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Christopher W. Nolan
Trinity University, cnolan@trinity.edu

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Tenure-Track or Tenure Trap?

Christopher Nolan

When looking at articles written about academic library issues, a reader quickly notices that discussions of faculty status and tenure for librarians have occupied a prominent place. Should librarians be considered faculty when they work for colleges or universities? If so, should they be offered tenure? And if they are offered the chance to achieve tenure, how should they be evaluated? Or are faculty status and tenure things that are irrelevant to the pursuit of librarianship and unnecessary diversions from what we should be most concerned about? These questions have been answered differently at different institutions. When considering a position at an academic library, you should understand how librarians are employed and evaluated at that library and whether the situation is one that matches your interests.

What Is Tenure?

Tenure is basically a lifetime contract between a teacher and an institution. Tenured professors have received a commitment from their universities that they may not be dismissed from their positions except in extreme cases (usually situations such as major financial hardship at the institution or egregious behavior by the professor). Various other benefits accrue to faculty who have received tenure: the ability to take academic study leaves, eligibility to serve on committees that may make policy, and, of course, the right to participate in the judging of future candidates for tenure.

Lifetime contracts are few and far between in our society. Why would universities and colleges offer such a benefit? The standard answer is that tenure protects faculty's academic freedom. Faculty, expected to pursue the truth in their research and teaching, may sometimes discuss or support ideas that are unfashionable, unpopular, or even considered unacceptable by others. During the early part of the twentieth century, and especially after the McCarthyism of the 1950s, tenure was widely implemented in American higher education as a reaction to dismissals of faculty for political reasons.

Of course, if a university offers lifetime contracts to faculty, it hopes to avoid hiring people who don't perform well over the years. Departmental colleagues will live with such a mistake for many years. Consequently, almost all universities and colleges offer probationary contracts to faculty for several years (usually six or seven) in order to evaluate the quality of these unproven faculty. During the probationary

period, a professor will normally be evaluated on his or her teaching, research skills, and service to the community (campus, profession, and local community). For the final tenure decision, various groups at the university review the candidate's performance and make their recommendations to whatever person or committee serves as the final arbiter.

Although tenure is typical throughout U.S. universities and colleges, it does not mean that there is uncritical acceptance of its presence. Criticism has been leveled at tenure from several quarters. University administrations sometimes want more flexibility in hiring, and many have increased their hiring of adjunct professors who are not eligible for tenure. Critics inside and outside the academy are concerned that tenure prevents long-term faculty from being held to appropriate performance standards. Additionally, many faculty who have gone through the tenure process complain of vague standards and procedures and political machinations that distort the process. Proposals to eliminate tenure have come from many directions, but higher education has not developed a widely accepted replacement. As a result, new librarians should be aware that standards for tenure are in flux and may change in the future.

Librarians and Tenure

Librarians looking for a position in an academic library will find quite a variety of ways that their professional status is delineated. Faculty status for librarians is not the rule, in spite of the Association of College and Research Libraries' strong support for it. Cary's 2001 survey showed that librarians at community or junior colleges are the most likely to receive full faculty status, while those at four-year colleges without graduate programs appear to have the least parity. Additionally, the presence of tenure or something similar to it is not necessarily tied to faculty status. There are many libraries which offer positions with faculty status but without tenure; librarians may have annual contracts or may serve at the pleasure of the administration. There are also libraries in which librarians are not faculty but have "professional" or "academic" status. Some, but not most, of these schools offer what is frequently called "continuing appointment," which is similar to tenure.

Librarians themselves have mixed opinions on the merits of faculty status and tenure. The debate over their appropriateness for librarians shows up in print on a regular basis. Arguments often center on whether such status enhances a librarian's career (in terms of higher pay or prestige) and creates better

performers (by stimulating professional development) or whether this status creates librarians who try unsuccessfully to mimic teaching faculty, take time away from librarianship, and thereby diminish their usefulness to their institutions. A key issue for many has been whether the rationale for tenure even applies to librarians; do academic librarians really need the protection of academic freedom? Or is this more likely a problem for school and public librarians who face greater attempts at censorship? The inability of our profession to come to any firm conclusion on the merits of the tenure process indicates that this is truly an ambiguous area; much of one's opinion will be colored by the effectiveness of the librarians where one has first-hand experience. Where does this leave the new librarian trying to decide which positions to apply for? Let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of working in a tenure-track situation in order to understand better what you should look for when investigating a job.

Advantages of Tenure

The most obvious advantage of tenure is the job protection which it affords. Although tenured faculty can be and are dismissed by institutions, the process is more difficult and potentially fraught with legal confrontations. Though challenges to his or her academic freedom may be rare, a tenured librarian may feel more secure when disagreeing with others about collection development, copyright enforcement, or campus governance. Tenure may also be protective in cases of discrimination or harassment.

Tenure usually offers full or almost-full integration into the campus's faculty governance structures. Librarians participate in peer review of their colleagues and strongly influence their tenure decisions. Depending on the size of a university or college and its own governing patterns, librarians may serve on important committees that review other faculty for tenure decisions, affect curriculum, recommend faculty benefits, and so on.

Tenure provides other benefits to faculty. Many institutions offer only the tenured faculty the opportunity to take an academic leave to pursue research or other professional development. Being tenured or on the tenure track may also result in more funding to librarians for professional travel or research projects. Frequently accompanying that research support is an expectation that one's normal work hours will include time for research and other professional development. Some libraries will provide faculty

librarians with designated release time in their regular schedules to pursue these other areas of faculty activity.

Aside from the personal “perks,” many argue that the entire process of achieving tenure and promotion spurs librarians to greater levels of professional development than they might have achieved without that process. Librarians in the tenure track become motivated to explore outside their normal routines. If research and publication are expected for tenure, librarians will develop the skills to find professional issues that need attention, discover ways to address those problems, and share their solutions with their campus and the profession. They stay more current on trends and technologies in their specialties; they keep the library moving forward as their environment changes. Likewise, when service is required of librarians for tenure, they get involved in campus committees and events, as well as professional organizations. This also works to keep librarians aware of the world outside their libraries, while injecting library talents and perspectives into groups that may have been unaware of what we offer. Involvement in the intellectual pursuits of scholarship and the practical efforts of campus and other groups develops better-rounded librarians who are more apt to influence their environments.

The question of whether tenure has an impact on librarians’ salaries has not been settled. In the 2001 ACRL survey which Cary describes, “equivalent salaries with teaching faculty” occurred least frequently out of nine “faculty status conditions.” Yet some library administrators claim that they can hire librarians at higher salaries when they can offer tenure-track faculty positions. It may be fair to say that this issue varies considerably among different institutions. However, librarians who have taken tenure-track positions and participated vigorously in the requirements for professional and scholarly development will find that they have increased their own skill set, have achieved a greater level of visibility on the campus and within the profession, and have thereby increased their perceived value. If this does not translate into more dollars at one’s current institution, it may certainly do so during future job changes, while also making one’s candidacy for positions more attractive.

Some have argued that this personal development is not a result of faculty status and the tenure process—that this type of bright, motivated librarian would act that way regardless of the review system. To some extent, this is true—only motivated people would want to take on the extra requirements of a faculty position. Yet the demands of any job, especially with technological changes and the staff cutbacks,

often consume our entire schedule and leave no time or energy for stepping back and thinking more broadly about what we're doing. The tenure process helps inculcate those habits that allow you to incorporate scholarship and service into your normal activities.

Disadvantages of Tenure

If there are so many advantages to accepting a tenure-track position, why would anyone not want to work in this environment? The most daunting problem with working within a tenure-track situation is the possibility of failure. The tenure decision is a major career hurdle. Jump over it and you gain many benefits; trip over it and you almost always will be forced to find a new job (and deal with the resulting résumé damage and psychological scars). The atmosphere for tenure review of librarians can vary greatly among institutions, yet the final review always comes down to a yes or no from colleagues, supervisors, and other campus figures. The pressure this can put on an untenured librarian should not be underestimated.

Tenure-track positions have requirements that are not always part of other jobs, most notably scholarship, research and publication, and service. These can create a more strenuous position, because these additional duties must be juggled along with all of the other daily tasks you need to do. Teaching faculty often postpone much of their scholarly activities to summers and other breaks when classes are not in session. Librarians occasionally will have the same sort of schedule as teaching faculty, but it is probably more common for librarians to work year-round. That schedule makes it challenging, though not impossible, to complete these additional requirements.

While some librarians enjoy and look forward to these additional responsibilities, many did not choose a career in librarianship in order to do them. Tenure requirements consequently may become things which take away time from those activities for which a librarian joined the profession: reference work with users, cataloging, and so on. If you are unable to *integrate* scholarship and service into your overall career development, these activities can make a position less enjoyable.

Lack of campus support can be a problem for faculty librarians as well. Even if a librarian feels comfortable about faculty activities being a part of the job, other campus faculty may not. Sometimes this may be a status issue, since librarians usually lack the doctorate held by most teaching faculty. More often this is because teaching faculty (and perhaps administrators) believe that librarians should be available to

do their “librarian-type” things all the time. Time taken to work on a publication, attend a conference, or serve on a faculty committee may be considered time ill-used, when it could have been used to get books cataloged faster or questions answered more promptly. This attitude ignores the importance of professional development for librarians, yet it is not uncommon on academic campuses.

As mentioned above, librarians frequently work eleven or twelve months of the year, while teaching faculty may have nine-month contracts. Besides the difficulty of completing tenure requirements while working a longer contract, librarians may feel that these disparities show them to be second-class faculty—especially if their salaries are correspondingly lower for the ranks they hold. This may not affect some librarians, but certainly many of us have heard resentment from our colleagues when teaching and library faculty workloads and salaries are compared.

Finally, tenure status can create strong ties to a particular job, both positive and negative. Once a librarian achieves tenure and then decides to look for another position, he or she may find that other jobs may not offer tenure status. Even if tenure is an option, new faculty may be required to prove themselves at the new institution before tenure is granted. This is rarely a full probationary period, but it does require a new librarian to go through a tenure decision a second time. On the other hand, if the new position does not offer the option of tenure, a librarian who has obtained it elsewhere may have to decide to give up that hard-earned status. In other words, there is no guarantee that the tenure you achieve at one library is transferable to other libraries. That doesn’t mean that a prospective employer may not value the work that went into the achievement, but it does mean that the job security afforded by the process may turn out to be temporary.

Questions to Ask Before Taking a Tenure-track Job

Interviewing for a position is a two-sided process. Not only does the hiring library staff interview you; you also are asking questions to check how the library fits with you. This means evaluating a possible tenure-track position and determining if the way the tenure process is implemented at a particular library is likely to provide a good chance for you to be successful. To aid your decision-making, here are a few of the key questions that you should ask before deciding whether to accept an offer of such a position. Consider

how well your answers indicate a match between your skills and interests and the demands of the institution that may hire you.

1. What are the parameters of getting tenure at this institution? That is, how does the tenure process work and how clear are the procedures? For instance:
 - If you have worked as a professional at other libraries, can you receive credit toward tenure for that experience, or will you need to go through the entire probationary period?
 - How well-defined are the tenure requirements? Some libraries have detailed policy documents that carefully spell out what is expected in each category of the tenure evaluation and when these things should be completed. Candidates for tenure in these situations usually know where they stand. Other libraries provide only generalities about the types of activities and achievements expected for tenure, and candidates may have no sense of whether they have achieved enough to get tenure.
 - How frequently will you receive feedback on your progress? A negative surprise at the time of the tenure decision is the worst possible outcome. You should check to see that the tenure process includes frequent and regular evaluations of a candidate's progress toward tenure. This gives you the ability to make adjustments to meet the expectations of the tenure reviewers.
 - What factors are evaluated in making tenure decisions, and how are they weighted? Assuming that the traditional categories of librarianship, scholarship, and service are specified, how is each of those defined? Scholarship, especially, can be a difficult task for many librarians. Are only peer-reviewed publications considered appropriate to meet this requirement, or are book reviews, poster sessions, and other means of sharing your experience given any consideration? Regarding librarianship, check to see if all the major roles of the position you are considering are included within the evaluated category of librarianship. Or are only those activities that mimic teaching faculty, such as instruction or collection development, given much importance? In terms of service,

is local involvement sufficient, or do your evaluators want to see that you have become an active participant, or even leader, in national organizations?

- Who makes the decision to grant tenure to a librarian? Some larger universities, in particular, allow the tenured librarians to make the principal decision, and an administrator, perhaps a provost or academic dean, affirms or denies this recommendation. Under this system, a candidate has a good sense of the likelihood of tenure from departmental (i.e., library) feedback and deliberations. However, if the case is then passed along to a campus review board and other academic administrators, the library's recommendation may not be as predictive of the outcome.

2. What support is given to untenured librarians to help them succeed?

- Is time to work on the various criteria given during typical work weeks? That is, if scholarship and service are considered especially important for achieving tenure, does your supervisor permit a realistic amount of time for this work to be done, or must it usually be completed by working longer hours? For even larger projects, such as a major publication effort, is release time given? And is financial support for workshop and conference attendance provided? (These latter activities often lead to committee appointments, speaking opportunities, and invitations to write for publication.)
- Does the library provide a support network for its tenure-track colleagues? Tenured librarians can give career guidance, help develop your research and speaking skills, offer to co-author papers, and much more. Additionally, those who have gone through the tenure process can help you stay on schedule, seek out appropriately regarded activities, and submit the best possible portfolio for tenure consideration.

3. How successful have librarians been at achieving tenure at this library in the past? Ask your potential future employer to indicate how many librarians have achieved tenure and how many have been turned down. But even this information can be slightly misleading. Many institutions will encourage librarians to seek employment elsewhere, if these staff are not considered faculty material. So an important follow-up to the first question is one about turnover: how long have the current staff been at this library and how long did their

predecessors work here? A possible warning sign is a staff which consists almost entirely of long-tenured and very recently hired librarians. This may indicate that recently hired librarians are not succeeding or are being driven away to other positions before they have the chance to get tenure.

4. How active are the tenured librarians in their areas of expertise? Because of the job security which tenure offers, those with this status may decide that they can work much less diligently and still remain at that library. Do senior librarians still participate in professional organizations? Do they still pursue areas of personal research and share these findings with colleagues through publication or presentation? Do they continue to receive promotions or do they “plateau”? An active tenured library faculty creates a more dynamic working environment and is also more likely to help you make it through the tenure process.
5. Finally, what is the campus perspective on librarians and tenure? Do administrators and teaching faculty recognize and support librarians’ status? Lack of campus support for librarians could foretell difficulties with your tenure process or future changes in librarians’ working situations.

As shown above, librarians can find many plusses and minuses in a faculty-status, tenure-track position. Most important is finding a position in which you feel that personal success is possible in an atmosphere of reasonable stress. Equally satisfied librarians occupy positions with and without the option of tenure. In many cases, your decision to join a particular library may be based more on the quality of the institution and your colleagues than the particular governance system used to evaluate you. But you should always consider carefully what the expectations will be for you in the following years.

Related Readings

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About the Author

Christopher Nolan is the Assistant University Librarian and Head of Public Services at the Coates Library, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. He holds the rank of Associate Professor, having received

tenure at Trinity in 1993, and has served on his university's Commission on Promotion and Tenure. Chris has published several articles on various aspects of reference services, reviews reference books, and has also written the book, *Managing the Reference Collection*, published by the American Library Association.