarded the same as the in-person equivalents. The authors note that assistance and support of scholarly research in times of budget shortfalls is more problematic and deserves further study. The extent and type of support for research-related activities that institutions, particularly ARL members, are providing to tenure-track librarians would be a useful addition to the literature. Many institutions may offer time away from work for research activities or other non-monetary benefits that are difficult to measure. Another related area worthy of investigation would be a survey of tenure-track librarians to determine their opinions on achieving tenure with reduced resources.

Acknowledgment: Special thanks to Paul Hrycaj for reviewing this manuscript.

APPENDIX A. SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at [doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2011.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2011.04.004).

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