

Ariana Varela and Katie Perry

A View from the Starting Line

Early Tenure Track in Libraries

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. We have been exploring a theme throughout this year, but this topic seems so timely with the beginning of the school year and so many people starting new jobs that this month's issue focuses on life on the tenure track, though we will return to the theme next month for the rest of this year. In this article, two librarians share their heard-earned experiences and wisdom about life on the tenure track as new librarians. — *Dustin Fife, series editor*

Ariana Varela (AV): Katie, you and I are the most recent hires at our library and the only two remaining on the tenure track, while the rest of our colleagues have since received tenure. I have been thinking a lot about the “hidden curriculum” of working toward tenure. While library schools do discuss the various types of librarianship one can pursue (e.g., public, special, school, academic), I never learned about the multiple professional classifications academic librarians experience depending on the institution where they work. Some academic librarians have faculty status and are on the tenure track, some have faculty status but are in a more precarious lecturer or contract role, while others are classified as staff or academic staff. While on the tenure track, librarians are expected to deliver on their assigned duties; pursue service for the institution, the profession, and/or the community; and engage in research (such as publishing, presentations) or creative activities. For me, that is often where the clarity ends. How much service should you aim for? How many publications are enough? How many of those publications should be peer reviewed? Katie, what do you think about the “hidden curriculum” of working toward tenure?

Katie Perry (KP): I agree! Like you, I didn't learn about all the different professional classifications until I was actively applying for positions. When I landed the position here at Cal State LA, I told my sister it was tenure track, and she said, “You're on your way to being Indiana Jones!” Haha. So while there are some wonderful protections in being fully tenured and benefits to being considered faculty, there are so many variables to figure out on the journey. Expectations seem to vary fairly drastically from institution to institution, which is why I feel so lucky to be going through the process at our institution alongside you—we're

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learning together! But back to your point, our retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) documents clearly say scholarship, instruction, and service are all valued, but nowhere does it say, for example, how many and which type of publications we should have by the time we go up for tenure. It all feels like guesswork. And since we're in this precarious place, we either will take on too much in some areas (haven't we both?) or we'll find out later in our reviews, after we've already spread ourselves thin by what we've chosen to focus on, that we're lacking in certain areas. It's funny because when I was very new, I was so worried about not meeting the hidden expectations that I said yes to everything and volunteered for everything, and only now, two and a half years into the journey, am I learning that I have to say no to certain things so I can remain good at what I'm already doing. Have you experienced anything like that as well, Ariana?

AV: Oh, definitely! Sometimes it feels like “no” cannot exist in my vocabulary while on the tenure track. Due to the nature of my role, I have regular individual meetings with our library dean. Since we are facing staffing shortages and budget challenges, many of those discussions involve assuming additional work and pivoting to ever-changing priorities. Being a woman-of-color librarian, I feel an added pressure to prove my worth and exceed expectations about what it means to be an academic librarian, especially one on the tenure track.

During the RTP process, we are reminded that our reviews are comparative with campus faculty that are up for review at the same time. This adds an extra layer of the unknown—who else on campus is up for review? What do their promotion packets look like? What are we being compared to? While instruction is central to both of our roles, the nature of our instruction work and our additional professional expectations vary compared to our faculty colleagues. Personally, another aspect that makes the tenure process challenging is the fact that I am not *new* to the profession; therefore, I feel like there is a perception that I do not need as much help with workload management or the retention and promotion process. I echo what you shared: This process would be so much harder if I did not have you to lean on and struggle with! Some of our colleagues have kindly informally shared their RTP packets via email as an example. This has helped me think bigger picture about my narrative—how it will be received by those outside of the library and how to best format sections and index evidence.

Katie, do you feel pressure to assume extra service, mentorship, and instruction work? What types of formal and informal support have been most helpful to you as you've worked toward tenure?

KP: I definitely feel pressure to always take on more service and more instruction—more of everything! I think part of it is that there is a genuine need, so it's hard to say no when the work matters and someone has to do it. But I also think there is the quiet (and sometimes not-so-quiet) expectation that you should keep adding to your RTP packet. It can feel like every committee, presentation, instruction session, or project is another opportunity to demonstrate your value, so turning something down comes with the worry that you might be passing up evidence you'll wish you had later.

I've even had conversations with tenured faculty that go something like, “Well, I'm tenured, so I don't really need to do that right now. Do you still need it?” Those moments have

really stuck with me because they reinforce the feeling that, as tenure-track faculty, we're constantly proving ourselves until we aren't. I don't think anyone intends for it to create an imbalance—and honestly, we have a lot of tenured faculty that continue to take on a lot of work (we aren't the only ones!)—but I wonder if it can sometimes result in tenure-track faculty taking on more of the “extra” work while we're still building our records at the university.

Personally, I've found it difficult to draw boundaries around my workload because every committee, project, or opportunity feels like something I can't afford to pass up if it might strengthen my RTP file.

As for support, I completely agree that seeing colleagues' RTP packets has been one of the most helpful things. Those examples make the process feel much more concrete and help demystify what a successful narrative actually looks like. I think that we're lucky to have had several colleagues who have volunteered informal mentorship regarding the RTP process. This mentorship has played a huge role in navigating the hidden curriculum. Having folks who are willing to share their experiences, review materials, and be open to answering questions (e.g., “What category would you put this in?”) really helped streamline my first experiences with putting my RTP packet together. At the same time, I think relying so heavily on informal knowledge networks can create inequities because not everyone has access to those relationships or feels comfortable asking for help. It makes me think there is a real opportunity for our department to make tenure expectations more explicitly transparent through formal mentoring programs or rubrics to ensure everyone has equal footing to help navigate the process successfully. And of course I think it's worth mentioning again that being able to talk through the process with you, compare notes, and have this kind of peer support has made the process feel much less isolating.

Ariana, we both mentioned how helpful it was to view successful RTP packets. If we had a formal mentoring program for new tenure-track librarians, what would you want it to include? Do you think there are other ways our library could make those unwritten rules more transparent? What do you wish was spelled out?

AV: The RTP FOMO is real. The pressure to stand out and prove your worth can also create a culture of competition and feelings of territorialness amongst junior faculty. I think you've articulated an existing tension in many workplaces: Newer colleagues that are on the road to permanency often assume additional labor as compared to their colleagues who have more job security. Competition pushes individuals to work hard, for longer hours, and perform uncompensated service. I feel like the culture of higher education requires this dynamic to continue functioning. But it doesn't have to be this way! You mentioned how both formal and informal structures of support can combat the feeling of not being able to say no and the uncertainty around the promotion process.

My previous institution has a similar promotion process where librarians work toward *continuing appointment*—a tenure-equivalent status. Junior library faculty are paired with a librarian colleague outside of their department who successfully submitted their dossier and were awarded continuing appointment. This mentorship program had a few formal requirements that were helpful in a large and siloed network of libraries: a minimum number of times mentors were expected to meet with their mentee each semester and direct feedback on narrative drafts. While currently we have been fortunate to have colleagues informally offer to provide feedback on our narrative statements, a formal mentorship process would

recognize the service they are providing and allow them to include this mentorship in their own review documents. Katie, I think both of these strategies would be helpful additions to our tenure process. More transparent expectations around publishing and creative activities would reduce a lot of the worry I feel around the promotion process. Creating a more supportive environment around the tenure and promotion process takes a lot of intentional work and requires the time and space to change the existing process.

To close, I'd like to share some reflection questions for readers:

- What structures in your organization's promotion process reinforce uncertainty and/or competition?
- Are there any formal or informal interventions you can apply at your workplace to support junior colleagues on their path toward permanency or increased job security?

We would love to hear what structures of support your organization employs for newer faculty! *~*