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# Workplace culture in academic libraries : the early 21st century

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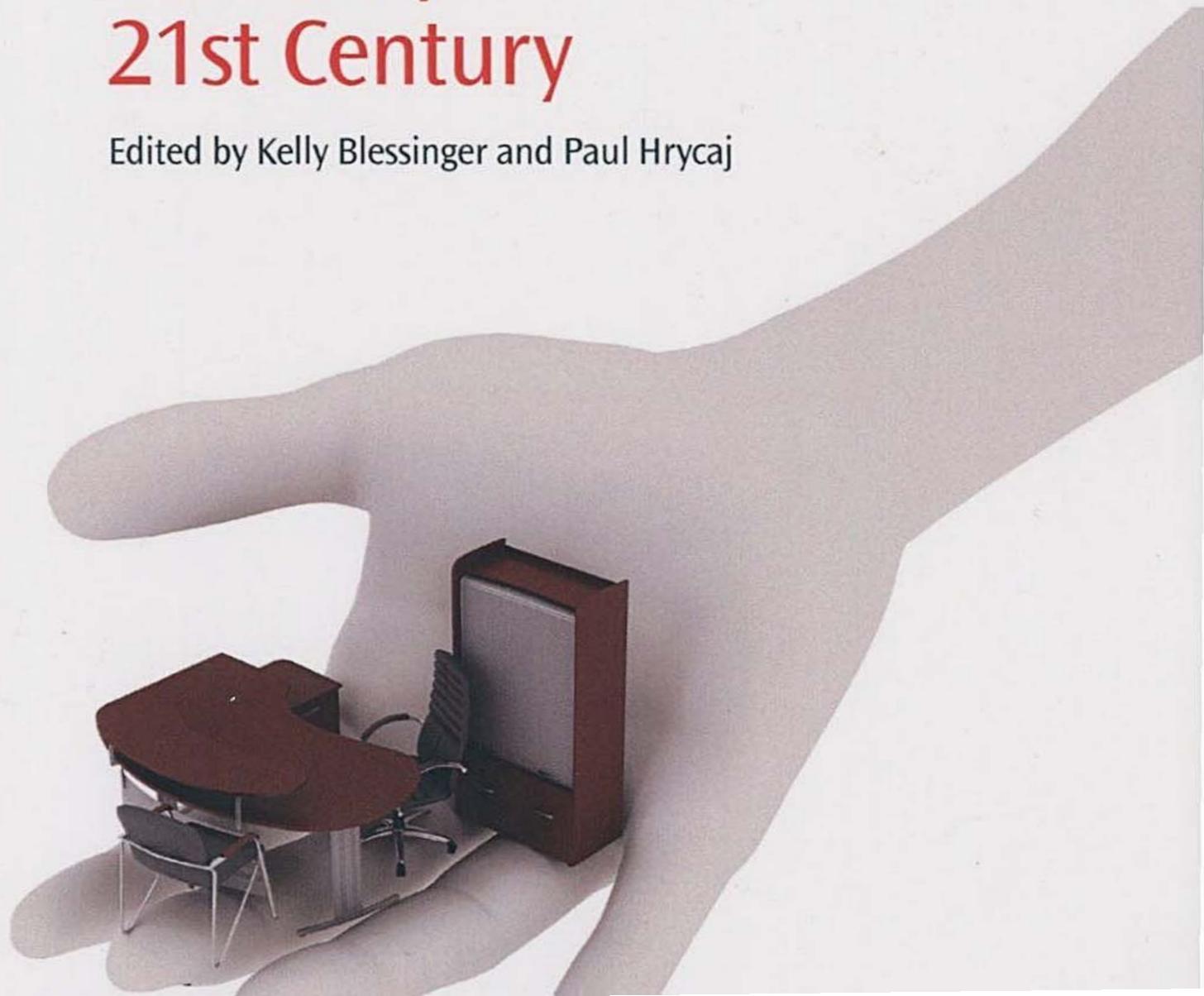
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# Workplace Culture in Academic Libraries

The early  
21st Century

Edited by Kelly Blessinger and Paul Hrycaj



**Introduction to *Workplace Culture in Academic Libraries***  
**Edited by Kelly Blessinger and Paul Hrycaj**

Librarians and library staff are typically focused on serving the needs of library users, and this can lead them to lose sight of the fact that libraries are also places of work. The library literature is replete with articles about how to improve services, facilities, and systems for library users, but there are relatively few articles about how to improve libraries for library workers. Librarians and library staff should be concerned with having a good environment in which to work, and improving libraries for library workers will doubtless result in better and more productive organizations.

One of the elements that contribute to the quality of a workplace for employees, if not the most important one, is the culture of that workplace. Workplace culture is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Business and Management* as “the values, customs, rituals, attitudes, and norms shared by the members of an organization, which have to be learnt and accepted by new members of the organization...”<sup>1</sup> A positive/healthy culture, where new ideas are encouraged, and where mistakes are accepted as part of the learning process, can lead to greater success and productivity for the organization. It can also create less employee anxiety and depression, increase employee satisfaction, raise motivation, and lower absenteeism.<sup>2</sup>

This volume was compiled to review current workplace cultures in academic libraries and ways to improve those cultures. Basic questions this book is concerned with are: “What conditions contribute to an excellent academic library work environment? What helps to make a particular academic library a great place to work?” Unlike other works published in this area, this work is neither a “how-to” guide nor a collection of highly theoretical and speculative essays. Rather, contributions to this collection primarily discuss successful current programs pertaining to workplace culture in academic libraries and place the discussion in a scholarly context, particularly by considering similar programs and/or the history of the topic as reviewed in the library literature. It is hoped that, because this work is

from the practitioner's standpoint, each contribution will still have significant practical value by providing useful ideas and suggestions for consideration by other academic libraries. Chapters relate to the physical environment, diversity, retention of quality staff, staff morale, interaction between departments, communication/information sharing, handling of complaints, and management styles conducive to healthy workplaces.

The essays in the section "Overview of Workplace Culture" begin the book with some "meta" workplace culture issues, such as defining the concept of workplace culture, workplace culture and leadership, the creation of a "preferred" workplace culture, and a case study that took place in a large metropolitan academic library. The chapter on "Assessment" by MacDonald discusses the different tools that academic libraries have used to assess their culture and plan for improvement. Some academic libraries have used professionally-produced tools, such as ClimateQUAL<sup>®</sup>,<sup>3</sup> to define their culture, while other libraries have created or adapted tools of their own.

The book contains a number of chapters related to staff diversity in academic libraries. Topics include making workplaces inclusive toward co-workers from diverse backgrounds; the importance for library leaders to develop cultural competences so they can improve interaction with diverse staff; and developing cultural competencies specifically toward Asian Pacific-American co-workers, a fast-rising group in academic libraries. The topic of diversity relates to more than just ethnicity, and in their chapter, Garnar and McCaffrey analyze the commentary of focus groups of different generations of librarians in regard to their differing visions of twenty-first century academic libraries. In the section on "Acclimation for New Librarians," Miller is specifically concerned with new librarians in academic libraries, and she advocates for special attention to be paid to this group. Not only do new librarians need help in being acclimated to their new profession, but their newness to the profession makes them a fertile source of fresh ideas.

The issue of communication is bound to be raised in any thorough discussion of workplace culture. There is a need for communication at all levels; communication, however, is an ongoing effort, and implementing and maintaining good communication requires concerted effort and time. The issue of interdepartmental communication is discussed by Mautino and Lorenzen, and interdepartmental collaboration through communication is addressed by Lubas and Bordeianu. Blessing focuses on the crucial aspect in a workplace culture of good communication flowing from the leadership to the staff, a characteristic of transparent leadership. The topic of workspace redesign projects is covered in two chapters, one by vanDuinkerken and MacDonald, the other by Weisbrod. The vanDuirkerken/MacDonald chapter, on the challenges of library staff workspace redesign, states that administrators frequently tend to make the mistake of announcing the need for a change and then moving directly to implementation, without conducting staff interviews, observing staff work behavior, and engaging in inclusive planning. Tedford, Corbett, and Lock report on the improvements in the workplace culture of their library after an inspirational library director was hired. While this director was concerned with making the library more innovative, she accomplished this by being more open to communication from her staff, listening more closely to staff ideas and making them feel more a part of the decision-making process for new programs at the library.

Fostering civility and managing conflict are two sides of the same coin of interpersonal relationships, one focusing on the positive and the other the negative. Snavelly and Hudson's chapter considers a number of ways to encourage civility in an academic library. And in her chapter, Plocharczyk discusses how best to manage conflict in academic libraries. She argues that conflict does not have to be seen only in a negative light; when handled constructively, it can bring about necessary and positive change.

Tenure for librarians is another weighty issue in academic librarianship, and two chapters deal with this issue directly. While the research in the article by Hepburn noted that most academic librarians

hold faculty rank, what that actually meant in terms of tenure or other conditions varied. Hepburn investigates the different types of faculty status to see what effect, if any, the varying statuses had on the culture of libraries, and he reports on a survey he implemented to help to determine these perceptions. Bruxvoort looks at the different ways mentoring, particularly mentoring tenure-track librarians, can be handled and then determines best practices for this.

Change is omnipresent in the twenty-first century academic library, with trends including major budget cuts due to the global economic recession, increased purchasing of and access to e-books, and repurposing of space to allow for more collaborative work and study spaces. Most academic libraries are currently facing budget cuts, and two articles in this book elaborate on how academic libraries can provide non-monetary awards and morale boosters. Johnson, Stoffan, and Carstens take up the topic of motivating library staff in a time when monetary incentives are not an option. They conclude by recommending practices that “include giving employees the maximum possible control over their physical environment and individual work schedules; providing them with opportunities to grow in their job and learn about other departments in the library; providing them with a possible career path within the library; including staff on library committees; attempting to communicate effectively with all staff; and praising employees’ accomplishments whenever appropriate.” And while a discussion of enhancing staff morale could take a number of directions, Jennings and Tvaruzka’s treatment of this issue in their chapter focuses on an effort to increase the level of fun that co-workers have in the library while still being mindful of budget constraints.

The major themes of this book, diversity, communication, and leadership, seem to fall under the umbrella of one overarching idea: respect. Increasing the respect for diversity in all of its manifestations, for co-workers, for the value of staff to the point that communication with them, their ideas, and their motivation and development are major concerns of leadership, these things should be on the agenda if the goal is to improve the workplace cultures of academic libraries. The editors hope

that this book will provide substantive suggestions and inspiration for academic librarians to improve the respect between their co-workers and leaders, to result in enhanced workplace cultures that will provide optimal conditions for library workers.

### References

1. Oxford Dictionary of Business and Management, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. "Making Work Fun: An Important Role for Managers," *SAM Advanced Management Journal* 67, no. 1 (2002): 4-8, 21; Katherine M. Hudson, "Transforming a Conservative Company – One Laugh at a Time," *Harvard Business Review* 79, no. 7 (2001) 45-53; Mildred Golden Pryor et al. "Workplace Fun and its Correlates: A Conceptual Inquiry," *International Journal of Management* 27, no. 2 (2010): 294-302.
3. ClimateQUAL®: Organizational Climate and Diversity Assessment is an assessment of library staff perceptions concerning (a) their library's commitment to the principles of diversity, (b) organizational policies and procedures, and (c) staff attitudes. It is an online survey with questions designed to understand the impact perceptions have on service quality in a library setting. The survey addresses a number of climate issues, such as diversity, teamwork, learning, and fairness, as well as current managerial practices, and staff attitudes and beliefs. From <http://www.climatequal.org/about>, Accessed 8/1/2012.