

EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR LIBRARY MANAGEMENT




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COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTE

This *JLA* column will consider issues of education and training for management positions in libraries and other information organizations from the perspectives of both the provider and the recipient. The column will appear in odd-numbered issues of the journal and focus on management education/training at various stages of the individual's career including the effectiveness of these efforts, their content, and the specific challenges of teaching and learning within the field of librarianship. The column will address both theoretical and practical concerns. Prospective authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at aa3805@wayne.edu

Promotion: An Intractable Management Problem for Academic and Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

The lack of opportunities for promotion within libraries may be an important reason for job dissatisfaction and lowered morale. This column examines reasons why librarians wish to be promoted, the two paths for promotion, a short history of promotion since 1945, how promotions occur, why promotion is a challenge for management, and some suggestions to alleviate the problem. The corporate promotion model requires moving into a position with increased responsibilities and is often the only model in public libraries. The academic promotion model also offers the possibility of promotion for increased performance of the same duties, usually according to more formal rules. A blocked path for promotion can lead to leaving the library for opportunities elsewhere or create morale problems. Library managers can take some steps to increase promotion opportunities and sustain morale. The concluding section briefly argues the opposing viewpoint that the current state of promotion may benefit the profession as a whole if not some individual librarians.

KEYWORDS

Promotion; retention; morale; corporate promotion model; academic promotion model

What happens when ambitious academic librarians do not get promoted quickly enough? They can seek a new position; or they can stay where they are, most likely with lower morale. The idea for this column came from having read *Why We Leave: Exploring Academic Librarian Turnover and Retention Strategies* by Amy Fyn, Christina Heady, Amanda Foster-Kaufman, and Allison Hosier (2019). The authors from four different academic libraries presented this paper at the 2019 ACRL Conference. The telling

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fact for me appeared in Table 2: Academic Librarians' Dissatisfaction with Job Duties where 41.82% of the 275 respondents strongly agreed and 28.36% agreed with the statement "I was not satisfied with my potential for advancement or promotion within the library" as the cause for their dissatisfaction. These percentages were far above the other choices in this table. While "participation was limited to librarians in the United States who voluntarily left one academic librarian position for another within the past five years," staying in the same institution with this unfulfilled objective to be promoted may lead to serious morale problems that are even a more damaging management issue for the library.

I will confess now that I remembered the statement that I quoted above but not where I first read it. I first searched in *Library & Information Source* with the term "morale" but found nothing. I then turned to my favorite "experts," namely the subscribers to the college libraries and public libraries discussion lists. Not only did one of the authors of the article contact me, but I got several other leads from academic librarians to several relevant articles that will appear in the short bibliography at the end of this column. I also learned that the more appropriate search term was "turnover," which had seventy entries in the same database. After examining those with library-related content, two papers from Nigeria and Ghana provided relevant content for this column. I did not hear from any public librarians.

I had initially thought that this issue would be of importance only to public libraries for reasons that will appear below, but the articles above convinced me to include academic libraries with discussion about how the two types of libraries are both similar and different. The paper will start with a definition of promotion and continue with reasons why employees wish to be promoted, the two paths for promotion, a short history of promotion since 1945, how promotions occur, why promotion is a problem for management, and some suggestions to alleviate the problem. I will conclude with an alternative viewpoint that perhaps the current system is functioning reasonably well. What follows will include generalizations that may not be accurate in all cases but that I believe correctly describe the current situation.

Definition of promotion and why employees wish to be promoted

The following definition comes from the *Merriam Webster* Website: "1: the act or fact of being raised in position or rank" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/promotion>). The three reasons that I have identified as the principal reasons for wanting to be promoted will clarify what a promotion means. Each person's desire to be promoted may be a mix of the reasons below, but identifying the most important factors can be helpful in thinking about how to deal with morale issues.

1. *An increase in compensation.* A promotion almost always includes some sort of increase in direct compensation. The amount will vary according to the rules and culture of the organization. Additional indirect financial benefits could be: increased funding for travel and professional development, better fringe benefits, and perks such as a reserved parking spot.

2. *Increased responsibilities.* A promotion often involves increased responsibilities including a higher level of supervision over more employees, greater budgeting oversight, and more influence over library decision making. Such a promotion will reduce issues of boredom in a current position and/or the desire to learn new skills.
3. *Increased status and improved sense of self-esteem.* A promotion most often brings about increased status. While others in the organization may not be happy that the person got the promotion out of envy or because they wanted it for themselves, they will most likely recognize that the library has shown a positive judgment about the person who received it. The promoted individual will almost always regard the promotion as an affirmation of competence, the worth of the person to the organization, and current and possibly future upward momentum. For some librarians, these benefits may outweigh the first two reasons.

A fourth reason is different from the first three that I consider from the viewpoint of the employee. In some cases, a librarian may seek promotion because of external pressures. These may come from a spouse who wants the additional revenue for the family, from parents who want to boast about the success of their child, or from a sense of rivalry with siblings. While I expect that these cases are rare, I have encountered them in my career.

The two paths for promotion

Overall, I see two possible paths to promotion for librarians. I call the first the *Corporate Model* because it is, with few exceptions, the more common model in the for-profit world. The first requirement for promotion is to have an open slot in the organizational structure. The slot may appear because someone has left, because the company is expanding, or because of reorganization. An internal candidate who is moving up will almost always have more responsibilities including increased management duties. The promotion could reduce the number of direct reports, but the new position will be higher in the hierarchical structure with overall responsibility for a greater number of people along with increased financial oversight. The promotion could be as simple as supervising the evening shift in a fast-food restaurant to becoming president of a Fortune 500 company.

This model is the common and sometimes exclusive model in a public library. A reference librarian becomes the branch manager before becoming an assistant director of the library system with the goal of becoming the director. In smaller libraries, internal promotion is much more difficult. The one librarian may be the director with no way to move up except to find a position in a different library. This model also partially applies in most academic libraries as will be seen below.

The second model is the *Academic Model*. Many libraries borrow or are influenced by the faculty system of promotion that is current practice in most colleges and universities. The academic model is very different from the corporate model because many faculty begin and end their careers with exactly the same duties—teaching and research. Promotion depends upon improving the quality of performing these two functions. For

teaching, the faculty member will have responsibility for more advanced courses, often with the expectation of developing new offerings or teaching areas. The more important qualification, at least in research institutions, is achieving a higher level of scholarship and an increased ability to obtain grant funding, especially in those areas such as STEM where grant funding is a requirement. In smaller public colleges, liberal arts schools, and community colleges, promotion may depend more upon excellent teaching and service to the institution. Thus, the beginning assistant professor starts with the knowledge that the first promotion to associate professor with tenure is a mandatory requirement for continued employment and moving to full professor is dependent upon significant additional accomplishments. But, to repeat, a professor has the same essential functions at the different ranks.

The academic model as applied to librarians can range from full faculty status with the same expectation for research to being grouped with other nonacademic employees such as accountants, counselors, and coaches where the corporate model mostly applies. Nonetheless, the following generalizations are usually true. Like the teaching faculty, librarians can often get promoted for doing the same thing only better and at a higher level. For this type of promotion, the cataloger or reference librarian moves up by handling the more difficult cases, teaching new hires, and having a greater voice in influencing management decisions. In addition, promotion usually depends upon a record of professional achievements including: publication, conference attendance and presentations, service on professional committees, and reputation beyond the host institution. This factor helps explain why much more is published and presented on academic libraries than public libraries. In public libraries, job performance within the institution is normally the most important factor in evaluation.

Since libraries are more like businesses than academic departments, the second path for promotion in academic libraries follows the corporate model of taking on increased management responsibilities. Even for this type of promotion, having a strong record of professional activities counts more than it would in a public library. In some institutions, such a promotion may move the librarian out of the faculty model onto a management track with or without retreat rights to a non-management position.

A bit of history

I have worked in academic libraries since 1971 and believe that the history of easy promotions during the boom that followed World War II may have had some responsibility for morale problems when conditions changed. During the postwar boom, institutions of higher education expanded so rapidly that a shortage of both faculty and librarians caused fierce competition for acceptable candidates. I know of librarians who were offered directorships of smaller academic libraries while they were in library school and had not yet received their MLIS. For public libraries, the explosive growth of the suburbs and healthy economic times also led to a greater need for librarians and the increased likelihood of rapid promotion.

The Peter Principle, from a book published by Laurence J. Peter in 1969, offered an accurate analysis of this period. This principle stated “that people in a hierarchy tend to rise to their ‘level of incompetence’: an employee is promoted based on their success in

previous jobs until they reach a level at which they are no longer competent, as skills in one job do not necessarily translate to another” (Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_principle). This principle lost its applicability when the boom ended around 1970, and the number of open positions started to decline. In fact, I became a librarian because I could not find a faculty position teaching French, something that would have been unheard of a few years earlier. As is often the case, the Peter Principle persisted for a long time after it was no longer valid and created increased unhappiness and lower morale for those who did not receive the frequent promotions of the earlier period.

Much has changed since 1970 with cycles of good times and bad times for libraries, but the general trend for most libraries has been a decrease in funding in inflation adjusted dollars. This decrease has made it more difficult to get an internal promotion for two interconnected reasons. With less funding, the library will have fewer employees and may reorganize to reduce the number of management slots. Furthermore, the principle of having a flat organization exacerbated this trend by eliminating management levels. To quote the CIO Wiki:

It Makes Employee Retention Difficult: Who does not want a promotion? Excellent employees who are looking for an improvement in their rank, aside from an increase in their salary, may find it hard to find job satisfaction in this kind of organizational set up. They may end up looking for a job somewhere else where they believe their efforts will be rewarded with a promotion. https://cio-wiki.org/wiki/Flat_Organizational_Structure

The second negative for promotion is that the flat organization makes it more difficult for ambitious employees to acquire management skills. The leap from one level to the next presents a greater challenge when intermediate positions have disappeared. In my early career, I was able to start with a small promotion of supervising two librarians and one staff member before moving on to broader responsibilities. As the quote above indicates, ambitious employees may leave the organization even if management wants them to stay.

How promotions occur

In the corporate model, promotions normally occur when a position becomes vacant or when new management positions are created through expansion or reorganization. The possibility for promotion will depend in part upon the organization’s willingness to consider internal candidates. A full treatment of this issue merits another column. Two other issues may also influence this decision: the age of the internal candidate and the length of service in the current position. Exceptional candidates who merit promotion for their qualifications can face difficulties due to lack of seniority, being too young, or not having served long enough in the current position. Such problems will most likely arise from jealousy on the part of coworkers rather than from hesitation on the part of management. While it happens rarely, promotion based strictly upon age can occur; but, according to the articles in the bibliography, is more common in other cultures (Mensah & Alemna, 1997; Omeluzor, 2018). To conclude with two final issues, someone can be hired to be groomed for a high-level management position and may feel forced to leave if the mentor leaves. Second, one financial advantage for the organization and

drawback for the candidate may be rules or traditions that restrict the increase in compensation even if a comparable position is worth more on the open market.

Promotion in the academic model can vary greatly from institution to institution. While teaching faculty are normally hired as Assistant Professors with two possible promotions, many librarians start at the equivalent of instructor as Librarian I with three possible promotions ending at Librarian IV. In general, successful promotion to Librarian II must occur in a limited time frame, usually the same seven years as a teaching faculty promotion to Associate Professor. Tenure or some sort of continuing appointment may or may not be part of the process. The justification for not granting tenure is that one of its chief goals is to protect academic freedom in teaching and is thus not needed by librarians since they do not usually teach formal courses. Sometimes, Librarian II can be the terminal rank for librarians who perform satisfactorily but not exceptionally. Librarian III is much more common as the terminal rank with only exceptional librarians reaching the highest rank of Librarian IV, the equivalent to teaching faculty becoming Full Professor.

Compared with public libraries, rules for promotion are also more formalized in academic libraries with a list of criteria for each grade as well as a minimum time in the current rank. Exceptions to this last rule are possible but rare. Promotion may also require educational qualifications beyond the master's in library science. For example, because I had a doctorate, I outranked the director of the library in one of my positions. Promotions usually come with an increase in pay, but such compensation may pale when compared with merit pay or management stipends in both the academic and corporate models. Normally, a committee of higher-ranking librarians provides some sort of evaluation to the library administrator and others who will review the decision. Candidates for promotion are often required to provide a dossier; and the file will include outside letters, especially if the promotion requirements include having a regional or national reputation.

Having both the academic model and the corporate model in academic libraries can create conflict. As indicated above, librarian managers may have a lower academic ranking than librarians that they supervise. They may also receive higher salaries either as base salaries or as a base salary with an administrative attachment. On the other hand, management success may make it easier to achieve the higher ranks of Librarian III or IV and even perhaps reduce the time in rank required for promotion. Rules are more likely to be bent if upper level management within the library or, in the case of the director, the academic institution do not want them to leave.

Why promotion is a problem for management

Promotion is a management problem for two principal reasons. The first major issue is that the library will lose employees who move elsewhere to get a promotion. Overall, with the corporate model, librarians with fast track career goals will normally achieve greater success if they seek out positions with greater responsibility as soon as they have the credentials to do so. Yes, moving too often can become a career negative; but it will not harm the exceptional candidate. Academic librarians who seek external promotions often fare better than teaching faculty because library skills are more transferable. The

skill set of an experienced reference librarian, even those requiring subject expertise, will likely be more in demand than a focused teaching/research need in a specialized academic discipline. An exception to this rule might be a “star” professor with grant funding success in a “hot” STEM discipline. Skilled managers in both public and academic libraries with excellent resumes will have even more choices and may even be able to move between the two types of libraries.

The second management problem is lowered morale for those librarians who cannot move to another position elsewhere and must instead find way to advance, to acquire new skills, and to remain motivated within the same library. The reasons for not being able or wanting to move can be varied—being a trailing spouse, having aging parents to care for, liking the area, having a strong social network, etc. The issue for management then becomes finding ways to keep these librarians motivated, happy, and productive.

Dealing creatively with promotion

The following section includes some suggestions about how management can deal with the issue of lack of opportunity for promotion. The section is divided into ways to increase the likelihood for promotion and how to increase morale when promotion is not possible. Which solutions are feasible will depend upon the legal and cultural traditions of the institution. Any solutions should also, if possible, take into account the reasons why the librarian seeks promotion. Finally, not all librarians who want a promotion deserve one.

Increasing the possibilities for promotion

One way is to increase the total number of available slots, a strategy more likely in an expanding library. New branches, a larger library building, or expanded services may offer such opportunities. A reorganization that creates new positions can have a similar effect, but it poses the potential problem of management bloat. For example, I know of one library that split a unit in two to solve a political problem where someone needed to be promoted. Another way is to push for vacancies in current management slots. Losing a librarian who moves elsewhere for advancement creates a promotion for the excellent librarian who stays. Libraries can also induce or push older managers to take retirement, but any such measures must consider laws against age discrimination. “In 1986, Congress abolished mandatory retirement by amending the Age Discrimination in Employment Act” (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2015/08/02/is-it-time-to-abolish-mandatory-retirement/#238e5b6040db>). A voluntary buyout is an option though it can backfire by inducing productive employees leave while the deadwood chooses to stay. While perhaps unethical, a canny manager might find legal ways to make the current position less attractive to the incumbent. Other options are firing marginal employees or not renewing contracts but must be carefully done to comply with employment law and institutional policy. Such actions may also have negative effects upon library morale.

Maintaining high morale

There are several strategies for increasing morale when no promotion is likely. They should be tailored, if possible, to meet the needs of the individual librarian. In addition, many of the suggestions below are excellent management practices to maintain and increase the morale of employees who have no wish to be promoted. Giving more money is the first obvious way to increase morale though research indicates that it may not be the most effective long-term strategy. Such a salary hike is the easiest in a system with merit increases though doing so may take away deserved increments from other employees. Some employees may demand an increase to turn down a promotion offered by another institution. This strategy may be regarded as manipulative and lead management to penalize the employee down the road. A disguised way to provide financial rewards is increased funding for professional development including conference travel.

More options exist if the librarian is seeking increased responsibilities or is bored with current duties. Management may arrange a job swap with another employee, authorize an internal transfer, or find a worthwhile project that would appeal to the librarian. A subtle danger might be taking advantage of the employee by adding additional duties without reducing current responsibilities or increasing compensation. While also a way to meet esteem needs, suggesting and then funding formal or informal education should also increase the librarian's skills, thereby enhancing the value of the employee to the organization. A sabbatical leave would be a similar option and could already be part of the organization's strategy for renewal and retention.

Working to increase the status and the self-esteem of the librarian offers other ways to lessen the desire to leave. I would advise against what I call the "false promotion" where the librarian has a new title without any increase in responsibilities or salary because I believe that most would see this as a cynical ploy. Concrete strategies could be to assign a new project, to arrange an appointment to an important internal or external committee, to suggest running for an office in a professional organization, or to nominate for an award. Most importantly, asking for advice and paying deserved compliments should be a routine step to sustain morale.

Final thoughts

This column has assumed that a lack of possibility for promotion may pose a problem for the management of libraries. The library may lose librarians that it would like to retain or may discover that promotable librarians who must stay in the current library without advancement are less likely to remain high performers. I would, however, like to balance these considerations by offering the opposing viewpoint that, in the long run, having librarians move for promotion is perhaps good for the profession. By having multiple jobs, they are more likely to experience different library and management cultures, acquire new skills, and become less susceptible to "we've always done it this way" thinking. Moving around may be especially important for those who wish to become directors. Advancing from newbie librarian to director within the same institution sometimes happens but is not all that common. In addition, the library that hates to lose an excellent librarian may then hire away a librarian from an institution that hates, in turn, to see them go. Accepting this global perspective may make it easier for

the current library manager to accept the inevitability of losing a star employee, enduring the vacancy, and expending the time and money to search for a replacement.

Recommended additional readings

Paul, S., & Rathburn-Grubbs, S (2009). Workforce planning and the school library media specialist. *Library Trends*, 2009(Fall), 246–262, 319–320.

Stanley, M. (2008). How ‘ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm—the problem of retention. *Indiana Libraries*, 27(1). 84–89.

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Mensah, V., & Alemna, A. A. (1997). Staff retention in public libraries in Ghana. *Library Management*, 18(6), 286–294. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01435129710168570>

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