

Jamia Williams and Jessi Van Der Volgen

Boundaries and Burnout

Thriving in the Academic Library

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, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional 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 is about boundary setting and supervision in the academic library. Our authors see a better future when we all can understand the boundaries that set us free.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Jamia Williams: Jessi, I have been reflecting lately about leadership and the role leaders can play in ensuring that the staff are doing a better job of taking care of themselves. One of the lessons that I learned from the COVID-19 global pandemic is that I want to continue doing a better job of taking care of myself. So, when I interviewed for my current position and you mentioned that boundary setting is vital for you and your colleagues, it was confirmation that I applied for the right job. I wanted to ask you how you got to this place where you have boundaries and want your team to have them. Can you please share your journey of becoming a leader who sets boundaries and wants her colleagues to do the same?

Jessi Van Der Volgen: I was surprised (and glad) to hear that stood out to you, Jamia! My first career was as a high school science teacher. I burned out pretty quickly because my whole life revolved around my job. As I left that job, I knew I needed to work on setting boundaries for myself, or I would burn out again. Since entering librarianship, I've witnessed people leave because they were asked to do too much, felt like they had to say "yes" to everything to succeed, or couldn't say "no" without risking their job. As I became a supervisor, I wanted to do my best to set up a work environment where we mutually understand that our jobs are just one piece of us, and that to do good work, we need time for learning and creativity. To make sure we have that time, I consider an important part of my job as a team leader to help people set boundaries, either with others or with themselves, and visibly hold boundaries for myself. I've been lucky enough to see that modeled by previous supervisors, but as I learned from you, it's not as common as I thought, is it?

Jamia: Unfortunately, Jessi, it is not as common as you thought. It truly is not normalized to set boundaries. Some people expect us to be selfless servants in every aspect of our jobs, and when a boundary is set, some people take it as selfish. I'm glad you mentioned burnout because I thought I was managing it well, but I wasn't. During my Renewals' coaching¹ with

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Kaetrena Davis-Kendrick, she pointed out that I was experiencing burnout. This prompted a journey of self-reflection,² revealing the need for a different approach to librarianship. The first question that I had was, how did I get here? I realized that I felt this pressure to over-perform when we had to return to in-person work. Also, I was not implementing the self-care practices I began to incorporate during the COVID-19 global pandemic quarantine. These two things, as well as other factors, led to me experiencing burnout. Fobazi Ettarh, who coined the term “vocational awe,” wrote about job creep and burnout when we are expected to do, or think we have to do, ALL of the things.³

So, as a leader, how do you ensure that you and your team do not give in to job creep, which almost always leads to burnout?

Jessi: When I read about vocational awe, it definitely made me think of my time as a teacher and the idea that we should give everything for our students.

Then, COVID-19 brought it into focus for me and led me to want to more clearly enforce boundaries for myself and help colleagues do the same. I had two little kids at home, and I felt like I was just doing a terrible job at everything! Work is just one part of us—we are whole people: caretakers, artists, volunteers, advocates—and if only one side of us gets watered, our roots are weakened, we have no energy for growth or creativity!

So, some real things you see on our team are regular one-on-one discussions of priorities and capacity, autonomy and choice in what to take on (to the extent possible), how to defer or decline projects or committees, flexible schedules, encouraging staff to use all their benefits and time off—and really being off! Since we work on a grant, we have pretty defined goals and that makes it a bit easier for us to evaluate potential projects. We ask, is this new activity in line with the grant goals or your personal goals? If you take this on, what will get deferred or side-lined? And finally, I’ve been working on making the boundaries I set for myself visible to the team—letting folks know when I’ve said no to something, not mysteriously answering emails when I said I’d be off, being transparent about leaving early to take a kid to the dentist, and so on.

What else have you noticed or do you think would be helpful?

Jamia: Jessi, great question! I have noticed that our team gets excited for each other when we take time off. I love hearing the cool things my colleagues engage with when they are off work. It is like I am getting to know them a little bit better. As a result, this keeps me on track in taking days off. I am glad you brought up the notion that we are more than our jobs, which is so true. Who I am outside of being a librarian is essential to me. I love planning my days off to center joy and rest on those days. It is my form of self-care. Also, since we have a hybrid team, I know sometimes that people who work remotely feel the need to push through when they are sick. So, seeing my teammates use their sick time has been essential for me so that I won’t fall into the trap of not using my sick time. Also, I appreciate your modeling of boundary setting. Sometimes, it can take time for people to unlearn grind culture and learn boundary setting.

As a supervisor, how do you converse with someone you see struggling to set boundaries?

Jessi: I like to set the stage early on for *why* I encourage folks to set boundaries for themselves—I want folks to be able to maintain their personal well-being, while performing the essentials of the jobs, with space for growth. If someone is struggling with setting boundaries with themselves or with others, I first ask myself if I’ve clearly communicated expectations. If I’ve been unclear about what the “musts” are for success in the role, then I

need to revisit that and get in alignment on priorities. Then, we'll discuss everything that's on their plate—what's fulfilling and exciting, and how to make more space for that; what can be delayed or discarded (and know that they will not be viewed negatively for doing so); what projects they're on and if they're being asked to work outside the scope of their role. For faculty librarians, we also discuss whether their activities align with the criteria for promotion. If they are clearly overloaded or are at risk of becoming so, we'll strategize how to get back to an appropriate workload (both in amount and type), and if they need, I'll provide coaching or examples for how to get to an endpoint on a project or committee. And sometimes, my role is to just to affirm that it's okay to say "no."

Jamia, what would you say to your peers who are working toward setting boundaries at work?

Jamia: Great question! I would tell them what Tressie McMillan Cottom said, "the institution cannot love you." Remember this when there are moments when you feel badly about setting a boundary. This is why having people in your life who love you is necessary. Furthermore, engaging in things that bring you joy will help you put work in a better perspective. Also, keep working toward it! Setting boundaries can be challenging for folks. I suggest following amazing people like Nedra Glover Tawwab, who wrote the book *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*. This book gives tangible ways that you can do a better job at setting boundaries. I can't fail to mention that there will be backlash from people who are used to you overextending yourself, so try not to take it personally. Just know that it comes with this journey.

It is essential to have people who respect boundary-setting and can help you set boundaries. If that person is not your supervisor, having peace protectors in your professional community will be life changing. They will give you reminders to keep you steady so you won't have to experience burnout. That is why having a supervisor who demonstrates boundary-setting and helps her employees set them is amazing.

I shared some people I look to for motivation and inspiration. Who do you look to for guidance on setting boundaries?

Jessi: I love that phrase—"peace protectors." One of my previous bosses used to remind us that very little in our work is an emergency, so there's no point in treating it like it is. I've definitely adopted that mentality. But really, I feel inspired by people coming up now and younger generations. We know that sacrificing our health for work is just not worth it, and I see folks clearly enforcing those boundaries—leaving work at work, pushing back against overwork, and changing the culture of our workplaces for the better. Without burnout, there's space to move from just surviving to really thriving.

Any last words of encouragement for how supervisors and employees can work together to support thriving?

Jamia: Yes, so many words, but I will keep it brief. Honestly, supervisors and employees need each other; do not let the institution grow a divide between us. We need each other in a real way because the COVID-19 global pandemic should have taught us that we are connected. How you care for yourself affects everyone around you, so make it a priority to be better and do better. As information professionals, many resources can help you if you need help knowing where to start. A job is not worth your health and well-being. Unfortunately, we need money to live, but we should not need a job to thrive. I encourage us to continue creating a life outside of work so that we are the best versions of ourselves when we are at

work. Lastly, therapy helps unpack many unhealthy habits that impede our ability to be our best selves. Let's keep unpacking to pack light, as Erykah Badu told us. ♪

Notes

1. Kaetrena Davis-Kendrick, "Renewals' Coaching Service," *Renewals*, <https://kaetrenadaviskendrick.wordpress.com/coaching/>.

2. Amanda M Leftwich, "Reflective Journaling: A Daily Practice," *LibParlor* (blog), January 30, 2019, <https://libparlor.com/2019/01/30/reflective-journaling-a-daily-practice/>.

3. Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe And Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with a Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.