

**THE
ACADEMIC LIBRARY
ADMINISTRATOR'S
FIELD GUIDE**

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THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY ADMINISTRATOR'S FIELD GUIDE

BRYCE NELSON



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Bryce Nelson
Seattle, WA

Introduction

THIS IS A FIELD GUIDE TO ADMINISTERING AN ACADEMIC library. It consists of:

- topics that matter,
- management advice and research,
- practical applications, and
- citations for further reading.

It is an overview for busy leaders “in the field” who realistically don’t have much time to read, think, and talk about their work. Reading in more depth can occur another time, when not “in the field” doing daily administration of a library.

Are there lessons from experience, research, and professional standards which will help in the administration of an academic library? There are, and they are found in a wide variety of books, journal articles, websites, blogs, and conversations with experienced administrators. This volume brings together some of these resources.

The topics are grouped in three sections. The first is about the academic library Director’s role in positioning the library as a core part of the institution’s

educational effort. The next section is about managing staff effectively. When the tasks in these sections are done well, then there is a higher chance of success with the tasks in the third section, providing effective library services.

Advice and research on administration needs to be interpreted and evaluated for their usefulness in a specific library and in its college or university. That takes:

- Judgment (“In what ways is this advice relevant to this place and time?”).
- Political awareness (“What is the political cost of a decision?”).
- Institutional knowledge (“What do the institution’s policies and procedures say about this topic?”).

Developing judgment, political awareness, and institutional knowledge takes time and appropriate information. This volume is designed to help with that process.

AUDIENCE

This book is for academic library administrators:

- at any level of experience,
- at any level of administration,
- in a community college, college, or university of any size,
- where research and publication are either valued, or not emphasized, and
- in a public or private college or university.

The key variables which separate academic libraries into significantly different variations are the:

- size of staff,
- relative importance of research, and
- amount of money available to the library.

These variables have significant implications for daily practice. Small-staff libraries are very different places from university research libraries. Nevertheless, this field guide has advice and readings of use to administrators who work in such a wide variety of situations.

This field guide should especially help a new administrator make decisions, decide when to act, and determine what to defer. An academic library administrator is “new” for the first two or three years in that position. Some aspects of the job take several years to learn or influence: for example, the budget cycle. Additionally, there is so much to learn and do in the first year

that there is a tendency to become overwhelmed, or overwhelm some of the staff. A new administrator might refer to this field guide on numerous occasions, but need not feel compelled to deal with all topics in it.

After some years of experience, a library administrator may want to rethink some basic assumptions and approaches used in the library. For example:

- Librarian turnover may provide chances to hire for very different roles.
- The campus political context may change with new leadership.
- New technology may alter space, budget, or personnel needs.
- Student learning preferences and faculty assignments could alter the role of the library in learning outcomes.

A veteran administrator might reconsider some aspects of library operation and use this field guide differently than a new administrator.

An administrative field guide is also useful for a library Director's supervisor, both as an overview of the Director's responsibilities and as an aid in guiding conversations. A college or university spends a considerable amount of money on its library. Top administrators want to know how and how well that investment fits into the school's overall teaching, learning, and research agendas. The Director needs to be part of the academic leadership team and demonstrate how the library is part of these agendas. This field guide can help the Director and supervisor talk about how the library is part of the institution's academic life.

This field guide would be useful as an external "voice" in an ongoing conversation between a Director and supervisor. If a Director has a coach/mentor then this field guide would help in that process. A library management class might also use parts or all of it.

DEFINITIONS

Within the community college, college, and university sectors there are multiple terms used to describe similar positions. For consistency and simplicity, I have chosen to standardize terms. The word I use may be different from that used on your campus.

Administrator

The terms administrator, manager, and leader are all used in this book. The term "administrator" refers to those people in a library whose job duties include both managing and leading. They could be the Dean, Associate Dean,

University Librarian, Director, Associate Director, or department head. When any administrator acts as a manager, the person is accountable for the conditions under which others work and the quality of their work. When an administrator provides leadership, that person asks if a task, service, or person is necessary, leads an evaluation, and then uses his or her influence to make a change.

Director

The administrator who leads an academic library might have the title of Dean, University Librarian, Director, or even another term. I use the term “Director” to cover any title that refers to the administrator who leads an academic library, including those in small-staff libraries who simultaneously do librarian and administrative work.

Provost

The person the Director reports to is commonly the top administrator with responsibility for academic affairs, or someone close to that level. The title of that person might be Provost, Vice President, Dean, or some variation. I use the term “Provost” to refer to the person who is the supervisor of the library Director.

Academic Library

I use the term “academic library” to refer to a library or library system in an institution of higher education. That institution of any size could be a community college, college, or university, public or private. The library consists of a physical building (or buildings) and a virtual presence organized through its website.

Library Staff

The term “library staff” refers to all who work in a library who are not administrators. Some will be professional librarians. Librarians often have faculty status. Other staff perform non-librarian roles and may be unionized. I use the term “library staff” to refer to all except administrators and student employees.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS FIELD GUIDE

This book is organized into thirty topical chapters. The chapters need not be read sequentially, nor does the book need to be read cover to cover. Rather, as

a field guide, an individual chapter is best read when there is a need for information on that topic.

The chapters are grouped into three sections, representing three areas within which academic library administrators have the responsibility for making decisions. The premise is sequential. First, the Director must be politically effective among other campus administrators. Second, the Director (and other library administrators) must be competent managers of library staff. If successful in those two areas, then the library administrators are more likely to manage the operational side of the library at an effective level.

PART I **BEING POLITICALLY EFFECTIVE**

The operation of an academic library is nested within the overall administration of the college or university. The supervisor of the library Director is usually an academic leader (e.g., Provost) who has influence over the library in terms of budget, hiring, space, and strategic direction. The library Director is one of many other administrators (e.g., Deans and Vice Presidents) who compete for money, space, personnel, and status for the colleges, schools, or departments they lead. The Provost tries to balance competing needs, all within the institution's goals and budget. The library Director must understand the organizational chart and how decisions are made, resources allocated, and services evaluated. The Director must learn to be a politically effective advocate for the library. That requires being a member of the campus leadership team. Thinking and acting politically mean understanding formal and informal influence relative to other administrators and units of the institution, making and using personal connections, and factoring in the longer-term consequences of decisions.

PART II **MANAGING AND LEADING STAFF**

Managing and leading staff is the hardest part of a library administrator's job. It can cause the most anxiety, but also provide considerable satisfaction during those times when things go well. The variables that make up the culture and effectiveness of a staff are always moving and aren't always self-evident. A good administrator sets the conditions for hiring, professional development, evaluation, and decision-making. Administrators need to know the recent work history of staff, the history of the library within the institution, and stay informed about the work all library staff are doing. How a library Director

begins and ends a tenure has much to do with the level of success for that person, and for the library.

PART III SUPERVISING OPERATIONS

Skillful library administrators manage the routine operations of a library so well that few people even notice. Uneventful daily operation is the goal. This occurs when:

- procedures are clear,
- budget is adequate to provide content and services close to what users want, and
- building and technical infrastructure work as they were designed.

However, when the quality is below expectations, or some operation breaks down (and there is no “Plan B” ready to go), then assertive complaints will likely be aimed at the Director.

ORGANIZATION WITHIN EACH CHAPTER

The format of this field guide consists of thirty chapters, each discussing a topic that is part of an administrator’s responsibilities. Each of the chapters is divided into four sections. The sections are organized in descending order, from the conceptual to the application. Each topic begins with a conceptual Assertion. Following, the Commentary paragraphs provide perspective and general advice. The Application section has examples of “good practices.” The Reading section contains citations to research and advice.

Assertion

Each chapter is introduced with an Assertion, which is a conceptual statement about the topic from the administrator’s perspective. Is this valid for a library in the context of its educational institution? The Assertion drives the content in the Commentary, Application, and Reading sections. Hence, the validity of the Assertion may well influence decision making on that topic.

Commentary

The Commentary section gives observations about the conceptual Assertion statement. These paragraphs are reminders of what to consider when thinking

about this topic. If these Commentary paragraphs are not useful for a specific context, then they may serve the purpose of helping an administrator reflect more accurately on what is useful for the institution.

Application

The Application section gives examples of “good practices.” The administrator needs to evaluate which of these may be useful in this library, institution, and time. All of these examples may not be relevant. Instead, they may serve as reminders of what to pay attention to, and what to alter so that it works in a specific context.

Reading

The Reading section provides references to books, articles, websites, and blogs that may be useful for further reading on the chapter’s topic. Grouped first are references with links to standards and guidelines. Following are citations to advice and research-based material. Depending on the size and type of academic library, some of the readings cited may be less about administration and more about that topic, and hence too specific for some readers. In a library with a larger staff, someone else will know specific material about that topic, and the Director will only need to know at a conceptual level. Or, in a small-staff library, the Director may need more of a working knowledge of many topics in order to make decisions, even collaborative decisions. The works cited are mostly from an administrative perspective, but there are also works cited from a librarian’s perspective that get fairly specific.

SUMMARY

This is a field guide for those who administer academic libraries. It is designed to give such people a reminder about what topics are important and how to think about those topics, and provide readers with some examples of good practices, as well as citations to advice and research. The intent is to help an administrator make and implement better decisions than without this guidance.

PART I

Being Politically Effective

An academic library Director must be part of the campus administrative team, and be politically effective on behalf of the library. This is where the Director's work starts. If the Director is not politically effective, then the chances of competently managing and leading staff (Part II) and operations (Part III) are compromised.

1

Rationale

Mission, Goals, and Strategic Plan

ASSERTION

The academic library Director establishes a process that keeps the library's mission, goals, and strategic plan aligned with the college or university's educational program.

COMMENTARY

Mission Statement

A successful academic library program begins with a succinct mission statement that is closely aligned with the academic part of the college or university's mission statement. The library statement might use some of the institution's same words. The statement needs to say that the library exists because it is a necessary, basic, core, or fundamental part of the institution's educational mission. It does not need to say much more. A useful mission statement is short, and has a few words or phrases which most people can remember.

A library mission statement which is not closely derived from the educational emphasis in the institution's mission statement, or which wanders with additional purposes, invites a perception that the library is supplemental rather than a core part of the school's academic purposes. Top administrators spent time writing and vetting the institution's mission statement, and these words influence decisions ranging from budget and facilities to accreditation. If the President, Provost, and Vice Presidents cannot see their educational words reflected in the library's mission statement, then it is easier for them to perceive the library as supplemental and take the library for granted. When the library's mission statement contains words that are the same as the institution's words about its educational mission, then the library has a better chance of being a necessary part of the institution's teaching, learning, and research agendas.

Library Goals

Just as the library mission statement must be derived from the college or university's mission statement, the library goals must also be derived from the institution's academic goals. Top administrators need to see alignment between the library and the institutional academic goals. Using some of the same words is helpful.

Strategic Plan

A library strategic plan is derived from its mission statement and goals, which is another reason why those words matter. A strategic plan needs to be renewed every several years, on a schedule. The strategic plan defines the priorities of library staff, and shows campus administrators (and accreditors) how and when the library is implementing parts of the institutional strategic plan.

It is easy for the terms in a library strategic plan to be too library-centric. The library Director and staff need to write a plan for the library that references how teaching, learning, research, and funding are done (and might be changing) in the institution. Ideally the financial resources follow the right vision and its derived plan. Library administrators need to be part of the campus "brain trust," to help push the institution beyond where it has been educationally. Library staff and administrators have a campus-wide view of teaching, learning, and research and have valuable insights to share. One purpose of an effective library strategic plan is to inform the campus community about the roles the library does and can play, timelines, and the cost and benefits of those emerging roles.

APPLICATION

Writing the Mission Statement

Writing the mission statement is a process shared by as many library staff as possible. It is wise to set aside time to work on this in a staff retreat, such as prior to the start of the academic year. Provide readings on what a mission statement should be, and that also show examples of mission statements well-aligned between an institution and its library. Invite a facilitator to lead the staff through the process of writing a mission statement (and goals and a strategic plan). Ask an academic administrator to talk to the staff about the current institutional mission statement and academic goals.

One way to start the process of writing a library mission statement is to look at the words of the college or university mission statement. Identify how many of these words can be used to answer the question of why this institution has a library program. Do the same with the statements for accreditation (e.g., core themes, goals, or standards) and use those words where feasible. Start with what is already written, identify key words and phrases, and try to incorporate those into a very short library mission statement.

Writing the Goal Statements

Writing goals is a process best combined with writing a mission statement and strategic plan. Inviting an academic administrator to talk with the staff about the institution's academic direction will improve the library goals. It also "says" to the administrator that the library staff are trying to align its resources and work with the academic direction of the institution. Look at the college or university goals, follow that format, and use the same words and phrases as much as possible. Make a chart with columns listing the institutional and library goals. Make it obvious that library efforts align with the institution's academic intent.

Writing the Strategic Plan

Writing the strategic plan should also be part of a staff effort to write the mission statement and goals. This is the document that outlines what library staff and administrators agree to do during the several years of this strategic plan. Administrators are responsible for the use of staff time, and the plan is that guide. Both administrators and staff should understand that things change, and that realistically some items in the plan will need to be modified or dropped during the plan's timeframe.

Using Graphics

A good mission statement consists of one or two simple sentences. Out of those words there might be three or four words that capture the essence of the statement, and that people might actually remember and use. A few words in a graphic representation can be a useful shorthand version of a mission statement.

Displaying the Mission Statement

Print, frame, and display multiple copies of the library mission statement and put these in predictable as well as surprising places around the library. This is especially useful if the mission statement can be summarized in a few words, and portrayed graphically in a way that people can remember. A framed graphic can go on walls in library work areas and in a few public areas. Advertise these words on the library website, the signature line of library staff on e-mails, on coffee cups for the library staff, or on advertising you give away (e.g., pencils or plastic book bags). By using several key words from your mission statement, you are saying over and over that this library is a foundational (not supplemental) part of what this institution does, and that the campus community should pay attention.

Invoking the Unofficial Mission Phrase

There is the written, vetted, published library mission statement, and then there is the unofficial “mission phrase” in the Director’s head. This is the driving phrase that gives urgency to an administrator’s work, but probably should be kept private. Think of a library that has better indicators, but which your library may be able to equal or surpass. With some self-deprecating humor, tell yourself that the “real” mission statement is “Beat [name of school].” By aspiring to surpass another library on some pre-determined benchmarks, you have another way to chart your yearly progress. Invoking the name of an aspirational library can keep you focused on a few indicators.

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