

Hope for the Future: Academic Libraries in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This essay focuses on how academic libraries can have hope despite low morale, burnout, and budgetary issues. Despite these challenging times, it is an opportunity for an employee-focused future of work and life balance. It is also a time to redress relationships with historically marginalized groups by examining pay equity, workload distribution, and diversity issues. Libraries have been so focused on the yearly budget that they are not thinking about the long-term issues. Libraries that survive the next budget crunch will inherit a fractured workplace if equity and diversity issues are not addressed.

Introduction

When I was 30 years old, I was diagnosed with cancer. This event also coincided with other events in my life. I had just left the Peace Corps where I was stationed in El Salvador, I was unemployed, and I was moving back into my parent's home in Colorado. Any one of these events would have been difficult on their own but the combination caused me to become depressed. Looking back at these events from a decade ago, I think that hope was the most critical approach to getting me through those hard times. There is hope during the darkest times. I like to believe that humans are hardwired to be optimistic. Hope is what I looked towards when things were going badly, and it was something that I could hold onto. During that difficult period, I recognized how fragile life was and the complete lack of power that I had in controlling the events and the people around me. This experience made me empathetic towards others who were struggling.

When I think about the last three years of the pandemic, I realize that this is also a situation for hope. When it feels like the worst thing you can imagine happens, it is easy to believe it is the beginning of the end and fall into catastrophic thinking. This type of worst case scenario thinking has caused everyone stress, and according to the annual stress surveys from the American

Psychological Association, stress levels have reached alarming rates.¹ The collective trauma of the last three years affected our students, staff, and educators. The pandemic affected people unevenly. There has been a wide range of experiences and emotions. We all may be weathering these particular storms collectively, but not all ships rose and fell at the same rate.

My experience with cancer mirrors the pandemic in the sense that there was hope. The pandemic forced me and other individuals to confront their own carefully crafted vision of what a library, society, and the world looks like. The concept of vocational awe coined by Fobazi Ettarh talks about the ways that librarianship at both an institutional and individual level is “inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.”² This line of thinking has caused issues as many institutional budgets have become flat or decreased. When individuals are able to do more with less, it affects the compensation of library workers, the job creep of adding new responsibilities, and the justification of stagnant wages because our community's needs are more important than our own. The pandemic has created an opportunity for individuals to look honestly at what is not working in their lives, workplaces, and society, and recognize that changes need to be made in order to be sustainable.

Matteson and Miller found that library professional norms dictate that librarians should express positive emotions and suppress negative ones. This emotional regulation can consistently be found to negatively influence job satisfaction.³ When I supervised employees, I felt like I knew what my staff needed, I just didn't have the capacity to give it to them. I couldn't because I was burned out. I couldn't give what I didn't have. It was unhealthy to constantly push myself to operate at the extreme end of emotional and physical capacity. I thought that in order to be a “good librarian” I had to find a way to cope with the stress. I didn't want to say anything because I felt like it would reflect poorly on my own abilities and be a poor reflection on my employer. This attitude of toxic positivity caused me to be divorced from my humanity. I was like an ostrich who stuck my head in the sand to avoid dangerous or negative information.

¹ American Psychological Association. “Stress in America.” *American Psychological Association*. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress> (accessed September 11, 2022).

² Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

³ Miriam Matteson and Shelly Miller. “Emotional Labor in Librarianship: A Research Agenda.” *Library & Information Science Research* 34, no. 3 (2012): 176-183. 10.1016/j.lisr.2012.07.005

I also experienced the phenomenon of the glass cliff. The term was first coined in 2005 by the academics Ryan and Haslam⁴ and it refers to women and later BIPOC individuals who were put into senior leadership positions without the requisite training, funding, resources, and feedback. This often occurs during times of crisis or recession when the chances of failure are more likely. The reason I took an advanced position was because there were not often opportunities for advancement. I felt like this was my only chance to get ahead and obtain a leadership position and experience. In my case, my supervisor left the organization, and it created an opportunity for me to gain the skills and experience that I wouldn't obtain otherwise. I became the interim director. My boss gave me two hours of training before she left, and I was told to figure out things on my own. I was lucky that I had a lot of skills and prior knowledge, but it was really hard to make things work and make do with less. I was working 60-hour work weeks to do not only my role but also the additional duties of the director. I was given a huge workload, and although I excelled, I burned out in the process. I had a limited amount of time and energy. I was in the catch-22 where I wanted to advance my career, but employers would only hire me if I had experience.

Changing Landscape of Higher Education and Academic Libraries

The Association of Research Libraries found in their report entitled, "Future States of the Research Library," that current concerns include impacts of the pandemic on teaching and learning, an accelerated pivot to STEM resources, and pervasive misinformation and anti-intellectualism within our society.⁵ The hazards are so complex and interconnected that it often feels like throwing darts at a dartboard to see if something will stick and make contact. Higher education and libraries are adapting and innovating around COVID restrictions and the changing educational landscape. Everyone is trying to keep up with the changing needs and expectations of our students and society. This uncertainty has caused employees to feel unsettled. The traditional planning and forecasting tools are not helping teams prepare, and as a result, people feel stuck waiting for more decisive answers.

There is also a feeling in libraries that people and institutions must adapt or perish. The Association of Research Libraries and the Canadian Association of Research Libraries identified

⁴ Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam. "The Glass Cliff: Evidence that Women are Over-Represented in Precarious Leadership Positions." *British Journal of Management* 16, no. 2 (2005): 81-90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2005.00433.x>

⁵ Stewart, Claire. "Future States of the Research Library." *Research Library Issues*, no. 303 (2022): 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.303.1>.

four common strategic directions for research universities including growth strategies and especially advancing STEM, engaging the state through its political system and its population, redressing relationships with the historically marginalized, and the residential experience.⁶ The authors are careful to note that the results show differences between the American and Canadian institutions and the unique leadership contexts of each institution. The authors found that the general perceptions or expectations of university libraries and library leaders range from maintaining the status quo to libraries needing to substantially offer more value.

Many library workers are left wondering where they fit within these expectations and how they will meet the future challenges. This uncertainty has caused some organizations to move forward with reorganization and reallocation of resources to meet the shifting focus. Many individual library workers want to stop, question, and consider the implications. This push for neoliberalism isn't employee focused. There are some individuals who burned out during the pandemic, who don't have the mental, physical, nor emotional bandwidth to adapt to the changing circumstances. They sacrificed so much and now feel that they are being left behind. Recent statistics demonstrate that individuals don't feel connected with their work. A survey by College and University Professionals Association for Human Resources found that 35 percent of the 3,815 staff members surveyed said they were either likely or very likely to seek a new job in the next year.⁷

Change Management Literature

Library literature on the topic of strategic planning and change management is abundant. The common themes are making evidence-based decisions based upon budgetary concerns, addressing social and political challenges, aligning library strategy with an institution's mission and values, developing core workplace skills, employee engagement, and building support from internal and external partners. The literature rarely focuses on an individual's emotional interior or experience of change management.

⁶Cooper, Danielle M., Catharine B. Hill, and Roger C. Schonfel. "Aligning the Research Library to Organizational Strategy." *Ithaka S+R*. Last Modified 12 April 2022. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.316656>.

⁷ Jacqueline Bichsel, Melissa Fuesting, Jennifer Schneider, and Diana Tubbs. "The Cupa-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey: Initial Results." *CUPA*. <https://www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/higher-ed-employee-retention-survey-findings-july-2022/> (accessed September 11, 2022).

From Nope to Hope

The goal for many academic libraries is moving toward a feeling of hope. We, as a profession, can't work on something in a meaningful way if we refuse to accept our present circumstances. Not where we want to be, not where we think we should be, not where others think we should be—but where we are, even if it's not an ideal place. We have to face the discomfort without hiding from it. Only once we stop resisting unwelcome thoughts and feelings, can we then take productive actions to overcome them. I think there is a tendency to always look for the bright side. We need to honor what we went through and in some cases, what we are still going through. There is value in recognizing that things are horrendous. We need to work through those emotions, as unpleasant as they might be, in order to effectively find the bright side and the life lessons. We can't have hope and optimism without the bad parts.

A simplified definition of hope is a will and a way. In order to have hope, we have to have a belief that things will get better and a means to achieve it. We are transitioning away from the period of pandemic restrictions, and we can now look back on our experiences of adversity and reflect on what we've learned. We can see the world through a different lens or frame of mind. We can take the painful experience and use it to change and transform the profession. The process of thinking ahead and envisioning future outcomes is vital for our profession's overall well-being and success, and a key part of reaching our goals. It also allows us to prioritize our mental, physical, and financial health. Compensation, workload, and healthy working environments should be the ultimate aim to combat the current feelings of burnout, low morale, and neglect. Else we'll fall back into vocational awe.

Jeff Duncan-Andrade talks about the concept of "critical hope" in his essay entitled, "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete." The author finds that critical hope "demands that leaders take up the most difficult challenges, explore the most sensitive subjects, and raise the most daring questions."⁸ Furthermore, he finds that there are three necessary elements of educational practice that produce and sustain true hope.

The first pillar of critical hope is "Socratic hope," which acknowledges that there are systems that advantage some identities and disadvantage others. It also recognizes that it's okay to be upset with an unjust society. The next component is "material hope." Individuals reflect, assess, and identify the resources needed to succeed. The last key is "audacious hope."

⁸ Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey. "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete." *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 2 (2009): 181-194.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w>

Community makes individuals feel less isolated and it's a place where people can grow strong within their values. It allows individuals to pull together collectively and pursue a goal. Without all three of these components, people lose hope.

These pillars speak to the ideas of healing, resistance, and regeneration. There is a need to heal the past in order to rejuvenate the present and future. The concept of critical hope provided a belief that things can be better, however it wasn't written with an academic library focus. When applying this thesis to libraries, I really want to see a blueprint which includes examples of other successful libraries or best practices. I really like the image of a GPS road map because we can seamlessly pivot to the next best route when a crash or traffic jam unexpectedly appears. We have to be aware of potholes and trust that our vehicle will get us to our intended destination no matter the obstacles.

Future Academic Library

My vision for a future academic library is one that is employee focused. A future that removes barriers to people being present and productive in the workplace, with organizations that support staff with a work and life balance. Academic library leaders must readdress relationships with historically marginalized employee groups by focusing on pay equity, promotion and tenure, and workload distribution. Researchers have found that the library profession has been reluctant to engage in uncomfortable and difficult conversations about race.⁹ The library profession has had issues recruiting and retaining a workforce that mirrors the diversity of their communities. The 2020 statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor found that 9.5 percent of librarians identified as Black or African American, 9.9 percent as Hispanic or Latino (of any race), and 3.5 percent as Asian-American or Pacific Islander.¹⁰

I would like to see academic libraries view the future from a transgenerational lens. I think right now, in the middle of the pandemic, we are focused on our current budget year. We are focused on not losing our status and seeking the approval of higher administration. The academic library needs to be seen as an innovative partner on campus that centers their mission on the strategic directions of their institution. The mentality of being future-minded

⁹ Amy VanScoy and Kawanna Bright, "Articulating the Experience of Uniqueness and Difference for Librarians of Color," *The Library Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2019): 285-297, <https://doi.org/10.1086/704962>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Table 11: Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, Annual Averages, 2020." *U.S. Department of Labor*, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf>

allows individuals to balance optimistic action with pragmatic thoughtfulness. Optimism doesn't mean that the world's all rosy or that everything is going to work out perfectly. We can envision, actively look for opportunity, and have confidence in our own ability to act and shape outcomes. Individuals who feel connected to the future and have a vision of success will often feel more purposeful and motivated.

Oftentimes, it feels like we're going at it all alone with a perception that we need to make ends meet. I would like to see libraries build support, encourage a broad-based association of allies, and engender belonging. Systems often don't allow any one individual to make a difference, but through a partnership of individuals, we can navigate the complexity. Long-term relationships built on trust really matter. Communities act like a beacon of light that helps each individual maintain a fire of righteous indignation within themselves. There is something empowering about going through something as a group and feeling connected to others. In my experience, I suddenly realize that other people have had similar struggles; I empathize with them, and then they begin to share their stories too. Pain, hope, and joy are human emotions shared by everyone. It is the basis of our humanity and interconnectedness. A shared purpose gives us strength.

Being in community means closing the divide between administration and their workforce. On the podcast, *Conversations with People Who Hate Me*, host and creator Dylan Marron often talks about how empathy is not endorsement. Empathizing with someone you disagree with does not compromise your own beliefs. Empathy allows you to acknowledge the humanity of another person. In terms of libraries, we can be angered by the lack of changes while still acknowledging that library administrators often don't control policies, procedures, or budgets. I recognize that administrators take work home with them too. They have watched and experienced the emotional impact that the pandemic has had on students, staff, and everyone in the community, while trying to find ways to keep everyone as safe as they possibly can. They are caring for their own children and also grappling with the constantly changing circumstances.

Lastly, I believe that library workers are uniquely situated to handle the changing educational landscape. The library is the heart of campus. Library staff have a diverse set of skills including building a coalition and working with outside decision makers. In our day-to-day work lives, we are at the forefront of helping users, solving problems, and connecting people with what they need. We practice active listening and work to find a solution. We also readily admit when we don't know something, create a plan to gain more information, and make referrals. These multiple skill sets add value to the people and organizations that we serve. We can leverage them to create momentum.

A Path Forward

I think that the path forward requires each of us to ask ourselves why we got into libraries in the first place. By looking at our joys and values, we could write our own playbook for moving forward. There must be a clear and vivid conception of the future that we want and a way to achieve it. I feel like we are burning out, not only because we are working too hard, but because we feel we have too little impact and we are not making a difference. Our daily lives are built on routine and looking only a few months ahead of us. It is creating a sense of dread because there has to be an emotional component of stretching, striving, and growing. We are craving this feeling of being expansive, for our work to be invigorating, and meaningful. Making a plan and committing to it will unleash all the energy and discipline we'll ever need to work towards an equitable and happy future.

In my lifetime, we went from card catalogs to items being born digital. When I started working in libraries 20 years ago, we had a large print reference collection, microfiche readers, and everyone was supposed to retire. Now, we have one shelf of reference materials, most journal articles have moved online, and we can all think of people who should have retired long ago. We can have nostalgia for the library that was (although that nostalgic version was often not realistic, equitable, nor accessible to all), but the library of the future will be different. If the last two decades are any indication, the library of the future will change a lot in the coming decades. It gives us a chance to build a library for a new generation where we can embed a culture of diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and accessibility.

I want a library that is built for the public good rather than a business. We should be willing to fund higher education as a society so that it is not tuition dependent. The library I want to build has free open educational resources (OER) that students can revise, redistribute, and remix. The consumer advocacy group, U.S. PIRG, found that 65% of college students said they have delayed buying a textbook because it was too expensive.¹¹ The College Board reports that undergraduates at four-year public universities are expected to budget \$1,240 on average for textbooks and supplies in 2021-22.¹² As a result, students often prioritize buying groceries or

¹¹ Cailyn Nagle and Kaitlyn Vitez. "Fixing The Broken Textbook Market Third Edition." *U.S. PIRG Education Fund*, 2021, <https://pirg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Fixing-the-Broken-Textbook-Market-3e-February-2021.pdf>

¹² Jennifer Ma and Matea Pender. "Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2021," *College Board*, 2021. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/trends-college-pricing-student-aid-2021.pdf>

paying rent instead of purchasing classroom materials. College is hard enough without worrying about the textbook. Individuals who don't have the book the first day of class fall behind.

I would like to see a library that serves a diverse group of users in order to meet their practical and extraordinary needs. We often focus on the diversity of ethnicity and race of patrons, but diversity also encompasses religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical ability to name a few. And libraries can permit people to see themselves represented in the library's collections and to discover and investigate new points of view. Diverse collections and viewpoints allow for greater multicultural awareness. This encourages acceptance and helps prepare students to thrive in an expanding diverse world, which I believe is a goal of higher education.

Lastly, I would like our staff to be a reflection of the diversity in our communities. It is my dream that library workers will receive the training, feedback, and promotion opportunities to achieve their professional goals. It should be the priority of our profession to grow individuals wherever they are. My hope is that there will be professional development money for individuals to hear about new ideas and best practices and share their own. I want Master of Library Science degrees to not be a financial barrier to career progression.

Conclusion

Hope is the belief that something else is possible. We can't have a sense of cynicism. Otherwise, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we tell ourselves it's pointless, we're right. We don't have to be afraid of starting over again from scratch because we will be starting over from experience. And if we can get ourselves into that mindset, I think it will be a game changer. Then we can change the words that we choose to use. The way we react to situations and people. All of that can ooze out into the circumstances that we are facing, and we can change the outcome. Hope is a muscle that we can build over time.

Everyone is a leader and each of us needs to be a cheerleader for the future. We need to rally people towards a positive outcome. Every leader in history has had to deal with opposition. Although we can feel grief, dread, and uncertainty right now, no one knows what the world holds five or ten years from now. Optimism is the light at the end of the tunnel that tells us that there is a brighter future that we can create. We can enjoy the entire process because we can take small steps and actions each day and over time this will turn into momentum. We are building the future.

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