

The Library as an Academic Department / The Dickinson College Model: How Revolving Leadership, Collegial Management, and Holistic Librarianship Can Revitalize Your Library

Speaker: Steve McKinzie, Chair, Dept. of Library Resources, Dickinson College

Abstract

Taking the structure of a regular academic department as a model for library collegial management has enabled College, a liberal arts college, to revitalize its library professionals and to mentor quality leaders. A panel will discuss history of rotating leadership, consensus management and holistic librarianship.

Paper

I. Dickinson's Model: why and how:

In 1975 the librarians at Dickinson did something that few small academic libraries have ever done. They scrapped the traditional hierarchical model of leadership, introduced a collegial pattern of management with a rotating chair, and implemented a holistic vision of librarianship. If this bold new plan for the library's management structure that I here describe appears somewhat revolutionary, if it sounds rather radical, or if it seems rather dangerous, it is because it was. The new system was extremely different from our old way of doing things. It was very radical, and if not pernicious, more than a little risky. It was a revolution; a reorganized structure of management, a newly-cast paradigm.

Like all revolutions, there were those who said that it wouldn't work. There were people who said that it couldn't be done. Just as they were gainsayers in our own country's break with Britain who claimed that no contemporary nation could function without a monarchy, that you could never entrust people with that much political power, and that a republic that these would-be visionaries were hoping to create could never hope to survive in the Machiavellian world of eighteenth-century realities, so there were those who argued against our system. They charged that no library could function without a director, that the librarian rank and file couldn't be trusted with that much power, and that the harsh realities of campus political life made such a structure wholly untenable.

Like that struggling new republic in the eighteenth-century's Western Hemisphere, the new model at the Dickinson College Library survived, and it prospered. The new system that these librarians and college administrators created at Dickinson more than twenty years ago was never perfect. There were drawbacks and disadvantages. There were lean years and fat. But there was also a great deal of success and a great many advantages in what we set about doing.

The Dickinson college model of rotating leadership, collegial management and holistic librarianship, as it stands now, works very well. It is a system whose dynamic advantages outweigh its drawbacks and whose positive dimensions counter its shortcomings. It is a management system, an approach to running a small to moderate

size academic library, or even a department in a larger research library that a lot of institutions and librarians ought to consider and consider very closely.

II. Disclaimers:

Now before I began to tell you more about our way of doing things at Dickinson, I offer two caveats. First, I firmly believe that there is more than one way to skin a cat, bake a pie or run a library. I am not a propagandist. I am not an evangelist. I am not trying to claim that how we do things at Dickinson is the way that you should do things in your shop. This is far from the case. I am only talking about our experience, because I believe that it is useful for all of us to reexamine the way that we do things from time to time. Looking closely at case studies can be a very healthy undertaking. That is exactly what I am presenting to you today a look at the way one library solved its problems of management and problems of organizational structure. If my remarks today enable you to take a fresh look at your library's own structure (finding things that you should reinforce or things that you should change altogether) then I have accomplished my purpose.

Second, I recognize that certain dimensions of the Dickinson model can appear bizarre to some of you who find yourself in leadership roles at your institution. Whenever I talk about the Dickinson approach to library management among library directors, for instance, (of which some of you are, I suspect), I feel rather like a shop foreman or trade-union organizer talking with a group of CEOs or top businessmen. Or I feel like a Communist agitator attending a Rotary Club. The analogy may be overdrawn, but it isn't too far from the truth. Let me assure, I recognize this, and I will try to make allowances accordingly. For your part, realize I am not asking you to like what I will say. I only ask that you listen.

III. Of running libraries: preliminary considerations:

Libraries often borrow much of their organizational structure from the various hierarchies of the business or industrial world. Leadership is often exercised by a director, sometimes by a Dean, or by a Chief Information Officer (CIO). There is a great deal to be said for this. Much of the work of libraries revolves around functions that closely resemble the industrial or business world. Books have to be cataloged. Reports have to be filled. Products and materials have to be purchased. Questions of efficiency have to be studied. Customers, clients, patrons (what have you) have to be satisfied. It is really a very business-like undertaking. The hierarchal business or industrial model works, because libraries are like businesses in many ways.

But there is another side of academic libraries that librarians have to take seriously. As much as such libraries may resemble businesses, they are also part of the academic enterprise. And as such, they have to recognize that teaching, learning and research is the very reason of their existence. In one sense academic libraries are not like businesses at all. They are rather more like laboratories or more like classrooms than anything else. They are places where people learn. There are spaces and communities

were scholars do research. If librarians are going to manage and serve these kinds of academic space effectively, they would do well to model themselves after the academy itself. It is that perspective that has dominated a good deal of the way that we have organized our library and its management structure at Dickinson.

IV. What were the principles that governed our process?

When librarians decided that they wanted to reinvent the library structure at Dickinson, they were only partly aware of what they wanted to do. They didn't have a blue print. They didn't have any kind of master plan that would tell them what their new library structure should look like or how it should function. They lacked, what might be thought of as a sophisticated ideology that would define power or interpret events and spell out a course of action.

Nevertheless, the revolution wasn't as haphazard or random, as it may sound. The librarians did know something of what they wanted to achieve. They knew what they were after, even if the specifics were rather hazy.

First of all, they sought a structure that allowed for a greater measure of collegiality. They had no desire for a situation with only one person calling the shots, only a single individual making the major decisions for the library. Instead they wanted something much more democratic something that would empower librarians, give them something approaching an equal voice in the decision-making process. They wanted a system that operated within the framework of a consensus. That wanted a system that was collegial, for want of a better word, a group decision making process with shared responsibility.

They also wanted to eradicate what they perceived to be the artificial barriers of librarianship the perennial and pernicious distinction between public and technical services, that plagued and continues to plague so many of the nation's academic libraries. At Dickinson the tensions between these two groups of librarians had been especially bitter, with some librarians refusing to even talk with librarians in the other to professional group. The professional and personal division was symbolized by the "blue wall" that separated technical services from the reference section of the library. Regardless of the realities of the new structure, the librarians were all agreed. In the new model they would do everything they could to offset this tension. They would encourage a holistic vision of the profession. Librarians would, they insisted, henceforth, think of themselves as librarians with both technical and public service responsibilities. They would do both, if not with equal enthusiasm or equal success, with at least, equal benefit. They would take it all on.

Combined with this holistic notion, the framers wanted a system that insured a greater degree of professionalism in their staff. They argued that librarians by the very nature of their profession have a variety of responsibilities and a host of functions to perform. In practical terms this meant that in the new system, librarians would eschew the radical specialization to which they were prone, commit themselves to substantial personal professional development, willingly serve on college committees, develop liaisons with a

bevy of academic departments, share in the management of the library, and even eventually serve as chair of the department on a rotating basis. The librarians shared a vision that being a professional meant high competence in a variety of areas. There was, what I call, a renewed commitment to the multifaceted professional dimensions of librarianship.

Of course, with all of this collegiality, holism and professionalism (in the good sense of the word), there was also a great deal of flexibility. This sense of flexibility was deliberate. We insisted on it. It was built in. There has been from this point onwards and throughout the history of the department a set of convictions about change. We believe and have believed that we would need to change, and we also believed that a system that allowed and welcomed that change would have advantages over others that didn't. That cannot be overemphasized in our case. At the very beginning, we did what we could (the creation of a rotating chair, the regular rotation of department responsibilities, an open review structure) to ensure that flexibility and elasticity would be integral to the structure. This was true even from onset.

V. The system in practical terms:

With these four roughly conceived principles in mind, (that is the principles of collegiality, holism, professionalism, and flexibility) what does the library structure at Dickinson really look like today? What did we develop? How did the system evolve? Allow me to outline the fundamentals of the system as it is at present, to delineate the structure, a structure that in a great many ways reflects the earlier vision. We are still following in a way the outline of the original framers, you might say. Let me explain the features of the present-day Dickinson model point by point.

A. The Department: We decided, overall, that the librarians would function much like other academic departments on campus. Consequently, the chair rotates among the senior members of the department. The department elects the chair with the approval of the Dean of the College, the chief academic officer of the institution. This structure mirrors other departments. It is, in this sense, like Dickinson's English or Political Science Department. The library is, for all practical purposes, simply another campus academic department.

B. Chair: As I noted earlier, we dispensed with the entire notion of directorship. We would instead have a chair or chairperson that would rotate. Candidates for the position are drawn from the senior staff, that is from those who have passed their six-year review, a major review that parallels faculty tenure review process. The chair serves a three-year term renewable only once.

C. Collegiality: Major decisions (collection development policies, decisions involving large equipment purchases or major online subscriptions, user-service policies, etc. -- all of these) are made by the department as a whole. Most importantly, the department itself serves as a search committee in the hiring of new librarians. Open discussion and candid exchanges of information and perspectives prevail.. This means in practical

terms that if you want something changed or if you want the department to initiate something new, you bring it before the department as a group. There is ample time for this, because the department meets weekly. In such contexts, the departmental chair leads these major weekly departmental meetings, but he or she serves only as the first among equals.

D. Rotating Departmental Responsibilities: Because the chair rotates, other departmental responsibilities rotate as well. Let me give you an example. If the librarian in charge of the serials department rotates into the chair, the department has to reach some sort of a consensus on who will henceforth oversee the serials department. This means that major responsibilities will change, more or less every three years. In this respect, flexibility becomes a hallmark of the system, a distinguishing feature that in a very positive way enables librarians to perfect their abilities in a host of different areas throughout their Dickinson career.

E. Technical and Public Services: In order to increase this sense of flexibility that I have mentioned, librarians make it a point to develop an acceptable level of expertise in both public and technical services. That is to say, all librarians presently provide reference services. All librarians also share a degree of the cataloging. You may ask, how much and to what degree does each of the various librarians perform in these areas? How much reference or how much cataloging do they do? Those are questions we decide collegially as a department. We try to balance these responsibilities as best we can by reviewing our various departmental commitments periodically during the year. We have, for instance, an all-day retreat at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year. During these meetings we talk a lot about how we can balance our various responsibilities. We recognize that our tasks vary, and we realize that we have to make allowances for the strengths and weaknesses of the different librarians in the department. It is difficult to do this equitably, but we try to even the load as best we can while at the same time insisting that all librarians at Dickinson share both technical and public service responsibilities.

F. Professionalism: Concomitant with our insistence that librarians perform both technical and public service, we emphasize what might be thought of as a kind of well-rounded professionalism. By that I mean that we insist that all librarians have a rich academic and professional life, both on and off campus. For instance, all of us serve as liaisons to a number of academic departments. All of us have various college committee responsibilities, and all of us maintain certain minimal standards of professional development things such as publications, conference presentations, or something very much along those lines. (All of these endeavors are, by the way, generously supported and encouraged by the College as a whole.) These are not responsibilities that we consider optional or only for a favored few. They are things that all librarians do as part of their service to the college and to the profession. To be sure, we recognize that people are different and that talents vary, but we demand that there is a minimal standard of professionalism that is required of all of us in a variety of areas.

VI. Positive and Negative Dimensions:

A. Positive Dimensions:

Now that you have some sense of how we have structured ourselves at Dickinson, allow me to point out some of the positive dimensions of that structure -- some built in advantages to the system that bear some elaboration. After that, I will then take some time to mention some of the drawbacks.

With respect to the former, there are three important advantages that stand out. First of all and perhaps most obviously the collegiality of a system with a rotating chair allows us to limit and diversify the library's leadership and management. As I noted earlier, we don't have a single person making the decisions or a sole director making all of the calls. Often directors, in a great many ways, are rather like monarchs. If you've a good one, it can be wonderful. A benevolent, enlightened ruler can do a great deal for her country. But if you have a ill-intentioned or incompetent king, you can find yourself with a tyrant or a fool lording it over the nation. It can be the same way with library directors. In all honesty, there are a great many good ones, (far more good than bad, I'll wager) but then there are others, who are...well, let us say, less than good. A system such as ours enables us to avoid what one might term the bad-library-director syndrom, a situation where everyone in the library knows the incompetence or poor judgment of the director, but no one can do anything about it. It is rather like having a king that you cannot get rid of. Here at Dickinson we have a built-in system of checks and balances. The tenure of a chair is limited and he or she remains forever subject to the normal professional review process and to the vote of the department.

Secondly, librarians, on the whole, like the system. They find our collegial approach to management attractive and the kind of opportunities that the system offers enticing. Those with an interest in management realize that they will have an opportunity to rotate in to the chair at some point. Those who welcome a free-flowing collegial process sense that their voices will be heard and their perspectives given equal weight, and those who value professional development sense that the system will give them plenty of challenge.

Thirdly (and this is one of the more important but probably least measurable advantage of the system) the structure enhances the image of librarians on campus. With everyone serving on all campus committees, with a rotating chair, with a well-developed liaison program, librarians have a high level of visibility, and I think, that they thereby garner a high level of respect. Faculty and administrators tend to perceive librarians as colleagues first and as librarians second. The image problem that librarians are prone to suffer on some college and university campuses, seems less prevalent at Dickinson. The management structure itself helps in this regard.

B. Negative Dimensions:

a) Superb Quality: Dickinson's decision to hire only librarians with two masters (an MLS and an additional subject masters), its collegial model of management structure, and relatively high starting salary has disadvantages. On the one hand, we are able to hire very high quality librarians. On the other hand, that very high quality invites turnovers.

Librarians who can get a job at Dickinson can usually land a job somewhere else. They sometimes do, if they have a spouse that wants to relocate to another part of the country.

Then there is the experience of chairmanship itself. Having several librarians who have served as chairs translates into several librarians who could serve as directors elsewhere. High quality and collegial management have a down side. Well-trained people are well-trained people. They can go somewhere else.

b) Rotation: Rotation of responsibilities isn't easy for either support staff or the librarians they serve. Some support staff chaff under the frequency of the changes. From their perspective as soon as they've finally broken a new librarian into their department, the librarians rotate, and there is a new one to train and bring along. Some librarians have a similar complaint. They grumble about the rapid shifting of responsibilities or question the department's ability to develop a proper level of specialization. From the librarian's perspective, as soon as you have adjusted yourself, learned the ropes of a new department, you're saddled with a new bevy of tasks to learn and new group of support personnel to manage. You have been rotated into a new position.

c) Multiplicity of Tasks: Even though most librarians enjoy performing the multiple tasks that the Dickinson system requires of them, others find it stressful and somewhat schizophrenic. In fact, we all find it this way at one time or another. In truth, the system has a built-in professional work ethic that is rather tough on librarians. They have to catalog, perform reference service, serve on all-college committees, work actively as a liaison to a variety of departments, offer numerous research instruction sessions, and participate in the department's collegial decision making process. It can be very daunting at times and a more than a little overwhelming. It is a dynamic system that demands that librarians learn multiple tasks, acquire flexibility and exercise superb time-management skills. If you are the kind of person who really likes wearing only one hat (or only one hat at a time), this can be a troublingly diverse and extremely demanding environment. In all honesty, there are some librarians who simply don't like it.

d) The Chair: All librarians have differing combinations of strengths and weaknesses. It is true that rotating the chair prevents power from long residing in a single pair of hands. But it is also certain that at any given moment you may not have the most talented manager serving the library as the departmental chair. Our system develops leaders rather well, but it doesn't develop them at the same rate or to the same degree. By giving everyone a shot at leading the library, you are not always going to have the best leading at a given juncture of the library's history.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Dickinson College model that I have outlined here today, the model of the library as an academic department with revolving leadership, collegial management, and holistic librarianship has merit. It is something that we have been doing for more than two decades with what I argue is great deal of success. It is a model that you may

want to consider at your own institution. They are drawbacks to be sure. There are disadvantages without a doubt. But there are also some wonderful pluses to what I have here been discussing. We have been able to tie closely librarians to the academic process at Dickinson. We have enhanced the image and involvement of librarians on campus, and we have enabled librarians to mature and grow as professionals without their having to take a job at another institution.

Those of you who have somewhat more traditional models of management or more conventional patterns of librarianship, may want to consider some of what I have been saying here today. If you are not ready for a full-scale revolution, you may be in need of some constitutional readjustment. Changes can be very good, and they can be very beneficial. That has certainly been the case at Dickinson.

In reflecting on the experience at the College, an obvious point bears mentioning as I close. Librarians should be able to create a structure, (no matter what it takes to do it) a system of library management that enables them to be effective librarians and solid professionals. I think that we have created just that sort of place at Dickinson. For the degree of success we have enjoyed, my opportunity of being involved with it, and the chance you have given me here today to talk about it, I am very thankful.