

## The Library as a Greedy Institution

Patricia Katopol

### Introduction

Ever since the college-wide budget cuts, Tamika, a librarian at a small liberal arts school, had wondered how long she could hold on. It seemed that almost every month her schedule changed, making it difficult to attend evening or weekend activities with her 8<sup>th</sup> grade daughter. Tamika had started her second master's degree this year; knowing she would need it for promotion to senior librarian, but now her unreliable schedule was causing her to miss classes and turn in late assignments. And as if she didn't have enough to do, Tamika also had to train a new staffer. To save money, the Director had hired a person without a library degree. By now, Tamika would have relaxed the reins a little and let the person work independently, but without the degree, the new person was taking longer than usual to get up to speed. Then there were the committees. Library committees. College committees. Between attending meetings and supervising the new employee, she barely had any time for her own work. She wanted to ask for a more regular schedule, but her director was fond of saying that anyone who didn't like the current situation could move on. Despite the current situation, Tamika actually loved being a librarian. A librarian had helped her when she struggled as a first generation college student and she knew she was making a difference in the lives of many of the students who now asked for her help in the library. She didn't mind working hard and supporting the college during tough times, but she wondered when she had agreed to give over so much of her life to her job.

### Greedy Institutions

Each of us lives in a variety of environments that create demands on our time. Work, family, hobbies, and community call to us. Of all these, work, with its competing demands from the team, the department, the division, and the organization, requires that we constantly juggle priorities and claims on our time and attention. Many work environments would prefer that members commit most of their time to them, ignoring most, if not all, other demands. Considering these environments, Lewis Coser developed the concept of *greedy institutions*, those institutions "characterized by the fact that they exercise pressures on component individuals to weaken their ties, or not to form any ties, with other institutions or persons that

might make claims that conflict with their own demands.”<sup>1</sup>

Consider two classic examples of greedy institutions – the military and the family. Those in the military are often away from their families for months at a time. They risk death or serious bodily injury in the service of the state. And despite these demands, men and women volunteer to join. They join an institution with almost unlimited demands because of pride in serving their country, financial, educational, career, travel, and housing benefits. They may also enjoy being perceived as set apart and special compared to civilians. These individual elements combine to make military service attractive despite its substantial demands.

Coser also labeled the family as a greedy institution. Parents have to deal with a myriad of child-raising demands. If one is at home with little ones, the demands on that person are pretty much 24/7. If a mom works outside the home, that work is more highly valued than the work of attending to the family. I remember the career guidebooks of the early 1980’s warning young women that family photos in the office would indicate a lack of seriousness about the career – that the demands of work must come first. Interestingly, Coser posits that the family is not greedy for all members as males get a better deal – that is, the family makes fewer demands on men than on women, who, when working outside the home, still have child care, and often elder care, responsibilities.

More recently, Campo<sup>2</sup> considered social media as a greedy institution. For avid users, there is no escape. “I am always struck by the endless stress they put themselves through. They must manage their online reputations constantly, avoiding the ever-roaming evil eye of the hive mind, which can turn on an individual at any moment. A ‘Facebook generation’ young person who suddenly becomes humiliated online has no way out, for there is only one hive.”<sup>3</sup> Sadly, the instances of suicides by young adults in the face of constant online harassment and bullying seems to attest that for many, there is no way out of this particular greedy institution.

Given the various ways in which a greedy institution can manifest itself, in this article, I want to examine whether the current environment for libraries makes them function as a greedy institution. In addition, does the organization’s mission, and the staff’s perception of the work, enable the library to be greedy?

## Creating Greedy Institutions

I suggest that greedy institutions can be created by the claims on it.

- As money becomes tighter, organizations seek to hold on to the resources (including staff) that remain. This can mean longer hours and heavier workloads for remaining staff. If it becomes absolutely necessary to hire staff, the greedy institution will seek to conserve resources by hiring the unskilled for less pay. It will also expect additional commitments from current members in order to make up for the loss of expertise. It may 'encourage' commitment from staff by inculcating feelings of 'we're in this together' and 'let's all try harder to make this work.'
- New work styles, such as embedded or consulting librarianship, may allow the library to be greedy. Working this way can be rewarding and professionally challenging, but the time demands can result in the librarian neglecting other work that is also important.
- Patrons make demands that cannot be ignored. Changing demographics can require re-envisioning the collection for a new populations, training in diversity, or developing after school programs. Library managers know that if issues important to patrons aren't addressed, they may withdraw their support, whether that is public support via taxes or organizational support with a sufficient budget.
- Technology also enables greedy behavior. There is always new technology for internal use or to deliver resources to patrons. A library's social media presence requires constant attention. Staff is now available 24/7 via email and cell phone. Smart phones let people perform many functions that previously required a computer, so that even when staff is away from the office, they can use the phone to do some work. Staff can wake up to an inbox full of email so that the work day starts over breakfast. There is no time away from the reach of the library.

## Do Workers Enable the Greedy Institution?

Many workers support the institution's ability to be greedy by their own view of the work. That is, how staff members internalize their feelings about the work may enable the greedy institution to have its demands met without much complaint.

*Mission-driven* – Many librarians work in mission-driven non-profit organizations, rather than profit-driven entities. The mission of a non-profit is what encourages people to work or volunteer for it and success is framed in terms of the mission and not revenue. For example, an after school reading program featuring books about strong girls may measure success by the number of girls who come back for a second year or the number of immigrant girls attracted to the program. Obviously, there has to be enough money to cover costs, but profit is not the primary indicator of success. The mission-driven organization can be greedy because people working in it may feel that they can't do enough - often because the need addressed by the mission, such as illiteracy, never goes away.

*Calling vs profession.* You may have heard people refer to their job as a *calling*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) has no paid clergy, so almost all members have callings – from teaching Sunday School, to playing the organ, to being the bishop. Members believe their calling is divinely inspired and few will refuse a calling, even if it means doing a job for which they feel ill-prepared. The work becomes more than just a way to keep things running smoothly, it becomes a way to show commitment to deeply held beliefs.

Now consider having a job or career, compared to a calling. According to researchers, a job is working for pay. It is the pay that motivates you (rather than the work itself) and allows you to do whatever it is that you really want to do.<sup>4</sup> Workers who see what they do as a career, put more of themselves into the work and look for advancement and power. Much of their self-esteem comes from how they see themselves and their work.

Take the work of a paraprofessional in the circulation department. A person who sees the work as a job is content just to do the assigned tasks and leave at the end of the day. Another person may see the position as the first step on a career path. They are planning to go to library school or they look for growth opportunities for non-degreed staff. They do more because it increases both their level of expertise and their sense of self-worth. Finally, the person who sees her work as a calling sees circulation as part of what makes her who she is

and would choose it again if she had to make a new career choice. She enjoys working with the pages and assistants, enjoys compiling the monthly reports, spends her free time reading about circulation at other libraries, and attends circulation conferences. Sure, she'd like a raise, but she'd continue to do the work without one because she finds it fulfilling. When asked what she does for a living, her face lights up, like [Evelyn Carnahan](#) in *The Mummy*, who, I'm pretty sure, felt called to be a librarian.

The Wrzesniewski research found that people who felt their work was a calling were more likely to take it with them on vacation and didn't want to retire. However, just because you love what you do, doesn't mean you can't be overworked. It can become harder to love the job because no matter what you do, it isn't enough. Combine working in a mission-driven organization and seeing your work as a calling and you are pretty much serving yourself on a platter to the greedy institution.

Whether an individual sees work as a job, a career, or a calling, American attitudes about work and leisure contribute to the ability of institutions to be greedy. Readers may recall learning about Japanese office workers dying from overwork, or *Karoshi*, in the 1980's. Eventually, it became a recognized cause of death in Japan, for which family members could recover monetary damages. In the States, we tend to think of this level of overwork as distinctly Japanese, but we are mistaken.<sup>5</sup> Americans work more than almost anyone else.<sup>6</sup> In the office, in the factory, in retail shops, we work ourselves into disability and early death in the service of greedy institutions and our own belief that it is good to be busy, that we are good if we are busy. Where other countries have mandatory paid vacations and parental leave, American workers are not guaranteed any vacation or sick days. The Family and Medical Leave Act only covers organizations with more than 50 employees – many workers are not covered, and the 'leave' is unpaid leave, which is difficult to take if you make so little you can't save anything to live on during your time off. If you are among the growing number of part-time workers (mostly women) you will rarely get any paid time off. Even when greedy institutions offer wellness classes, nap rooms, or the vaunted perks provided by tech companies such as Google, no one is fooled. The perks are not there to offer a true respite, but to enable the worker to do even more work. Americans generally don't die at their desks, but from stress-related illnesses. They sleep through meetings and fall asleep at the wheel. They endanger their health by eating processed foods full of sodium and chemicals because they are too tired to cook healthy foods after a long day at work. "[T]he Yale Stress Center is finding in their functional MRI studies that stress—the WHO has rated us the most anxious

country on the planet—is actually shrinking our brains. Sick and stupid and overworked and overtired does not make for the most creative and productive workforce.”<sup>7</sup>

### Managing in a Greedy Institution

Arguably, many workplaces present somewhere along the ‘greedy’ continuum. Being in such an environment everyday can be difficult even for those who make a willing commitment going in – such as joining the army. After enough time in a difficult situation, many people will start to check out mentally, doing just enough to get by, or literally, by leaving. The reward of the work, whether financial, professional, or emotional, ceases to motivate. At some point, even those who see their work as a calling, may come to think that the greedy institution asks too much.

Organizational culture is notoriously resistant to change. If you find yourself in a greedy environment, sometimes all you can do is decide how you will react to that culture and its constraints – especially to staff attempts to put space between themselves and the institution. Do not penalize people in terms of promotions or choice projects because they take a vacation or personal time. Managers also need time away. There are no gold stars for being overworked and constantly stressed.

Are libraries truly greedy institutions? Some are. Many more exhibit aspects of greediness as they try to satisfy the demands placed upon them. Libraries may be enabled in their greed by the way both staff and management see the library’s mission and how they see their roles in the workplace. There’s no magic fix for the greedy institution, only that people working in them be aware that they, not the organization, need to be in control of the amount of commitment they choose to give.

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