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# Human Resource Administration in the Academic Library

Dennis R. Defa

Libraries at colleges and universities provide a challenging environment for the practice of human resource (HR) administration. The dynamics and structure of the academic library within the higher education community create complex environments for the library administrator attempting to navigate the myriad rules and regulations (state, federal, and institutional) that affect staff recruiting, hiring, processing, compensating, and related functions for library personnel. Depending upon the complexities of the HR function in any academic library, the organization may be best served by designating an HR expert as a member of the library's administrative team. This article will review the HR function at the college and university level, then evaluate specific structures of the academic library within this broader organization. The intent is to help both library and campus HR administrators in understanding each other's perspectives on HR issues and to evaluate the importance of an in-house HR expert to address the situations encountered in the day-to-day administration of the library.

A review of the relevant library literature reveals that while there are numerous examples of discussions relating to HR issues and how to resolve or handle specific situations, there is very little information regarding the design or use of the administrative HR function. Questions relating to the best practice when deciding how the HR function in the academic library is established are missing from the general library literature.<sup>1</sup> The journal *College and University Professional Association—Human Resources (CUPA—HR)* has not provided any in-depth discussion on developing or transforming the HR office in an academic library and what role the library's unique staffing circumstances should play in the overall HR function on a campus.<sup>2</sup>

The complexities of the HR challenges for library administrators are unique to the individual college or university. Size matters. A basic caveat: the more complex the institution, the more complex the library organization. For example, when comparing libraries at a research university to those at a comprehensive university or community college, it is evident that research libraries are physically large, have staff that may number in the several hundreds, are generally open more hours a day, and may serve several

sites on a campus or in the community. By contrast, while libraries in a small community college may not have the numbers of employees compared to a large research university, they may still have the same variety of HR issues, only at a lesser scale. These specific organizational elements in different libraries create dynamic environments that, in many ways, are unlike any other on campus. While many college and university administrators believe that their office, department, or function is somehow different from the rest of the institution, there are some organizational and structural elements of the academic library that truly are unique in the organization.<sup>3</sup> These factors, combined with federal and state laws regarding employment, benefits, compensation, discipline, and termination that continually become more complicated, make the case for an in-house HR specialist.

## Campus Human Resources

The campus HR operation is charged with a variety of responsibilities that make it one of a relatively few departments that have direct, campuswide effects. The functions usually include, but are not limited to: staff employment, classification, salary and benefits administration, employee/labor relations, training and development, employee assistance, workers compensation, safety, and so on. Because of the nature of these responsibilities, the campus HR operation is, in some fashion, responsible for every employee on the campus. Faculty benefits are usually administered through the HR department. Student employment may be separate, but payroll forms and I-9 certification typically come to HR to be processed. Often, the HR department is the primary repository of all official employee files. The HR function at an academic institution serves a multifaceted community, and the skill level and administrative expertise of the department varies according to the size and type of institution. As a general rule, the larger an organization, the more decentralized the HR function.

The HR department's professional employees are required to understand the overall makeup and operation of their institutions. Expertise with the organizational dynamics between the various vice presidents, deans, directors, and departmental chairs is necessary to provide the services each unit requires. Knowledge of federal and state laws, university and college policies and procedures,

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Dennis R. Defa (DefaD@cwu.edu) is Assistant Vice President of Faculty Relations, Central Washington University.

recruitment philosophy, market analysis, affirmative action and diversity, and myriad campus-specific details (for example, private vs. public, secular vs. religious, civil service vs. noncivil service, union vs. nonunion) are integral to the successful management of the HR function on a campus. It is important that the campus HR professionals working with departmental administrators are empowered to make decisions, waive procedures, and provide flexible operations to address the individual department's concerns. Laws cannot be broken and institutional policies cannot be violated, but, even so, the complexities of large organizations require a less rigid and more creative approach to problem solving.

A trend in HR management in higher education is to "push out" many of the day-to-day functions to the appropriate administrative office (deans, directors, and department chairs) instead of handling every issue or task. With the improvement in electronic data management, many human resource information systems allow individuals to access their own information and make changes and updates. Larger administrative units, such as college deans or directors of large departments, may have access to employee records on their desktops and assume much of the data integrity responsibility that historically has been given to HR. Examples of this self-service function are the ability to change addresses, W-4 deductions, and some benefit enrollment information. This trend makes administrative offices more accountable for HR-related issues in their areas of responsibilities.

While HR professional employees are experts in the fields they represent (compensation, staff employment, salary and benefits administration, recruitment practices, employee/labor relations, and so forth), they do not, for the most part, have the experience of working in an academic or support department. Whenever the campus HR professionals examine an issue within any department, they generally do so from the perspective of the HR department's mission and not necessarily from that of the department's needs.

In larger colleges and universities, the sheer size of the campus dictates that HR professionals will be unable to create close, working relationships with employees in the many academic and support departments. Thus the HR department has "teams" that are responsible for specific areas of the campus (for example, one team may be responsible for the library and another for the college of social and behavioral science). The disadvantage is that not all HR team members can be expected to become familiar with the many issues of library operation. So it becomes critical for large departments with employees in a variety of categories to have a professional HR employee on their management team.

## HR in Academic Libraries

The academic library is a microcosm of the institution because it faces most of the issues confronted by the campus HR office. The scale of the issues may be smaller, but, in terms of their affect on the operation of the library and its ability to fulfill its mission, they are just as critical. Again, depending upon the size and complexity of the campus, the library will be staffed by a cross-section of campus employees. Librarians may hold faculty status or a modified academic appointment. Staff employees include administrative employees exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and clerical, support, and paraprofessional nonexempt employees that are subject to FLSA. Part-time employees include both permanent and temporary, student and nonstudent, and some student employees that qualify for various forms of financial aid, like work study.

If the institution has a library science program, there may be the added issue of having a teaching faculty and a service faculty sharing the same facilities. Each will have a different set of criteria for recruitment; each will have different promotion, retention, and tenure/permanent appointment documents. Or, it may be that only the teaching librarians are faculty and the service librarians are professional/administrative employees without tenure or continuing appointment. Some instructional librarians may not have any administrative relationship to the library but simply have their academic department located in the library facility. Cases such as these provide a number of challenges for the HR professional in academic libraries.

While the academic library is not the only administrative unit on a campus with this mix of faculty, exempt, nonexempt, part-time, permanent, temporary, student, and nonstudent employees, it is one of the only places where all these employees interact in a number of ways, and in none of these other offices is the mix of employees such that patrons can mistake one for the other. For example, there is no mistaking medical faculty for "the staff," and there is no mistaking professors for "the staff," but when a patron approaches any service point in the library, there is often no visible differentiation between the librarian, paraprofessional, and even the student employee. Despite working side-by-side at a service desk, all categories of employees are hired, processed, and administered in different ways depending upon the institution's policies and procedures. In addition to the workforce diversity, there are the issues related to being open long hours each day, including weekends. During the weeks before final exams, many libraries are open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The hours of coverage creates issues relating to shifts, overtime, compensation, and scheduling of employees.

Thus, for these and other reasons, a compelling case can be made for the establishment of an HR professional position in the academic library. Once acknowledging the need for such a position, library administrators must consider how they expect the HR function to operate. Do they

anticipate the HR function to be primarily transactional in nature, processing paperwork and completing forms? Or is there a strategic role for HR in the library? Will the HR functionary be part of the management team and have input into the library operation? Or will the function be primarily clerical?

Then administrators need to decide how they want to interface with the HR functions at their institutions. There really are only two choices. The first is to assign HR duties to one of the library administrative personnel, who assume this role in addition to their existing duties. The second is to create an in-house HR position and hire someone with the skills and experience to function in that capacity. The first choice is used primarily if the library is smaller and relies upon the campus HR department to provide much of the personnel gatekeeping operations. The individual who fills this position typically has little or no formal training in HR management, and the position is chiefly task oriented: making sure forms are signed, filed as necessary, and meet processing requirements. In many such instances, the responsibility of being the primary contact with the campus HR department is added to the duties of the library's senior clerical support person.

In cases where the library relies on the campus HR department to provide necessary oversight compliance, it can request that the department designate a primary contact person for all HR matters and establish a working relationship. Minimally, the HR contact to the library must establish a working relationship with library administrative employee, become aware of how the library is organized, and learn what kinds of issues may arise. While this approach clearly has merit, the employees report to the HR department and not to the director/dean of the library. The issue with this model is that the HR professional will still evaluate issues on the basis of the HR department's mission instead of the library's needs.

In light of today's more complex staffing relationships on campus, many academic departments are reevaluating their organizations and realizing the advantages of having an HR specialist. Many academic libraries have addressed this internal administrative need by creating an in-house HR position that reports to the director of the library and who also interfaces with the various campus HR administrators. A library's HR officer works with its faculty, staff, and student employees to coordinate all aspects of their particular job-related issues. Engaged in both the academic and administrative sides of the institution, these persons may likewise be involved in budgeting and planning and function on the management team that reports to the library director.

The nature of a library HR officer's work varies. But all are likely to include certain basic functions. The library HR officer is responsible for developing, implementing, coordinating, and monitoring all human resource programs and processes for academic librarians, professional, and classified staff, and hourly assistants. The HR officer man-

ages human resources, including employment, classification, salary administration, staff training and development, and employee relations. Specific duties and responsibilities in each of the HR areas could include the following:

- **Recruitment.** Coordinate the recruitment, selection, and appointment of professional staff and academic librarians, plus the recruitment of classified staff, students, and hourly assistants.
- **Employment/Compensation.** Monitor library's salary budgets in conjunction with the library financial/administrative manager. Oversee annual salaries and hourly wages for market equity.
- **Position Administrator.** Oversee the position-classification and job-analysis process; coordinate the performance management process, including evaluations for librarians and staff. Oversee and coordinate the faculty librarian's tenure, retention, and promotion process. Ensure that affirmative action, equal opportunity, other federal and state regulations, and university and library policies are followed.
- **Training/Staff Development.** Develop and oversee comprehensive library employee orientation and employee training programs, including needs assessment, curriculum design, and evaluation. Training may involve safety and security instruction as well as overseeing library security operations (for example, emergency plans and procedures).

The incumbent in the library HR position may also be a member of the director's management team. This reporting relationship ensures that HR issues are reviewed in the strategic context of the library as a whole. It is also important that this administrative body be made aware how any decisions it makes will affect library employees.

There is sometimes concern as to how a library HR person will fit into the campus organizational structure. Campus HR operations generally welcome the creation of a library HR functional expert. To have a trained, knowledgeable HR professional overseeing the day-to-day functions at the campus library enables the institutional HR department to work closely with one individual to better ensure all the functional needs of the library are met according to established protocol, and it frees campus officials of the responsibility of oversight. In turn, this relationship also allows the library HR officer to handle basic matters in-house, take broader library issues directly to the campus HR department, and represent the leadership of the library in addressing any related issues.

## Creating a Library HR Position

The position of library HR officer can be established in several ways. Two methods are probably most common in academic libraries. Both have distinct merits and concerns.

First, the library HR officer could be included in the academic librarian ranks, with all the requirements and responsibilities necessary to hold an academic appointment. This would include a master's of library science from an American Library Association-accredited program (or equivalent). A second master's degree in a related field or substantial work experience in HR may also be a requirement. In this case, the incumbent is accountable to meet the promotion, retention, or tenure procedures for librarians, and thus will be reviewed by peers on a predetermined time basis. While reporting to the library director, the incumbent in the academic ranks can be terminated by a recommendation from the appropriate campus regulatory bodies.

In this scenario, an issue to consider is that if the position is held by a librarian with an academic appointment, the majority of the employees, who are not part of the faculty, may view it as being designed for the benefit of the faculty. The perception may be that decisions and recommendations will always fall in line with the librarians, since the "HR librarian," with an academic appointment, will always be mindful of how any decision or recommendation may affect their own careers. Conversely, unless the individual in the position already holds tenure or continuing appointment, academic colleagues will evaluate the performance, often in the anonymity of the promotion, retention, or tenure meeting. That can be problematic because colleagues who know very little about the day-to-day HR function may participate in these processes without having any specific HR expertise, and it could be a detriment to how some sensitive personnel issues are handled.

The second option is to install someone with an administrative appointment in an FLSA-exempt, professional position. The position can be recruited for someone with specific academic training and experience in HR, preferably in a higher education environment. The position would be part of the director's administrative team and be responsible for all of the in-house library HR functions, including librarian recruitment. The person for this position may even come from the campus HR department, or some other HR entity. The immediate benefit of hiring someone from a campus HR department is that the library administration has someone who understands the campus processes and has connections. Even if hiring from outside the university or college, recruiting someone from elsewhere with relevant HR experience is a viable option. Another issue to consider is how the employees in the library view this position. If the HR officer is an exempt, professional/administrative employee, the faculty librarians may view this position as an additional "administrator," someone not familiar with library faculty issues. The librarians may not appreciate a nonfaculty member having any role in faculty issues such as promotion, retention, or tenure. It is then important to clarify to the faculty that the HR officer coordinates related faculty processes to ensure that policy and guidelines are followed, but takes no role in the faculty decision-making process.

By contrast, the nonlibrarian employees may view the HR officer as their voice on the director's council and see this position as a conduit for staff information and concerns to reach library administration. This relationship can be beneficial because the majority of individuals working in any academic library are nonfaculty staff employees. Many of these employees can be concerned about being represented in library decision making, especially since those in control are professional librarians and may have a very different perspective on issues that relate to the library as a whole.

Each option has its own merits, and the decision to fill the position in either category must depend upon the specific needs of the library and institution. Here are some of the questions to consider:

- What is the climate in the library with respect to staff issues?
- Is there friction between the faculty, paraprofessional, and administrative employees?
- What is the general sense of trust regarding the administration by all the library employees?
- Does the campus HR operation understand the needs of the library and make decisions and recommendations accordingly?
- Does the library need someone to provide strategic input for planning for the future, or is clerical and transactions support all that is needed?
- The relationship between the library administration and the campus human resources department must also be considered. Are the HR needs of the library being met, or is there room for improvement?

## Conclusion

Library administrators must constantly assess how effective the HR function is in the library. To do this, they need to assess their current needs and the climate in their operation. One constant concern is the morale of the employees. Others are, what is the relationship between the library administration and the faculty (professional) employees? Between library administration and the staff employees? Between faculty and staff? Also, what is the working relationship between the library and campus HR?

Library leaders need to evaluate the nature of the HR function in their organizations. Do they view a strategic role for HR? Or is the function transactional and task-oriented, providing limited input to library administration and governance? If the complexities of the ever-changing HR world in higher education seem to keep the library in turmoil, or if the service provided by the campus HR department is not as responsive as required, the library management team may wish to look at making some

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- The more you practice good management skills, the better you'll be. Read good books and articles on management, find strategies that suit your style, and use them. Listen to your employees and let them know that you care about them.
- If it's time to have a difficult conversation with an employee, practice talking to yourself in the mirror or find a trusted colleague to work with.
- Know when to delegate. This demonstrates trust in another's ability and helps develop that person's decision-making skills.

## Save Your Money and Buy a Postcard

This is a clever travel technique that I've come across several times. Do you really think that your photo of the Eiffel Tower is going to match any postcard that you could buy? So, if it's just a *picture* of the monument that you want, pay for it. On the other hand, if you feel that you've found a particularly unusual angle that speaks to you, or if you spot a unique photo opportunity, *go for it!*

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changes. Although this article focuses solely on the role, scope, and purpose of library HR officers in academic institutions, public library directors in larger systems face many similar situations and may likewise benefit from using specialized HR administrative models. In many cases and for many reasons, the prudent decision is often to have an in-house HR expert familiar with the library's issues.

## References and Notes

1. For example, see Simmons Welburn, Janice McNeil, and Beth McNeil, eds., *Human Resource Management in Today's*

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ing ploy, a pretense that the customer is important. That lack of conviction comes through in the corporate voice, and it is most obvious when staff are not given freedom to resolve customer problems. When staff have to literally *stick to the script*, there is no passion for customer service.

There's a quote in a customer service book that Ms. Barrett gave me: "When the heart is in the right place, the ego gets out of the way."<sup>3</sup> Simple and complex, it explains to me why some new ways of work catch on and why some do not.

- Did a normally reliable staff member drop the ball on a project? Find out what the circumstances were behind it and then move on (buy the postcard). On the other hand, you may need to spend a lot of time coaching an employee who isn't always able to follow through on a project. In this case, be prepared to examine different ways to motivate and encourage the employee.

## Have Fun!

If photography is your hobby, you should enjoy it. Focus on flowers, or set up that still life that you've been visualizing for a while. Capture some exciting cityscapes. Genuine interest will keep you going and encourage you to continue learning. Similarly, discover the joys of management. Watching people grow and develop, providing opportunities for others, or managing projects all contribute to your growth, both personal and professional.

*Academic Library: Meeting Challenges and Creating Opportunities* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2004).

2. CUPA-HR Homepage, "We Are Higher Education," www.cupahr.org (accessed Mar. 13, 2008)
3. Library administrators need to be judicious in applying their "uniqueness" argument to the campus HR department. While there are indeed several unique elements in the administration of the academic library, there are many more administrative similarities to the campus as a whole. For an example of a library inappropriately applying this "uniqueness" argument, please see Dennis R. Defa, "Position Analysis of Library Assistants," *Library Administration & Management* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 88-93.

## References and Notes

1. Allen B. Veaner thusly sums up "business management derivatives." He elaborates on the topic in his "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II," *College & Research Libraries* 55 (Sept. 1994): 389-404. While admittedly critical of business fads, he does not "suggest that we cannot learn from business and industry or should not apply appropriate business techniques to managing academic libraries. The key is in the words *appropriate* and *proper*" (398).
2. Donald Trump and Bill Zanker, *Think Big and Kick Ass in Business and Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
3. Ken Blanchard and Barbara Glanz, *The Simple Truths of Service—Inspired by Johnny the Bagger* (Napier, Ill.: McMillan Media & Simple Truths, 2005), 72.