

Finding Balance

Examining the Experiences of Supervisory Technical Services Librarians on the Tenure Track

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Many technical services librarians manage departments and supervise staff while trying to achieve the requirements of tenure. While this scenario is not unique to technical services, historically technical services departments have been deprioritized over more public-facing departments, creating an added burden for tenure-track technical services librarians. This topic has only been minimally explored in professional literature. The present qualitative research study examines the ways in which the responsibilities of tenure-track technical services librarians who supervise staff impact the amount of time they can devote to the requirements of tenure, and utilizes focus groups to hear from both those who have been awarded tenure and those who are going through the process. Participants reported that they are experiencing both challenges and successes in the process, yet need more support. The results of this study may be of interest to both librarians navigating the tenure process and the colleagues and administrators who support them.

Librarianship, scholarship, and service are typically the three areas in which academic librarians are evaluated in the tenure process. Successful achievement of these three criteria in and of themselves is challenging work. Yet some librarians have the added responsibility of managing a department and supervising staff. Supervision is an immensely time intensive aspect of management that is generally not considered in the tenure process. The increasingly complex work of technical services can make development of expertise within this realm of librarianship challenging, but complexity is further compounded in libraries that continue to deprioritize technical services over public-facing departments. As this situation becomes increasingly common, technical services librarians who supervise can be left struggling to figure out how to manage effectively and meet the requirements of tenure.

In February 2020, the authors met in the CARLI (Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois) Counts program, a continuing education library leadership immersion program that prepares librarians to make effective use of research findings on the impact of academic libraries on student success. The authors bonded over their recent transition to faculty librarianship after working many years as paraprofessional library staff. They discussed the challenges and found a common understanding in their experiences as new tenure-track cataloging librarians with supervisory responsibilities. Both authors were challenged to observe other librarians within their institutions who were facing the same difficulties: understaffing, feeling misunderstood, and struggling to find mentorship for guidance with priorities, scholarship, and supervision. As part of the CARLI Counts program, they developed a research mindset and considered how others in similar situations were addressing these challenges. A quick literature review revealed that not much had been written

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about their specific type of situation, which led them to investigate how other librarians in similar circumstances functioned. The authors began their investigation with the research question: In what ways do the responsibilities of tenure-track librarians who supervise staff impact the amount of time they are able to devote to the requirements of tenure? What they found is that technical services librarians are attaining tenure but are often struggling to do so.

Literature Review

Experiences of Tenure-Track Technical Services Librarians Who Supervise

Literature directly related to the authors' research question is limited. In 2011, New Mexico State University (NMSU) librarians Liz Miller, head of General Cataloging, and Dorothy Ormes, head of Government Documents and Maps, drew upon both personal experience and literature to address the issue of tenure-track supervisory librarians, albeit not specifically technical services librarians. They contend that "the delicate task of managing personnel while meeting tenure requirements adds an extra layer to our workday and can present significant challenges."¹ Ormes and Miller suggest there is no one-size fits all experience for tenure-track supervising librarians. They offered general strategies to free up a supervisor's time, such as delegating work to staff, but most suggestions require work on the supervisor's part (e.g., training, documentation, and monitoring). Notably, in 2011 when their work was published, academic libraries had not yet fully experienced the demand for advanced technological skills or the magnitude of staff reductions currently affecting many technical services departments.

The problem of decreasing staff in academic technical services departments has been well documented in the professional literature.² The resulting heavy burden and requirement for tenure-track academic librarians to assume new or additional responsibilities is illustrated by the NMSU Library. Between 2003 and 2020, NMSU's technical services department decreased by 54 percent, and both faculty and staff were assigned more responsibilities and shifted tasks to student assistants while struggling with "a general loss of institutional memory."³ Similarly, Jacksonville State University technical services librarians are grappling with inconsistent opportunities, plus increasing responsibilities. Unlike their faculty colleagues who teach, tenure-track librarians at Jacksonville are not given additional compensation to update skill sets needed to assume new responsibilities. Instead, they rely on uncompensated autodidacticism to update both their skills and the skills of those who they supervise to cover additional work without additional staff.⁴

In 2005, Janet Swan Hill surveyed tenure-track technical services directors and librarians regarding status and success with the tenure process. Although not specifically focused on supervisory tenure-track technical services librarians, some of the responses included supervisory responsibilities. At least 35 percent of survey respondents agreed that despite a near equal success rate of achieving tenure, technical services librarians' path to tenure was more difficult.⁵ Respondents cited reasons such as the devaluation of management responsibilities and staff training responsibilities "not considered teaching on par with that of the teaching faculty."⁶ Beyond these few articles, not much has been published about

tenure-track technical services librarians who supervise staff. Yet the publications do offer a sense of this role's multi-faceted challenges.

Work Challenges of Technical Services Librarians

With limited literature related to this specific situation, the authors' review was expanded to include the challenges that technical services librarians generally face. When considered with the additional responsibilities of tenure and supervision, one can gain a clearer vision of what tenure-track supervisory technical services librarians face. Personal experience and professional literature reveal that technical services work is labor intensive and has become increasingly complex in recent years, requiring librarians and staff to work with both print and electronic resources. Furthermore, librarians are trying to develop analytics skills amidst the strains of decreasing budgets and staff.⁷ The complexity of this work is compounded by the loss of permanent staff who are considered experts in areas such as format specific or foreign language material catalogers. Laskowski makes the case that hiring permanent staff to catalog these specific materials is not a cost-effective solution for some institutions.⁸ If an institution lacks the funds to hire temporary staff to catalog these materials, existing library staff must take on this labor-intensive, unfamiliar work, which in turn takes time away from regular responsibilities and can lead to mistakes that will impact patron discovery. This is supported by Karen Snow's study of quality cataloging in academic libraries. Participants in Snow's study, professional and non-professional academic library catalogers who perform original cataloging, indicated overwhelmingly that time is what is needed to produce quality cataloging.⁹ Without adequate skills or time, what appears to be an effective technical services or cataloging unit may actually be one that slides on quality. "Defining effectiveness for a technical services department is not easy. . . . a department may appear efficient if its ratio of items processed per FTE is high. However, the same department may have a backlog that delays the timely processing of materials."¹⁰ Another possibility is that a department may lower the catalog quality by choosing to use minimal description in catalog records, ignore regular maintenance activities, or exclude authority control.

When Ormes and Miller's work was published in 2011, leaning more heavily on staff to assume additional work created by budget cuts, retirements, hiring freezes, and attrition may have seemed like a viable option. However, Davis suggests that technical services work is becoming more complex and that "there is a gap between the skills that are held by current technical services personnel and the skills that are needed for new and emerging technical services functions."¹¹ Yet when a library budget is tight, professional development and continuing education funds are often the first to be cut; thus resulting in the supervisory technical services librarian being responsible for either educating themselves or their staff to effectively handle additional work. The literature is abundant with evidence of staff assuming increasingly high-level tasks as technical services departments decrease in size. However, as discussed by the Staffing and Workplace Ethics Working Group of the Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, this model is questionable.¹²

Scholarship, Service, and Supervision Challenges of Tenure-Track Librarians

While technical services librarians are redistributing work and keeping staff skills up to date, they are also trying to maintain momentum toward tenure with scholarship and service requirements. In some cases, workload percentages for scholarship and service requirements are small in relation to the percentage for librarianship. These workload formulas should theoretically provide solid guidance and create time for scholarship and service. Hartnett, Arant-Kaspar, and vanDuinkerken reviewed twenty-eight institutions' policy documents in their multi-institutional study of academic librarians, and found the workload breakdown percentage averaged librarianship at just under 70 percent, followed by research at just over 10 percent, then service at just over 10 percent.¹³ However, despite these defined workload allocation formulas, the “applied, service-oriented, and highly-collaborative”¹⁴ nature of librarianship can often blur the lines between these responsibilities, while still being held to the same promotion and tenure standards as non-librarian teaching faculty. In combination with the deprioritization of technical services, this can result in an allocation model that cannot realistically support librarianship at less than 100 percent and leaves new librarians struggling to be successful in a standard work week. This can lead to librarians resorting to conducting scholarship on their own time as found by Fox in a 2006 survey of Canadian Association of Research Libraries librarians.¹⁵ In 2017, Hughes surveyed 115 librarians from across the United States who had transitioned to tenure track positions with 50 percent of respondents still working toward tenure.¹⁶ Hughes found that “27 percent of respondents struggled to find scholarship opportunities and 19 percent did not feel they obtained adequate support for scholarship.”¹⁷ Technical services librarians, especially, felt unsupported, citing a lack of understanding on the part of administration and “time constraints, diminishing staff, difficulty [finding] scholarship opportunities related to cataloging, and administrative duties dominating their available time.”¹⁸

Communicating our Value

In 2007, Janet Swan Hill found that there are some tenure-track librarians who question whether technical services librarians should have tenure at all.¹⁹ In her survey of technical services directors and librarians, Hill received responses indicating “We explored excluding [technical services] librarians but didn't. It was the quality of the [technical services] librarians then not their jobs,” and “I've found that some (not all) non-[technical services] librarians also question the work we do as meeting tenure criteria.”²⁰ Nevertheless, Hill found that occurrences of exclusion appear to be uncommon.²¹ Additionally, Lee suggests that expressing our work, or our profession of practice, to those unfamiliar with behind the scenes library work can be challenging.²² This may make some technical services librarians feel as if they have to work harder to prove their merit.

More narrowly, Woolcott and Myntti's research project in 2016 gathered information about the past, current, and future organizational structures of academic library cataloging units.²³ Although the survey data revealed trends in cataloging staffing models at academic libraries of varying sizes and funding levels including faculty status of cataloging librarians, it did not reveal the rate at which these positions have changed. Nevertheless, of the 410 respondents, “faculty appointments were the most common,

making up roughly 55.4 percent of the professional catalogers in the respondent's cataloging unit."²⁴ However, 6.2 percent of respondents indicated a status of "other" in the survey for their professional catalogers, leaving comments such as "We currently have no professional catalogers" or "Our faculty are tenure track, but we do not have any tenure-track faculty on the cataloging team."²⁵ Further research of the historical rate of change in cataloger faculty status would be interesting. At the very least, catalog librarians should pay close attention to their institutional historical rate of change in cataloger faculty status and organizational structures.

Comments from participants in Woolcott and Myntti's research remind us that catalog librarians are thought of as expendable and are commonly replaced with technology personnel, non-professional catalogers or general staff.²⁶ For department managers and supervisors, it is imperative to have staff who have the right skills to perform bibliographic or metadata work, especially since department managers and supervisors often "are too far removed from the daily work, and have too many diverse functions reporting to them."²⁷ However, despite the redefinition of cataloger roles to positions such as Digital Initiative Librarian, E-resource Librarian, or Metadata Librarian, all "include requirements involving some standard cataloging functions of a professional cataloger."²⁸

Unfortunately, it might be argued that all of these discussions regarding whether or not technical services librarians should hold tenure position, if our work is valued, or, even more disheartening, if we are expendable may have taken a toll on our self-esteem. In 2017, Weng and Ackerman found that negative perceptions of technical services librarians are common, and that some technical services librarians feel that their public services colleagues perceive them more negatively than they actually do.²⁹ "This suggests that the traditional negative image of [technical services] librarians is still widely perceived by both [public services] and [technical services] librarians, but also that such a negative image is more strongly felt among [technical services] librarians themselves."³⁰ The authors agree with Weng and Ackerman that what is best taken away from these findings is determining what can be done to diminish these negative perceptions.

While we are faced with modernizing technical services with our limited staff and budget, we are also trying to supervise and support a staff that is increasingly being asked to assume additional and more complex work. With a limited body of professional literature, it is difficult to get a sense of how supervision responsibilities impact the multi-faceted role of a tenure-track technical services librarian. Therefore, to better understand the unique challenges of these librarians, the authors wanted to hear from those librarians who are currently navigating the tenure process and those who were successfully awarded tenure while supervising staff.

Research Method

The authors' goal was to generate information revealing how the responsibilities of tenure-track supervisors impact how much time they can devote to tenure requirements. They decided that focus groups that recorded stories of both tenure-track and tenured supervisors was the most effective means to gather data. The groups also enabled the authors to collect a large amount of qualitative data in a

relatively short amount of time. Additionally, conducting focus groups allowed them to foster a safe environment for empathetic discussion to unfold. Focus group discussions can spark dialog that may not occur during individual interviews “because participants are influencing and influenced by others.”³¹

The authors initially drafted focus group questions and asked colleagues at their respective institutions to review them for clarity and to ensure direct relation to their research question. They made minor revisions to the final draft. The questions were similar for the two groups, but not identical as questions for the tenured group were modified to ask participants to reflect on when they were tenure-track supervisors (see appendix).

The next step was to apply for Institutional Review Board approval, which was granted with focus groups conducted using Zoom. To respect and ensure everyone’s privacy and anonymity, instructions were sent to all participants that detailed how to change their names in Zoom before entering an assigned focus group session. The authors made themselves available to address all participants’ questions and concerns. Every participant’s email was answered within twenty-four hours. Everyone received the research participation form that stated participants had the right to leave at any time during the session.

Two focus groups were conducted; one for tenure-track supervisors in December 2021, and the second for tenured supervisors in January 2022. The rationale for the group composition was that participants would speak more freely if they shared the same experience level. Krueger and Casey suggest avoiding “power differentials among participants.”³² Additionally, the authors were able to compare the data from the two groups for similarities and differences.

The optimal number of participants to include in a focus group is between five and nine with a maximum of ten to twelve.³³ Virtual groups have been shown to have higher cancellation, no-show, and attrition rates than face-to-face groups,³⁴ with studies providing examples of online participants who were more likely to withdraw both prior to the start and during the session.³⁵ With these variances in mind, the authors limited groups to twelve participants. By factoring in no-shows, the authors anticipated between six and ten participants.

To recruit participants, the authors compiled a list of technical services related electronic mailing lists to which they belonged or lists that did not require a fee-based membership to post a message. In October 2021 a call for participants was sent to ten lists, including CARLI Tech Services, AUTOCAT, OCLC-CAT, Alma-L; American Library Association (ALA) metadata librarians, the Serials in Libraries Discussion Forum (SERIALST), ACQNET, Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Medical Library Association (MLA), and the ALA Core Metadata Interest Group. Responses began to come in immediately. Within five days of posting, there were enough interested volunteers to fill both focus groups as people seemed excited for the chance to tell their stories.

A moderator is an essential ingredient for focus group success.³⁶ The authors enlisted a colleague who was interested in their research and knowledgeable about the topic. The moderator guided the discussion, elicited more information when needed, and encouraged participation. Having a skillful

moderator allowed the authors to focus on the conversation, take in everything that was being said without distractions, and kept the discussion moving, guiding it with the aim of collecting data relevant to the research question. All participants were encouraged to share their stories.

Ninety minutes was allotted for each group. Scheduling was accomplished with a Doodle poll. All but one participant was available on the day and time with most availability. As stated earlier, the literature prepared the authors to expect some no-shows, but they had 100 percent participation for the tenure-track group. A Google Doc was created in advance for participants to share thoughts or comments they had after attending the focus group. The benefits of using a Google Doc were also realized when the authors unexpectedly began running short of time for questions in the first focus group of tenure-track supervisors. With this realization, they shared the Google Doc link in chat, giving those participants who had to leave an opportunity to still weigh in on the questions. Although the first focus group exceeded the allotted time, participants were cooperative and most wanted to continue beyond the ninety minutes. Due to time constraints, the last two questions were assigned to the Google Doc for all participants. In the second focus group of tenured supervisors, participants were encouraged to contribute to the chat or use their microphones. This saved time and may have encouraged people who prefer to use chat to contribute more to the discussion.

Zoom meetings were recorded with participants' knowledge and transcripts were exported into TechSmith Knowmia transcription software. The generated script was then edited while the authors listened to the recordings from Zoom. Chat comments were added as close as possible to time proximity. When transcription was complete, participants' names were anonymized to protect their identity.

Taguette, a free and open-source tool that helps researchers to code qualitative data, was used to code the transcripts. Questions and corresponding transcripts were divided into individual files for each focus group and uploaded to Taguette. The authors created a codebook using both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding uses a top-down approach by creating tags to identify themes the authors anticipated encountering. Inductive coding allows for tags to be created as unanticipated themes emerge.³⁷

The authors did a trial run with one focus group transcript. As this was a new experience for them, they reviewed the transcripts several times before they were satisfied that they had coded everything. Additionally, they kept analytic memos for each question with anything in the transcript that they found noteworthy. These analytic memos helped them to identify patterns and emerging themes. They were also helpful for analysis of each question. Berkowitz's questions for qualitative analysis guided the memos' content.³⁸ These questions are:

1. What patterns and common themes emerge in responses dealing with specific items?
2. How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to illuminate the broader study question(s)?
3. Are there deviations from these patterns? If yes, are there any factors that might explain these atypical responses?

4. What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How do they help illuminate the broader study question(s)?
5. Do any of these patterns or findings suggest that additional data may need to be collected? Do any of the study questions need to be revised?
6. Do the patterns that emerge corroborate the findings of any corresponding qualitative analyses that have been conducted? If not, what might explain these discrepancies?

After the trial round of coding was finished, the authors reviewed the codebook to refine the results and discovered that some codes could be combined while others needed to be divided into subcodes. For example, advocacy was divided into advocacy.department, advocacy.self, and advocacy.staff. The authors also found that some of the tags they had created during their inductive coding meant the same thing, but they had chosen different terms (e.g., administrative and administration). They collaborated in codebook editing and recoded the data. Following the recoding, the trial round data was not used in the final analysis.

After the authors coded the first transcript, they reviewed their codebook, made minor adjustments, and coded the next set of scripts. When the authors had each coded both transcripts, they compared the data and discussed and resolved any discrepancies in their coding. They also reviewed their analytic memos to ensure that they were capturing the predominant themes in their coding and were not overlooking any important aspects of the conversation.

When the coding was complete and the codebook finalized, the authors created reports in Taguette to identify what codes were most frequently used. They then exported the portions of the transcripts that had been coded with specific tags. All analytic memos were combined in one document that was indexed by group and question number.

Results

Several themes emerged as the authors reviewed the data. Codes or themes and frequency of use by tenured or untenured participants are documented in table 1.

The most frequently used code or theme was “change management and reorganization,” with thirty-three total (sixteen tenured responses and seventeen untenured responses). “Administration.supportive” was used almost as frequently as “administration.unsupportive” with twenty-eight and twenty-nine respectively, and untenured responses were higher for both of these than the number of tenured responses.

“Staff.inadequate” received the fourth highest number of responses, with a total of twenty-six (five tenured and twenty-one untenured). Again, the untenured responses were higher. The “day-to-day work” code was next, with twenty-one responses (eleven tenured and ten untenured).

Table 1. Emerging themes

Code Name	Untenured	Tenured	Total Matches
change management and reorganization	17	16	33
administration.unsupportive	16	13	29
administration.supportive	20	8	28
staff.inadequate	21	5	26
day-to-day work	10	11	21
multiple roles	14	5	19
planning and strategic vision	12	7	19
supervision.soft skills	10	9	19
research.limited time	11	7	18
staff.training	13	5	18
mentorship.tenure	5	11	16
workflows and documentation	11	2	13
tenure.professional development	9	3	12
in-depth projects	12	0	12
time famine	8	3	11
bargaining agreements	10	0	10
staff.retirements	9	1	10
supervision.mentorship	2	8	10
tech serv deprioritization	2	8	10
frustration and discontent	7	2	9
library school	7	2	9
staff.satisfaction	9	0	9
faculty/staff division	8	0	8
mentorship.supervision	2	6	8
staff.autonomy	5	3	8
professional development.inadequate	5	3	8
camaraderie	7	1	8
advocacy.department	1	5	6
quasi-supervision	6	0	6
staff.experienced	2	4	6
toxic	4	1	5
networking	0	5	5
research.boundaries	2	3	5
staff.adequate	4	1	5
supervision.administrative duties	2	3	5
supervision.crisis-management	0	5	5

Table 1. Emerging themes

Code Name	Untenured	Tenured	Total Matches
advocacy.staff	3	2	5
nostalgia	3	1	4
persistence	4	0	4
supervision.unexpected consequence	3	1	4
administration.micromanagement	2	1	3
advocacy.self	0	3	3
crisis management	3	0	3
quality of life	3	0	3
supervision.transparency	2	1	3
putting out fires	2	0	2
micromanagement.staff	0	2	2
staff.inexperienced	2	0	2
tenure.service	0	2	2

The following themes received between sixteen and nineteen responses, sorted highest to lowest: “multiple roles,” “planning and strategic vision,” “supervision.soft skills,” “research.limited time,” “staff.training,” and “mentorship.tenure.” Eight themes had between ten and thirteen total responses: “workflows and documentation,” “tenure.professional development,” “in-depth projects,” “time famine,” “bargaining agreements,” “staff.retirements,” “supervision.mentorship,” and “tech serv deprioritization.” Eleven themes had six to nine total responses: “frustration and discontent,” “library school,” “staff.satisfaction,” “faculty/staff division,” “mentorship.supervision,” “staff.autonomy,” “professional development.inadequate,” “camaraderie,” “advocacy.department,” “quasi-supervision,” and “staff.experienced.”

Seven themes received five total responses: “toxic,” “networking,” “research.boundaries,” “staff.adequate,” “supervision.administrative duties,” “supervision.crisis-management,” and “advocacy.staff.” Three themes had four total responses: “nostalgia,” “persistence,” and “supervision.unexpected consequence.” Nine themes had three or fewer responses: “administration.micromanagement,” “advocacy.self,” “crisis management,” “quality of life,” “supervision.transparency,” “putting out fires,” “micromanagement.staff,” “staff.inexperienced,” and “tenure.service.”

A review of the authors’ analytic memos confirmed what the numbers illustrated. The patterns and themes that emerged in their memos were the same as those obtained from their analysis of the Taguette data.

Analysis and Discussion

Challenges Experienced

Some of the biggest challenges for participants were change management and reorganization, inadequate staffing, serving in multiple roles, and staff training—all of which are interrelated to the common circumstance of technical services departments being asked to do more with less. These findings support the literature's discussion of tenure-track academic librarians who experienced the challenges of decreasing staff as well as having to take on additional roles.³⁹ One participant said, "In addition to my duties, I have to help out with instruction, stay late during exam hours for the circulation desk, and help out public services because we are short staffed, so that also is a hindrance." Participants also expressed frustration with having to fight to fill open positions and with reorganizations being conducted without their input. Several reported administrators taking open positions and reassigning them to other areas of the library. Retirements and the resulting loss of institutional knowledge was also a common theme. These staffing shortages, loss of experienced staff, and reorganizations leave the supervisory technical services librarian with training challenges as well. These experiences substantiate the research done by Stevens,⁴⁰ and demonstrate that there is a gap between current skills and emerging skills in technical services as discussed by Davis.⁴¹ Additionally, the reorganizations and moving of positions away from technical services are evidence of the deprioritization of technical services as discussed previously.

Another facet to change management is working with people who are resistant to change. One participant expressed that "every time something comes open, we're trying to reassess the workflows because that is literally the only opportunity we ever get to change something, because it seems like once that workflow is in place and you get those people in place, it can become very entrenched because of the way that culture is."

However, change is inevitable and technical services has experienced a great deal in response to advances in technology and budget constraints.⁴² Additionally, as supported by the literature, the work is labor intensive and has become increasingly complex.⁴³ The focus has shifted more to electronic resources, and print subscriptions have dwindled. We have migrated from legacy integrated library systems to new library service platforms, and our workflows have changed. This is what one participant noted: "Technical services has changed through the years, right? It is more focused on e-resources and less on print. And so, our cataloging area has also tried to adjust and accommodate that. I have also looked at using different tools to automate a lot of procedures ... finding more efficient ways of doing things."

Several participants described their work environments as toxic. Question number one asked, "If you had five hours uninterrupted every week, what would you work on?" One participant's unsettling response was, "I actually come in at 5:00 a.m. every day in order to get my own work done. So, I would like to be able to have like a normal workday instead of an unreal workday all the time just because of all the workload that I have to get done. That's just craziness. So, for me it would just be quality of life I think." To this, another participant responded, "So, I have to say, NO, why? That's the worst thing I've

heard in a long time. I'm so sorry that's your situation." While the first participant did not describe the work environment as "toxic," a poor quality of life and an extraordinarily long workday were described because of the expected workload. The authors acknowledge that although this is only one person's experience, this is not a sustainable scenario for anyone.

For some, a toxic environment was due to the divide between faculty and staff and the lack of effort from administration to alleviate tension to create a more favorable work environment. One participant said, "And the administrators have not done anything to smooth over those relationships. In fact, the administrator that is in the interim position has made it worse." Some participants bore the brunt of staff resentment: "New faculty that come in are just going to be like walking punching bags for long-standing resentment."

Another common theme was not having a voice in decisions that are being made about their departments and the people they supervise. Here is what one of our participants reported about people she supervises who were working from home during the pandemic, "I was not included in the selection process, or even asked, hey, could this person work from home?" When referring to open positions and reorganizations, another participant commented, "Basically, [my administrator] swooped in and said, 'Here's what's wrong with your unit. . . . You have someone retiring, and I think you don't need to fill that position.'" A third participant described filling an open position in this way, "It was reworked into another place in the library without discussion with me." In response to how she has to fight for her people and positions, a fourth participant said that she is fierce and persistent when it comes to defending her people.

Additionally, respondents discussed how so much time is spent resolving situations that arise in the moment. One person stated it is like "putting out one fire and on to the next." Instead of being able to lead their departments with vision, respondents found themselves in a reactive mode in which they continually respond to problems. Many respondents felt this challenged their ability to complete their daily responsibilities and prevented them from making time for research and large-scale projects. The management responsibilities of running a department and supervising staff do add an additional layer of responsibility making the path the tenure more difficult as reported by Ormes.⁴⁴

Despite the challenges participants faced on their road to tenure as supervisors and department managers, they had strategies for success. Participants spoke of embracing autonomy in their leadership roles, cross-training staff, and receiving support from their tenure committees. Additionally, two prominent themes that emerged were administrative support and mentorship. Both groups included participants that indicated these two themes were either vital to their success or the lack of them was a hindrance to their success. Some participants also shared their experiences with successful advocacy.

Administrative Support

The responses in the authors' data about supportive administration versus unsupportive administration were about equal. For the purpose of this research project, administration is defined as one's direct supervisor and others higher up in the chain of command. Participants reported that administration

provides support in a variety of ways. They encourage tenure-track librarians to take research time during the work week and ensure that they have a clear roadmap of what is needed to attain tenure. In a study done by Hughes, 62 percent of participants felt they were successful in part due to the support they received for scholarship.⁴⁵ They are practicing shared governance, transparency, and ensuring that the faculty tenure and promotion committee does its job by preparing untenured faculty to go up for tenure. They ensure their direct reports receive leadership training that will enable them to continue to grow their supervisor skill sets. They are making sure that departments are adequately staffed. They listen when it is necessary to revise job descriptions. They are reorganizing departmentally to lessen the burden placed on supervisors. They are taking time to understand what their direct reports do. They are collaborating on research with them, ensuring that mentors are assigned, or serve as mentors themselves. One participant noted the following about feeling supported as a supervisor: “About a year and a half ago I was able to work with our Dean and our cataloger to take her position from cataloging associate to a managerial professional position because she just has all the skill sets . . . to do really good cataloging and more, and so that kind of support for the staff . . . was really important.”

Another participant had not realized how supported he actually was until hearing other participants’ experiences:

This is the time of year when we have innumerable presentations from HR and from the Faculty committee . . . talking about what it takes to fulfill the requirements of annual review . . . and what needs to go into the various documents and how to just, process-wise, submit the documents and I’ve always found those relatively tedious and relatively boring and like the cost of doing business, but hearing people . . . talk about like just not having that information, it’s great support actually, and I don’t think I’d realized until now how good it is. And I guess how lucky I am to have that level of support from library administration on that front.

This participant also revealed how administrative support can be inconspicuous. When his colleagues and he felt unsupported in their scholarship endeavors, they developed their own informal peer mentoring program. “The fact that we were able to have these discussions and to organize programs and do peer mentoring meant that we were actually, I think, quite supported. . . . We had the time and the flexibility within our working schedule, and so I think that was another really good structure and level of support, I think, from library administration.”

Nevertheless, as some of the focus group participants expressed, there is still room for improvement regarding administrative support. A 2020 mixed-method study published in the *Journal of Library Administration* found administration to be one of the top five reasons academic librarians chose to leave their jobs, and participant open ended responses cited poor leadership, micromanaging, biased or unethical behavior, and lack of employee support.⁴⁶ In 2006, Luzius and Ard also cited unhappiness with administration as one of the top reasons librarians left the field entirely.⁴⁷ For those who choose to stay, a 2021 study reported that lack of support leads to higher occupational stress levels more frequently than stressful events.⁴⁸ As the authors point out, “this finding is encouraging as it promotes

achievable change”⁴⁹ such as support from administration or mentorship from a more experienced colleague.

Mentorship

Focus group participants noted that they feel more successful when provided mentorship with both supervision duties and getting started with scholarship. Some of these mentoring relationships are formal pairings provided through official university or library level programs, and participants also expressed satisfaction with informal mentorship. Participants described mentorship as co-authorship on a research paper or could also include a colleague just helping you “get through the red tape . . . and stay on track.” Participants asserted that without mentorship, they might be “given no direction on what it is your portfolio should look like.” Mentorship for new colleagues can ensure that they do not feel the need to “just have to latch on to somebody and hope they are willing to take you along on the ride.” What is not helpful is the sentiment, “I have tenure and I struggled so you need to get through your own struggle.” Mentorship can include scenarios like investigating a cross-departmental collaboration that would help our colleagues who might be the sole technical services librarian in the library. Successful mentorship also means recognizing that colleagues might be isolated. As a result of the deprioritization of technical services departments, a library may have several public services librarians, but only one technical services librarian. One librarian indicated:

I moved into a tenure-track position and had no idea what to do and I’m the only cataloger—I would have loved to have had some sort of mentorship or collegial support in terms of, you know, writing. We have a bunch of reference librarians who co-author papers all the time. I didn’t have that opportunity, and I really wished that I could have somehow been connected with somebody to get me started on that process.

Much of what participants expressed regarding mentorship is not new. As early as 2007, Hill pointed out that “mentoring is not specific to technical services librarians; but, given that they tend to be few in number in any given library, it might be argued that they have greater need of purposive mentoring than their public services colleagues.”⁵⁰ Hill also suggests that mentorship can serve to expand knowledge and interest in the work of technical services.⁵¹ Survey results published in 2018 cite mentorship as crucial for scholarship success for librarians pursuing tenure⁵² and suggested that insufficient mentoring hampers scholarship progress.⁵³ Goodsett and Walsh found that formal mentoring programs “provided increased understanding of institutional culture and improved communication and time management skills, all of which are crucial for librarians pursuing tenure.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Sassen and Wahl found that despite 72.9 percent of academic library deans and directors indicating that they support formal mentoring programs to encourage research and publishing activities, only 52.1 percent had a formal program in place.⁵⁵

Advocacy

In addition to seeking administrative support and mentorship, technical services librarians must advocate for themselves. According to some of the tenured participants, if administration does not

ask about technical services, our role is to inform them of the importance of our work to students and faculty. Furthermore, one must advocate not just for one's department, but also one's time. This is what some participants said about self-advocacy: "I think we need to not forget to be advocates of our own needs in all of the areas. I think maybe the help is out there, but we just kind of have to find it and ask for it," "I think advocacy, not only for your department, but also your time is really, really important. And I started to learn that after a couple of years . . . that's when I started blocking out time for research and stuff," and "I saw myself as an advocate for my department and my staff, but I had to start seeing myself as an advocate for myself as well as my time. And once I started doing that, I feel like I was able to get resources and support that I needed instead of just waiting for my supervisor to hand it to me."

Other ways that participants practiced advocating for themselves and their departments include documentation. One participant had a prepared white paper that articulated what was needed to keep her department operational. Participants also suggested that when a position becomes open, consider whether it is still needed, or if the position could be repurposed to meet more pressing demands. One librarian chose not to refill a serials check-in position to get more resources for the electronic resources librarian. And, as one librarian articulated, if there is a risk of losing a needed position despite how difficult or challenging it can be to get high level administrators to grasp the importance of your work, do not stop trying to help them understand it. Explain "it's not just the title. It's all the other things that person did because all of us [are] wearing many different hats."

Conclusion

The authors' interest in this subject is personal, and stems from first-hand experience as tenure-track technical services librarians supervising departments that have been deprioritized. According to fiscal year data since 2018, both Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC), an R1 University with an FTE of 9,223, and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), a Doctoral/Professional University with an FTE of 10,105, have seen their technical services faculty remain static, hovering between two and four faculty, with SIUE currently operating with two full-time technical services faculty and SIUC with three. However, at both institutions, public services faculty have outnumbered technical services faculty by at least half since 2018, with SIUE seeing its public services faculty increase by more than 60 percent. This trend is also seen with SIUE library staff. Since 2016, technical services staff at SIUE has decreased by more than 60 percent, while public services staff has only decreased by 20 percent. SIUC has been fortunate to keep their technical services staff at a consistent level. The implications of deprioritizing technical services faculty and staff could become increasingly prominent as discovery system technology continues to become more advanced and increasingly utilizes new MARC fields and terminology. Limited, missing, and poor-quality metadata in bibliographic records—especially as seen in older records that do not utilize these new fields—could have a negative impact on discovery and access.

Nevertheless, the deprioritization of technical services is only part of the problem. Tenure-track technical service librarians with supervisory responsibilities need support, and the focus group participants expressed the sentiment that they would feel more successful with support and mentorship from their administration. A few participants have successfully advocated for their department, their

staff, and themselves. Others are consumed with being unable to move beyond putting out daily fires. The reality is that administration is failing us by not taking the time to see how our work is changing and becoming more complex or ensuring that there is mentorship to help us succeed with both scholarship and supervision.

If replacing faculty and staff is not an option, administrators need to be aware of librarians who are flying solo or feeling isolated and offer them support. They also should ensure that librarians are involved in reorganizing departments or work. Furthermore, this theme of technical services librarians feeling misunderstood and undervalued by administration is an area that should be explored further.

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Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

Untenured Focus Group Questions

Icebreaker: Who went into librarianship wanting to be a supervisor?

Post in chat

- How many years have you been a supervisor while on the tenure track?
- How many direct reports do you have?

Begin discussion

- If you had five hours uninterrupted every week, what would you work on?
- What would your day look like if you did not supervise?
- What support, if any, do you get from your supervisor or library administration? What support would you like to get?
- If you have had positions that have become vacant, how have you or your library handled the work assigned to positions under your supervision?
- What is your approach to supervision? How do you define success as a supervisor?
- Do you feel as if your administrative/supervisory duties impact your participation in librarianship, service, or scholarship? Which area of impact concerns you the most?
- Where are you in the process of applying for tenure? Has the amount of time you devote to tenure changed over the years you've been on the tenure track?
- Do you foresee future situations that may have an impact on your tenure process?
- What question did we not ask that we should have?
- Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important to you?

Tenured Focus Group Questions

Icebreaker: Who went into librarianship wanting to be a supervisor?

Chat:

- Did you supervise the entire time you were pre-tenure? If not, how many years did your role include supervising? If you supervised the entire time you were pre-tenure, just put “All” in the chat.
- What is the greatest number of direct reports you have had at one time?

For these questions, I ask you to think back to your time as a pre-tenure supervisor.

- During that time, if you could have had five hours uninterrupted every week, what would you have worked on?
- What would your day have looked like if you did not supervise?
- Thinking back, do you feel as if your administrative/supervisory duties impacted your participation in librarianship, service, or scholarship? At that time, which area of impact concerned you the most?
- What support, if any, did you get from your supervisor or library administration? What support would you have liked to have gotten?

Returning to present day.

- If you have had positions that have become vacant, how have you or your library handled the work assigned to positions under your supervision?
- What is your approach to supervision? How do you define success as a supervisor?
- What question did we not ask that we should have?
- Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important to you?