

Nina McHale

Rank Promotion and Tenure in the Library

How Criteria and Process (Still) Favor Reference and Instruction Work

In a *The Way I See It* essay in the July/August 2000 issue of *C&RL News*, Rodger C. Lewis briefly recounted the history of how librarians came to have tenure in the 1950s and 1960s. He noted that this movement was not without controversy, and that

...on many campuses there were a couple of interesting bumps on that road to a new identity: the teaching faculty began to feel threatened by the possibility of having to share whatever wealth and privilege there might be with a larger group, and they objected vociferously; the technical services librarians realized that the public service librarians, in their attempt to take on a new identity, were emphasizing their instructional contact with students and their assistance to professors at the expense of the clever people in the back room, so a break in the ranks occurred that threatened to derail the movement.¹

Twenty-five years later, this rift between technical services and public services work is still visible in the context of how we evaluate ourselves. The primacy of public service experience in tenure and promotion (T&P) documentation and practices, particularly in reference and instruction, can create inequity.

To Lewis's point, teaching—even one-shot information literacy sessions—is the easiest analog between the work of faculty librarians to faculty colleagues in academic departments and, therefore, to the academic mission. Reference and instruction work has evolved over this period to include deeper and embedded interactions with faculty and students. However, the advent of the Internet caused tectonic shifts in technical services and library technology, resulting in a proliferation of many more types of faculty librarian positions that called for expertise in areas such as metadata creation and maintenance, digital asset management, electronic resources management, and web development and user experience. In my experience at multiple academic libraries with tenure-track and non-tenure-track promotion paths, the scope and scale of this growth have not been reflected in processes for evaluation, with the result of promotion criteria favoring reference and instruction librarians. Faculty librarians in technical services and technology have not had a scaffolding on which to fairly evaluate their work in a context that clearly describes their contributions to their libraries, their campuses, and the profession.

At two of these academic libraries with rank promotion paths, I noted that a contributing factor to this issue was the origin of the T&P documents: They were adapted directly from those in place for teaching faculty in the academic units rather than developed separately

Nina McHale is associate dean for student and scholar services at the University of Denver University Libraries, email: nina.mchale@du.edu.

in the context and in support of faculty library work. In fact, the three broad categories of faculty librarian work were defined in T&P documents as “Teaching,” “Research,” and “Service.” “Teaching” has since been changed to “Librarianship” at both libraries. This may seem trivial. However, as the head of the reference and instruction department, I realized the extent to which my colleagues in other departments did not see themselves in our promotion practices when a fellow department head told me that they “need[ed] to be a lot more like [me] and [my] team before [they could] go up for promotion.” This colleague’s breadth and depth of experience in technical services would have almost undoubtedly resulted in a successful promotion in rank, but they understandably lacked confidence in the process to fully account for their contributions. This was further compounded by the fact that the majority of the faculty—seven of fifteen total faculty lines—were in the reference and instruction department. The status quo served the majority for quite some time, but thankfully the faculty senate recently undertook a thorough review of the process with the intent of becoming more inclusive.

Finally, until very recently, our professional guidelines echoed this inequity. The legacy ACRL document A Standard for the Appointment, Promotion and Tenure of Academic Librarians suggested “Additional evidence for promotion in rank,” and first on the list of the evidence was: “Contributions to the educational mission of the institution: for example, teaching (not necessarily in a classroom); organization of workshops, institutes or similar meetings; public appearances in the interest of librarianship or information transfer. Assessment by students and professional colleagues may contribute to this evaluation.”² The guidelines also include “Contributions to the advancement of the profession” and “Activities related to inquiry and research” as further evidence; however, “teaching” is the default example given. At the 2026 ALA Annual Conference, however, the ACRL Board of Directors approved the new ACRL Standards for the Employment, Promotion, and Tenure/Continuing Appointment of Academic Librarians, which consolidated the above-mentioned standard with two others.³ This new, single standard is intended to apply a broader lens of equity toward all academic librarians, regardless of their faculty/tenure status and removed the “teaching-forward” language of the legacy standard.

This is a simple, yet serious, matter of equity. Academic libraries tend to have short internal career ladders, so a promotion in rank is often the best (or only) way to receive more than a moderate annual merit increase or a cost-of-living adjustment. Therefore, all library faculty need to feel actively seen throughout promotion activity. To this end, review your organization’s tenure and promotion documentation and practices with a critical eye toward inclusion. Where and how is the word “teaching” used; is it disproportionately referenced? In rubrics and sample or supporting documents, are there a variety of detailed examples that are representative of faculty work across all units? Ensure engagement in tenure and promotion practices with all faculty librarians; does everyone see a clear path for their own success in the process? If you are invited to serve as an external reviewer for another institution, note and communicate any biases.

College campuses are inherently interdisciplinary spaces; a chemist and a sculptor must be able to confidently evaluate one another for rank promotion to work successfully and equitably across the institution. As faculty librarians, we do ourselves a collective disservice by not fully delineating the scope and scale of our own collective expertise and experience when we rely on analogs—i.e., teaching—and define ourselves against what we are not—teaching

faculty—rather than what and who we are. Faculty librarians all deserve supportive and inclusive tenure and promotion processes that value the entire spectrum of our contributions, skill, and expertise. ~

Notes

1. Rodger C. Lewis, “Publish or Perish: Looking at Tenure from the Other Side of the Street,” *College & Research Libraries News* 61, no. 7 (2000): 606–08, <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/20830/25553>.

2. Association of College & Research Libraries, “A Standard for the Appointment, Promotion and Tenure of Academic Librarians,” April 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250324014708/https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/promotiontenure#appointment..>

3. Association of College & Research Libraries, “ACRL Standards for the Employment, Promotion, and Tenure/Continuing Appointment of Academic Librarians,” June 2026, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/employment_promotion_tenure.