

Michael Kirby and Meredith Farkas

Leading and Locked Out

Academic Community College Librarianship

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, and this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors, and they were given space to explore. This issue's conversation discusses the role of community college librarianship in our profession. The authors highlight how library workers at community colleges are often leading the way, while still being “locked out” from the dominant narratives of academic libraries.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Michael Kirby: Hi Meredith! Thank you again for agreeing to this conversation. I wanted to start with a little information about my workplace. Here at CUNY Kingsborough Community College, we have faculty status (as do librarians at other CUNYs), but, as you can imagine, the benefits awarded to faculty don't always translate. For example, there have been some questions about sabbaticals recently, which have been granted to librarians, but, to my knowledge, only at the four-year colleges of CUNY. Not only do we not have parity with faculty more generally, we also don't really seem to have parity with librarians in our own system. What does your work situation look like? Do you have faculty status?

Meredith Farkas: It's so nice to work with you Michael! We librarians also have faculty status at Portland Community College (PCC), and it's actually significantly less fraught than it was when I had faculty status at universities in the past. I have the same status and privileges as all full-time faculty; in fact, I'm writing this from my sabbatical. In my opinion, the most compelling reason for librarians to have faculty status is for us to be seen as educators and partners by faculty in other disciplines. While I've had some form of faculty status for all of my 19 years in academic libraries, my community college experience has been the only time when I truly felt like a peer to the vast majority of my faculty colleagues across the college. It's distressing to me that community college librarians are treated as somehow lesser librarians in your system, though I wish I could say I was surprised. I remember when I accepted my job at PCC in 2014, there were colleagues at my university who saw it as a step down, which was ironic, because it was my dream job. What are your thoughts on why other academic librarians see community college librarianship as less-than?

Michael: My guess is that this “less-than” mentality that exists within the profession has a lot to do with people's preconceived notions about community colleges in general and

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community college students in particular. Sabbaticals are for people with something worth researching, right? The unsaid part of this assumption, of course, is that community college librarians don't have anything worth researching. We kind of get back to this age-old (false) distinction between librarians as providers of service and librarians as scholars. Yes, I spend a lot of time doing reference work and information literacy, but these services warrant critical examination, and I think we (as community college librarians) can offer a unique perspective.

Meredith: We certainly can! When I worked at a research university, I felt pulled in a million different directions because we were meant to support the research needs of undergrads, graduate students, and faculty. It was a revelation to come to a community college, where I could concentrate much more deeply on my teaching and focus on the success of a smaller, though quite diverse, population. It was refreshing to work at a place where we were all so focused on our students. I learned more about quality teaching in my first year at the community college than I did in my previous nine years in libraries, six of which I'd spent as a head of instruction.

It was at the community college that I learned about trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive teaching, and other asset-based approaches. My colleagues are far more engaged in learning to be better teachers than anywhere else I've worked. My research with Lisa Hinchliffe¹ showed that community college libraries were far ahead of academic libraries in terms of building an assessment culture, yet when she and I presented our research at the ACRL 2015 Conference, it was only lightly attended, and almost entirely by community college librarians. There's so much that academic library workers of all types could learn from our work with community college students (many of whom end up at other colleges and universities), and yet we tend to get less support to present and publish.

Michael: I totally want to echo the point that many community college students end up at four-year universities. I believe the national statistic is about one-third of community college students transfer, although at certain institutions (like CUNY), it's much likely higher because of college credit reciprocity that's built into the system. My experience with assessment culture has been similar to yours in that it does really seem like community college librarians are more open to figuring out what works and what doesn't work in regards to teaching. This is probably because we do so much of it. I would go even further, however, and say that in my experience, community college librarians are exceedingly open to innovation across the board. You've mentioned trauma-informed practice and culturally responsive teaching, but a place that I've found that we've really been able to innovate at my institution is with open education.

It's often the case that librarians are relegated to supporting roles in open education (as administrators of institutional repositories, spokespeople for the "movement," etc.), but where are the OERs tailored for information literacy instruction? Of course, they've always existed; we've just never called them "OERs," and these resources we have been sharing for decades don't fit into the stereotypical model of the semester-length, open textbook. Various librarians at my institution have really been pushing against this narrative. But yes, I don't want to get too far off point. Community college librarians have heavy teaching loads, this naturally gives them unique practical insights, these insights are ignored because of the bias against research produced by community college librarians, and, finally, these insights are locked out of the official narrative of what it means to be a librarian. I seem to be talking in circles! Where do you think we go from here? Is there a solution somewhere?

Meredith: The leadership role many community college library workers have played in the open education movement is definitely not off point. It's another place where our unique experiences can be useful to other academic library workers.

Your phrase "locked out of the official narrative" is so insightful. When I was in library school, I certainly never heard or thought about community college librarianship. What I learned about academic librarianship looked like university library work. Certainly community college library workers are not the only ones left out of the narrative in our profession, but that narrative shapes our views of what is possible and what is valued in our field. It creates the petty hierarchies that devalue the work of so many in libraries. It encourages people to pursue certain types of work in certain settings because it appears most valued in the story of our profession. And it discourages others from even going to library school because they don't see a place for themselves. I think interrogating and changing the narrative of academic library work and how it is communicated throughout our profession is a good place to start.

I think our profession could do more to encourage scholarship from community college librarians. I've appreciated that ACRL has made an effort to include more community college workers and relevant content in their conferences, but speakers from community colleges are still expected to pay the same rate to attend as attendees from better-resourced institutions. I remember the Library Instruction West Conference in 2020 had a lower rate for community college and public librarians to encourage more diverse participation and in acknowledgment of the reality of our funding. More scholarships and grants specifically for community college library workers to present at conferences would definitely encourage more cross-pollination.

I also think community college library leaders need to place value on their employees sharing the great work they're doing and make it part of their jobs. The one thing I do miss about university librarianship was that scholarship was part of my job, and so I was able to engage in scholarship during work time. Our scholarship not only enriches the profession, but enriches our own practice, thereby improving our own libraries.

Michael: To your point about encouraging scholarship, I've often been encouraged just through exposure to the work about community colleges that, in spite of all of the obstacles we've covered, proudly insists on existing. I'll highlight a recent favorite: A comprehensive series of books (edited by Janet Pinkley and Kaela Casey) have been coming out from ACRL. Some of the titles include *The Community College Library: Reference and Instruction* and *The Community College Library: Assessment*, and I believe a third book is in the works. These are great entry points for anyone that's a new hire at a community college and has questions about what the workload might look like on a daily basis.

Meredith: Yes, there are community college librarians making great scholarship happen in spite of the barriers, and there are some community college libraries that do value and support scholarship. There's hope for sure! More than anything, though, I wish that workers at other types of academic libraries would recognize that there are useful things they can learn from community college library workers and value the unique insights we develop because of the nature of our work. We have so much to offer, and not just to other community college workers. ✂

Note

1. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe and Meredith Farkas, “Community College Libraries and Culture of Assessment: A Survey of Library Leaders,” *Proceedings of the 2014 Library Assessment Conference, Seattle, WA* (2014): 183–87, <https://www.libraryassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/bm~doc/proceedings-lac-2014.pdf>.