

Embracing the Challenge of Change Through Collegial Decision-Making

Barbara Fister and Kathie Martin

Twenty years ago Harlan Cleveland declared that the emergence of a global information society had brought on “the twilight of hierarchy.” In a world in which knowledge was changing the way we work and in which information is inherently uncontrollable and prone to diffusion, hierarchy—which relies on control, secrecy, limited access to resources, and the confines of location—is no longer effective, or even an option. The implications for work relationships in this new, information-rich environment are profound: “Collegial not command structures become the more natural basis for organization.”¹

How ironic that libraries, organizations that are all about sharing information democratically for the public good, still tend to draw their organization charts along the lines of early twentieth century industrial models, with knowledgeable decision-makers and supervisors concentrated at the top, those who carry out the work at the bottom. The conditions Cleveland describes have rendered these organizational structures obsolete in daily practice—but not when it comes to the dis-

tribution of rewards. There is a troubling disjunction between how libraries work and how library work is institutionally represented and rewarded.

Rationalist models of administration, developed in the early twentieth century, were grounded in the belief that information could improve industrial processes, and that the administrator’s job was to conduct informed analysis to control and improve the production of goods.² These models presumed information was in scarce supply, available only to administrators, who were uniquely qualified to gather, interpret, and deploy it. Those old assumptions still influence organization charts, but the ground under them has crumbled. “An information-rich environment is a sharing environment” according to Cleveland, and as information becomes diffused, so inevitably does power. Planning no longer can be performed by a few leaders on behalf of the organization, but is a dynamic and improvisational process led by a common understanding of where the organization is going. In terms of public-service institutions, these new conditions require participation

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from all members of the organization and from the public they serve. That is the only way for organizations to make what Cleveland describes as “decisions that stick.”³

Externally, libraries do such a good job of diffusing information, adapting to new conditions, soliciting user response, and sharing ownership of the results, its groundbreaking work is so transparent as to be nearly invisible. Historian Edward Ayers has found that, though merging the distinct cultures of IT and academia has proven difficult, it is librarians who “have seen the farthest, done the most, accepted the hardest challenges, and demonstrated most clearly the benefits of digital information. In the process they have turned their own field upside down and have revolutionized their professional training. It is a testament to their success that we take their achievement—and their information-management systems—for granted.”⁴

Libraries have a border culture that creolizes IT and academia, mingling the transparency, instability, and “everywhere but nowhere” diffusiveness characteristic of IT with the local knowledge, historical rootedness, and respect for different ways of knowing inherent among academics. But curiously, most library organization charts appear to belong to a third culture: that of the traditional production facility that Harlan Cleveland believed was outmoded twenty years ago. When library administrators look for models that will enable more effective adaptation to rapid change, they often seek out prophets from the profit sector, ignoring (perhaps because it is so obvious, but more likely because it is fundamentally radical) the extraordinary potential of a tradition right under their noses: the collegial self-governance of academic departments.

Collegial decision-making operates along the same principles as those attributed by Michael Polanyi to what he called “the Republic of Science,” the process of negotiation and discovery used to create, refine, and rethink knowledge. Membership in this republic requires three essential contributions: professional expertise, trust, and a disinterested urge to further the work of the whole. Authority rests neither in the individual nor in a higher body that organizes the work, but in the members of the group. “[T]his authority is dynamic; its continued existence depends on its constant self-renewal through the originality of its followers.” It operates within tradition built on commonly-held core values, but depends on creativity to continue its

work, and to do so guarantees self-determination and freedom for all members “to speak the truth as they know it.” This conversation among members is necessary because the body of knowledge is too complex and diverse to be mastered by one person or governing board; various members of the community are counted on to contribute their expertise. This is the ideal of the self-governing academic department—and a natural structure for libraries which, after all, exist to enable the activities of this republic.⁵

New roles

Academic librarians have taken on new tasks that deepen and extend their traditional commitment to service, collection-building, and instruction. They are playing an increasingly activist role in the future of scholarly publishing and in the shaping of information policy of all kinds, recognizing the profession’s core values can inform and contribute to this new global information society. According to Siva Vaidhyathan, this work is more important than ever because as the ideological, economic, and legal struggles over the control of information are heating up, the library “embodies Enlightenment ideals in the best sense.”⁶ We all stand to lose a great deal if the profession fails to take up this challenge.

Paraprofessionals, in turn, are taking responsibility for key library functions. They increasingly manage essential library operations such as circulation and reserves, cataloging and acquisitions, and resource sharing through complex interlibrary loan protocols. Paraprofessional work involves constant change: new technologies offer new opportunities to distribute more information more widely, which requires on-the-fly and continual learning, planning, decision-making, and retraining of staff. Because these systems change constantly, paraprofessional involvement in user groups and consortial decisions are increasingly influential; they know these complex systems through daily use better than anyone else, so need to be in on the efforts to improve them. And paraprofessionals handle the majority of library personnel training and supervision. The academic library’s largest group of employees is student assistants⁷—but though the tasks they perform are essential and training is complicated by their limited work hours and built-in turnover, their supervision counts for little in human resources departments’ assessment of the relative value of positions.

Sociologists Rodolfo Alvarez and Leah Robin point out that most organizational theory research relies on top-level managers as cultural informants.⁸ Unfortunately, managers don't always understand or value the work of other participants well enough to do it justice. The quiet revolution in integrating digital systems and library services that Ayers finds so heroic has turned the lights out on library hierarchy, but powerbrokers at the highest levels haven't noticed. After all, libraries appear to work extremely well. Why change the rulebook just because the rules have changed?

According to Mary Guy, bringing the rulebook—including the organization chart, position descriptions, and rewards—in alignment with practice is important. “Organizational architecture” provides an examination of formal and informal structures and “replaces a simplistic focus on organizational structure with a holistic focus on the interaction between structure, people, mission, and behavior. A well-designed organization is one in which the architectural elements are congruent with one another.”⁹ On an ethical level, bringing library structures and reward systems into alignment with contemporary library work is a matter of social justice. On a practical level, it's a matter of survival for the profession. We can't continue to have increasingly higher expectations of paraprofessionals without sooner or later paying the price—whether it comes in the form of better wages or in burnout.

Blurred vision

The literature dealing with librarian/paraprofessional relationships tends to focus on two issues. One concerns the “blurring” of positions. Reformers often exhort librarians to hand off routines to paraprofessionals so librarians can engage in more significant work. According to Allen Veaner, though nearly every individual working in libraries today can be considered a “knowledge worker,” there is a natural dividing line between librarians and other library employees: librarians make programmatic decisions; paraprofessionals carry out those decisions by following established procedures.¹⁰ Though he urges librarians to retain that distinction, the pace of change in both librarian and paraprofessional roles has obliterated routine at all levels. Paraprofessionals who manage library units are the experts in their areas of responsibility; they can't look to librarians to reprogram their routines for them. Still, many libraries require that unit managers secure permission to make

decisions paraprofessionals are uniquely qualified to make—a situation that seems scripted for a Monty Python routine, but is symptomatic of the disjunction between archaic organizational structures and the contemporary reality of library work.

Larry Oberg has taken a somewhat different stand on the issue of blurred identities. He, like Veaner, believes librarians should concentrate on professional work and let capable paraprofessionals manage many library operations. But he also points out that as we've handed off responsibilities to paraprofessionals, we've done a poor job of communicating to human resources departments how significantly their work has changed and how important it is.¹¹ Though these jobs now have far more in common with IT than clerical positions, they are not perceived (or rewarded) that way. Because most library paraprofessionals are female, the work they do is trivialized as “women's work.” Gender inequality and ingrained images of libraries as old-fashioned, orderly, and tradition-driven workplaces are hard to overcome, especially if library directors share those prejudices about paraprofessionals and their work.

Joan Bechtel has argued persuasively that paraprofessionals' work is undermined when librarians fail to provide them with respect, fairness, sufficient training, and freedom to do their work without undue interference.¹² Interestingly, in addition to advocating for collegial management as an effective and professionally satisfying means of carrying out the library's mission, she has argued conversation is an appropriate paradigm for libraries, a profound contribution to our self-understanding.¹³ It is through conversation, fostered by libraries, that new knowledge happens. And this paradigm of conversation can replace the factory-floor organizational structures so commonly used in libraries.

Collegial decision-making makes sense for libraries because it is architecturally sound. It diffuses authority through sharing expertise, trust, and common goals. Like Polanyi's Republic of Science, it balances tradition and innovation, testing new ideas rigorously, but celebrating those that produce the most profound change. Renewal comes through the creativity of its members, whose disinterested curiosity is driven by a shared belief in the value of furthering knowledge.

One library's experience

In the mid-nineties, many of the librarians and para-

professionals at Gustavus Adolphus College recognized that sharing decision-making made sense for our small, liberal arts library.¹⁴ This recognition involved both redefining librarians' roles and recognizing the paradigmatic shift in librarian/paraprofessional relationships. Putting those changes in place is still a work in progress.

The first step, the easiest one in retrospect, was to rethink librarians' identities so they were more integrative. We agreed to share responsibility for reference and instruction, collection development, and management of the library's resources while each librarian would retain major responsibility for an area of specialization such as systems or instruction. Rather than have a director, we would elect a chair every three years as other departments did. The chair, as "first among equals," would add the tasks of coordinating the library's efforts and liaison with the administration to his or her portfolio. In negotiating this structural change with the administration, a description of this relationship was scribbled on a notepad during a meeting and thereafter was referred to as "the crude pie chart."

The chart was helpful, but incomplete; it did not include the essential contributions to decision-making and management made by paraprofessionals. Though faculty librarians were already acculturated to collegial decision-making, having participated in it across campus, we needed to clarify and to extend the collegial model to include paraprofessional roles. While preparing an argument for the human resources department that these positions needed to be reclassified, job descriptions were revised to better reflect both shared and specialized responsibilities. During these discussions, particularly as we discovered the areas of common ground among positions, a revised organizational chart emerged.

This new chart, two overlapping circles of responsibilities—initially dubbed "the crude pie chart on drugs"—erased the old vestiges of hierarchy lodged in nominal supervisory roles given to librarians over paraprofessionals and showed the collegial conversation extended to the entire library staff. The new chart is not a topographic map of which positions are highest and lowest, but rather a political map that shows where decisions are made. Some are made individually by specialists, some are shared by paraprofessionals or by librarians as a group, some are made by committees, and some are made by all of us. The department chair

coordinates the work of the whole, sees to it conditions are receptive for ironing out difficulties, and serves as the liaison to the college's chief academic officer to whom the library reports. The role of the chair is primarily one of service rather than leadership; all members of the department are expected to provide collective leadership.

James T. Minor points out that choosing between collegial and hierarchical models won't in itself lead to change.¹⁵ Aligning theory and practice is an ongoing process of renegotiation of roles, redefinition of terms, and cultural and situational factors. Some library professionals, according to Philip Howze, prefer routines and only accept change if it comes in small steps.¹⁶ But as Kathlin Ray has pointed out, routine went the way of the clockwork Newtonian universe. The postmodern library needs to be tolerant of ambiguity, flexible, and able to manage in a quantum world of discontinuity.¹⁷ An organizational structure that acknowledges change is routine and routines constantly change is one that is based on conversation and action, not on chains of command. In Polanyi's words, this form of shared authority is "dynamic"—a necessity for these volatile times.

One requirement of the collegial library organization is that learning on the part of all staff needs to be encouraged at a deep and critical level. This is more than training or morale-building exercises that help workers adjust to change but don't call the organization's fundamental goals into question. It requires "substantive learning" which, according to Curtis Ventress, "is defined as a normative or ethical inquiry that encourages the questioning and examination of organizational norms and practices that are incidental to the issues of efficiency, effectiveness, and maintenance." This sort of learning is "values-creating rather than value-conserving."¹⁸ In order to align theory and practice, collegial organizations must be willing to take that risk.

Another requirement is the courage on the part of members to speak up, and that requires trust. "Collegial" is not synonymous with "congenial."¹⁹ Collegial decision-making means sharing ideas even when they challenge the status quo or make colleagues uncomfortable. "Power, politics, and conflict are interrelated, inevitable facts of life in organizations" according to David Carnevale, which means organizations need to create healthy forms of conflict resolution. "Trust is raised when influence strategies are open, honest, and civil. On the other hand, when the expression of

disagreements are not permitted or where conflict is dysfunctional and zero-sum, trust is lessened.” He believes that “governance systems can be crafted that take advantage of people’s best, not their worst, tendencies.” But the rationalist, mass production model so common in library organizations doesn’t do that. “In terms of developing trust and high performance over the long haul, the influence of bureaucratic structures is deadly . . . Bureaucracy is a monument to mistrust.”²⁰

Continuing challenges

Once engaged in collegial library management, a certain nostalgia for hierarchy can set in. Accountability, it seems, is easier when someone else does it for you. Sharing authority means holding one another to standards, and that can’t mean settling for the lowest common denominator. There needs to be a way for benchmarks to be set and measures to be taken. A healthy climate of frank and constructive communication needs to be developed and nurtured. Moving from a culture of distrust and reliance on authority is not easy—not just for the individuals involved, but because it requires significant changes in the way the institution perceives and rewards paraprofessionals.

For faculty librarians (in situations where “faculty status” is not merely a label but includes librarians as peers of faculty in other departments), the process of earning tenure and promotion provides a chance for the community to evaluate and reward their colleagues’ work; expectations for teaching, scholarship, and service are articulated, if not explicitly, and it is possible to advance through the ranks by developing one’s expertise and demonstrating a pattern of service to the institution. This is the only form of “merit pay” that is truly collegial, not determined by a remote higher authority, but by the collective. Paraprofessionals have no parallel promotional ladder. The only way up is out—to another job. Providing a career ladder for paraprofessionals is key to encouraging creativity and risk-taking, as well as to retaining skilled and dedicated colleagues.²¹ The concept of rank—allowing those who grow in their ability to provide service and leadership while deepening their specialty, proving their worth through rigorous peer review—is a model for a paraprofessional rewards system consistent with collegial decision making.²²

Another issue that needs to be addressed creatively in the library community is how to ensure that the intellectual freedom we defend in our “Library Bill

of Rights” is honored in the workplace. Once faculty librarians have earned tenure, they can afford to have the courage of their convictions without risking their livelihoods. That’s what tenure is for—to provide conditions for expressing new and possibly unpopular ideas without threat of repercussions. A collegial library must ensure that even without the guarantees of that extraordinary social contract, all of its membership respects and protects those who “speak the truth as they know it.”²³

There is an unavoidable abundance of evidence that collegial management doesn’t always work. A list of dysfunctional departments could be made at just about any college or university campus. Members may avoid confronting colleagues who aren’t pulling their weight or let personal differences color their interactions; they don’t meet often enough or have long and unproductive meetings; they sometimes cower under their desks and wait for a dean or provost to solve the problems that they should be solving themselves. Organizational structures don’t in themselves change human behavior.

But libraries are badly in need of a new model for self-organization, one that makes the most of its members’ talents, invites and nurtures creativity, and allows dynamic responses to an always-changing environment, rewarding growth without requiring talented workers to go elsewhere for rewards. The self-regulating, self-organizing, dynamic collegial model of peers working together, sharing their expertise, balancing individual curiosity with a common goal of advancing knowledge provides a rich blueprint for library organizational architecture. And it is one uniquely suited to what libraries do: sustain and enrich the ongoing conversation that creates new knowledge.

The curious thing is that many libraries already operate this way in spite of bureaucratic and unhelpful organizational structures. They simply ignore the hierarchy, find work-arounds, or create unofficial structures that work better—a marketplace of ideas that is more or less a functional black market. It is the nature of those who work in libraries to serve, to share, to innovate. Our culture is already collaborative and responsive to our users. We have nothing to lose but our chains of authority.

The true challenge that faces us as the profession reinvents itself is to fight for equitable and just reward systems with paths for advancement that keep our best

members invested and involved, a climate of intellectual freedom to safely hold the conversations we need to have, and a commitment to use those conversations to build the organizational architecture needed for these challenging times.

We're not there yet. We have a better organizational chart at Gustavus than we had before, we are having better conversations both within the library and with the entire campus, and after years of struggle most paraprofessional employees have had slight upgrades in their positions, but we haven't been successful in creating a rewards system that is consistent with the collegial model. Our political map of where decisions are made does not extend to those parts of the institution where wages and ranks are set for non-faculty library workers. As a small and understaffed organization, paraprofessionals have had to take on responsibilities that in many libraries are handled by librarians, as well as training students to handle many tasks that were previously done by full-time staff. Though this "efficient" use of staff is a trend in libraries everywhere, we've probably moved further in this direction than most. Unfortunately, we have failed to make clear to higher decision-makers in the administration what paraprofessionals contribute and what's at stake if, without adequate paths for advancement, they decide it's not worth it.

Though librarians wring their hands about their self-perception of low status, some outside the profession consider the work done in libraries "heroic."²⁴ Until academic libraries care enough about our core values to actually honor them in our own workplaces, and fight to make clearer to those we serve how very much is at stake, we may find that libraries share the same twilight as hierarchy. It's a lingering twilight to be sure, already twenty years in the making, but if libraries really are the embodiment of Enlightenment ideals, we can't afford to cling to archaic organizational structures while we let the lights go out.

Notes

1. Harlan Cleveland, "The Twilight of Hierarchy: Speculations on the Global Information Society," *Public Administration Review* 45, no. 1 (January/February 1985): 188.
2. Robert B. Denhardt, "Organization Theory," in *The International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998): 1554–70.

3. Harlan Cleveland, 187–88.
4. Edward L. Ayers, "The Academic Culture and the IT Culture: Their Effect on Teaching and Scholarship," *EDUCAUSE Review* 39, no. 6 (November/December 2004): 50.
5. Michael Polanyi, "The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory," in *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969): 49–72. Also available at the Polanyi Society Website, <<http://www.mwsc.edu/orgs/polanyi/mp-repsc.htm>> (10 December 2004).
6. Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Anarchist in the Library: How the Clash Between Freedom And Control is Hacking the Real World and Crashing the System* (New York: Basic, 2004): 119.
7. Though paraprofessionals and librarians outnumber student employees in terms of FTEs, the total number of students requiring training and supervision is, of course, much higher. If it is assumed student employees work twenty hours a week or less, ACRL statistics indicate they most certainly are the largest group of employees, albeit part-time. Association of College and Research Libraries. "Summary Data: Personnel and Public Services, All Libraries Reporting," *2003 Statistical Summaries for Academic Libraries*, <<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/statisticssummaries/2003a/B12.pdf>> (10 December 2004).
8. Rodolfo Alvarez and Leah Robin, "Organizational Structure," in *The Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2nd edition (New York: Macmillan, 2000): 2002–17.
9. Mary Guy, "Organizational Architecture," in *The International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998): 1561.
10. Allen B. Veaner, "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II," *College and Research Libraries* 55, no. 5 (September 1994): 388–402.
11. Larry Oberg, "The Role, Status, and Working Conditions of Paraprofessionals: A National Survey of Academic Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 53, no. 3 (May 1992): 215–38.
12. Joan Bechtel, "Leadership Lessons Learned from Managing and Being Managed," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 18, no. 6 (January 1993): 352–57.
13. Joan Bechtel, "Conversation, a New Paradigm for Librarianship?" *College and Research Libraries* 47 (May 1986): 219–24.
14. David Lesniaksi, Kris Huber MacPherson, Barbara Fister, and Steve McKinzie. "Collegial Leadership in Academic Libraries," in *Crossing the Divide: Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference of the Association of College and*

Research Libraries. Ed. Hugh Thompson (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001): 233–39. Also available at <<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlvents/lesniaski.pdf>> (10 December 2004).

15. James T. Minor, “Four Challenges Facing Academic Senates,” *Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal* (summer 2004): 125–40.

16. Philip C. Howze, “Collegiality, Collegial Management, and Academic Libraries,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29, no. 1 (January 2003): 40–43.

17. Kathlin L. Ray, “The Postmodern Library in an Age of Assessment,” in *Crossing the Divide: Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries*. Ed. Hugh Thompson (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001): 250–54. Also available at <<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlvents/kray.pdf>> (10 December 2004).

18. Curtis Ventriss, “Organizational Learning,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998): 1578.

19. Philip Howze.

20. David Carnevale, “Organizational Trust,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration*.

(Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998): 1586.

21. For a practical description of how such a program might work, see Tara Ludlow and Deborah Stansbury Sunday, “Career Paths for Paraprofessionals: Your Ladder to Success,” *Library Administration and Management* 16.4 (fall 2002): 198–202.

22. This is not to say only libraries at which librarians have faculty status can manage themselves collegially. In fact, two large-scale studies suggest faculty status in itself does not guarantee a sense of involvement and ownership in decision-making. See Bonnie Horenstein, “Job Satisfaction of Academic Librarians: An Examination of the Relationships Between Satisfaction, Faculty Status, and Participation,” *College and Research Libraries* 54 (May 1993): 255–69; Gloria J. Leckie and Jim Brett, “Job Satisfaction of Canadian University Librarians: A National Survey,” *College and Research Libraries* 58, no. 1 (January 1997): 31–47. These studies both find participation is key; the self-organizing structure of the academic department could provide a design for encouraging and rewarding activist participation.

23. Michael Polanyi.

24. Both Ayers and Vaidhyanathan refer to librarians as “heroes.”