CAUT Librarians' Committee Discussion Paper
on
Librarians' Workload

This paper is to promote discussion within the Canadian Association of University Teachers
and does not necessarily reflect the views of CAUT

1
Introduction

1.1
In recent years, workload has been a consistent topic of concern for academic librarians. Two symptoms beyond the anecotal have been noted by the CAUT Librarians' Committee, and there is no indication that the concern has abated.

1.2
The first symptom was the finding from a survey of workloads conducted over the summer of 1998, that nearly every librarian surveyed believes that their University Library does not have enough professional librarians to accomplish its tasks. This is not a surprise, of course. Nevertheless, the unanimity among librarians is striking, and probably reflects the general trend of severe pressure on academia as a whole.

1.3
The second symptom was a consensus of opinion arising from the October 1997 CAUT Librarians' Conference in St. John's, Newfoundland, namely that there is a gathering crisis in Canadian academic librarians' morale, which results directly from librarians' perceptions of their inability to control an exploding workload as resources get thinner. Two years on, there is little indication of improvement. This sense of crisis produced a call at the conference for librarians to accept that participation in their own governance is an integral part of their job, and to become active in determining the direction of their institutions' priorities, since the latter are the prime determinants of librarians' workloads.

1.4
The fact that overwork and inadequate resources are demonstrably taken as the general condition of Canadian academic librarians has led the CAUT to consider its position on the matter. The Association needs also to be prepared to assist its librarian members and member associations in dealing with what many consider to be the greatest problem facing their profession today.

1.5
In the course of surveying Canadian academic librarians on their workloads, it has become evident that there is a tremendous diversity of situations across the country, and that even where the situations at two institutions seem parallel (for example, librarians included as full academic partners with faculty in a certified environment), the same solution is not necessarily appropriate in both cases. However, what is undeniably common to all situations is the threat to members' actual ability to carry out their tasks in a professional manner (not to mention the threat to their sanity), because they are being given more responsibility than they can fulfil with the resources of

time and expertise they have at hand. For this reason, despite the diversity, it is still possible to enumerate common issues that arise in the context of workload. This paper aims to do this, and to present a position on each which is informed both by general principles of the rights of academic librarians and by a general understanding of what is going on in Canadian academic libraries at the present time.

2
The Workload Problem

2.1
There are three (interrelated) general causes for the burgeoning workload of academic librarians: diminished resources for universities at large, including reductions of library staff ; an increasingly managerial or corporatised style of governance at the highest levels; and an explosion in the complexity and sheer quantity of the work to be done, largely due to the expansion of the role of information technology. The result for librarians is a syndrome of increasing pressure to "do more with less," a familiar mantra of policy-makers. In practical terms this means, for instance, serving proportionately more time on the reference desk, covering collections responsibilities for a greater number of subjects, or cataloguing more books per day. These are things which can be counted, and therefore carry with them the spurious air of a measure of productivity. At a time of enthusiasm for performance indicators in certain quarters, numbers of this sort are the most useful things to show senior administrators or governments which demand accountability in response to pleas for resources.

2.2
The difficulty with a productivity model such as this is that the less measurable aspects of librarians' tasks tend to be considered less important, even if they are an essential foundation to the measurable ones. Because it can't be quantified, the time needed for a reference librarian (for example) to prepare for the desk hours, in terms of expertise, of followup and of simple recuperation, is discounted in importance. An increasing proportion of desk hours performed is inevitably accompanied by a decrease in the quality of that service which, conveniently for the bean counter, can't be related in a direct quantitative manner to the amount of the task, either. The result is increasing strain for academic librarians, whose professional ethic includes both a concern (in the academic manner) for the intellectual quality of their performance, and a concern to serve, which leads them (in the manner of doctors) to feel a requirement to do whatever can be done, despite shortages of resources.

2.3
The enormous effect of information technology on the librarian's task is also disregarded in this model, because technology is facilely assumed therein to be a labour-saving innovation. Unfortunately, this isn't the case, because librarians are not the manual equivalent of a system, but are rather the intermediaries between system and user. Quite contrary to such an assumption of labour savings, it is increasingly necessary for librarians to be able to master a broad diversity of systems in order to convey their advantages to the rest of the academic community. This is more work, not less, as systems increase in diversity and complexity. New information technologies tend not to replace those already in use, but rather to add dimensions of availability and complexity, and to increase the quantity of information to which there is access. Therefore, the user's need for critical evaluation of information resources (that is, for the function of the librarian) is greater than ever before.

2.4
A librarian thus needs to understand the workings of every potential information system or source in order to provide critically facilitated access to what the user requires. The relatively simple alternatives of the catalogue, paper periodical indexes and union listings, for instance, have been augmented (but not replaced), first by numerous online searching services a decade ago, and now by the multifarious and chaotic resources of the internet and world wide web. A conservative guess puts the numbers of existing websites in the hundreds of millions, and many more are added daily. However, in very few cases have any of the traditional types of sources ceased to be needed and used. "Search engine" software, supposedly an aid to navigation, is itself an additional subject that the librarian must learn to use well enough to critically assist users in the best path to the information needed. And there are literally thousands of search engines available to choose from, in contrast to the simple and uniform principles of the traditional paper resources (which, in some form, still need to be maintained). Add to this the diversity of new schemes for controlling access to information which is already proprietary, or has become so under the new copyright regime. If the librarian is to provide any better access to this welter of data than a home computer amateur surfing the net, much professional time and expertise needs to be spent on learning and keeping up with developments as they occur, just as it must be by doctors in the field of medical science. This is a huge intellectual task, and is of course impossible, if there are also demands to spend a greater proportion of that time in the "frontline" activities which are more countable. There is a limit, long past, to what ingenuity can achieve by way of streamlining practice to solve the problem; unless librarians are able to maintain the expertise to facilitate critical access to information, the economic pressures now mean that more and more users must do without that access, at a time when their need for it is greater than ever before.

2.5
The effect is only multiplied by such perverse consequences as the illusion of greater economy created by a reduction in reference statistics, because information technology often requires much more intensive and time-consuming "front-end" instruction than traditional facilities. And, naturally, users expect more than they used to: they will often have a computer and internet connection at home, and it is the librarian's expertise that they need. In the field of reference, this means a longer interview, and therefore fewer interviews in a given period of time.

2.6
Nor is the problem confined to the reference function. The collections librarian, too, is an indispensable mediator of the user's access to appropriate information to supply his or her needs. Collections librarians must choose among a huge diversity, not only of actual information sources, but even of kinds of sources, and decide how to integrate these into the collection to best serve the needs of the institution's users, to say nothing of the burgeoning of means of acquisition. To do this, he or she must first know and understand the alternatives. Again perversely, in a time of reduced budgets, buying fewer materials for the library when there is more to choose from means more work and time spent evaluating the options (or selecting with less rigour and precision and allowing collection quality to slip).

2.7
All of this creates a multiplication of the intellectual tasks required of the collections librarian; if that person must not only choose materials for the collection but decide together with the cataloguer on the kind of access which will be available (there is no longer a clear distinction between owning and not owning a resource), decide on how to manage a materials budget in a new environment,

understand and choose between the options for making available various types of web services (to which he is forced by the impossibility of maintaining periodical collections at previous rates), then the number of books he or she acquires is virtually irrelevant as a measure of the work that must be done. To multiply the number of subject areas in a collections librarian's responsibility under these circumstances is a doubly false economy; without the background expertise needed to carry out such tasks, the quality of a collection (which means both the quality and availability of the information to which an institution has access) will inevitably decline. And this in turn means a denial of access to the user if the maintenance of that expertise is made impossible by filling the collections librarian's time with "countable" activities.

2.8
The cataloguer's task has expanded as well, to an extent previously unimaginable. Cataloguers need to maintain expertise in a huge variety of systems in order to provide a consistent access to the library's resources. And access no longer means simply listing book and serial holdings in a uniform fashion: users now need, and expect, reports which gather information in a way which will enable them to use it. The diversity of sources means that this can no longer be accomplished simply by catalogue headings, but needs new technical means, suited to the individual requirement, each time. Data is no longer available to the library in a few forms for which institutionalised handling practices will suffice; instead, new means constantly have to be created to accommodate new forms of information. Since, as was mentioned, the distinction between owning and not owning certain types of material (for instance, on the web) isn't clear, the type and limits of available access to them constitutes part of their description, which adds a dimension to this part of the cataloguer's task. Integrating access to such materials into the collection is a further aspect of the technical services librarian's intellectual challenge. But the expertise necessary for these activities cannot be maintained if cataloguing quotas are increased in the name of economic efficiency. Cataloguers, too, need opportunity for study to maintain the intellectual foundations which will enable them to carry out their function.

2.9
In all fields, in fact, the amount of expertise needed to cope with information technology is not only larger than ever before, but increasing rapidly, without the prospect of pause. There is no area in which economies of the crude type dictated by a preoccupation with numbers can be made without fatally damaging the accomplishment of the library's mission by making it impossible for librarians to fulfil it. The task has increased to the extent that there aren't enough bodies to go around, and at the same time, the professional understanding indispensable to choosing what will not be done without jeopardising the mission altogether is threatened by a lack of opportunity to maintain it.

2.10
In addition to setting up this destructive dynamic, the productivity model has the concomitant pernicious consequence that, despite its appearance of objectivity, it provides no objective measure for putting limits on the drive for productivity. The market signals that economic activity depends upon either do not exist at all in librarians' line of work or are irrelevant to the accomplishment of the task. There is no clear threshold at which it can be demonstrated that a given reference Librarian is serving too much time at the desk; that the quality of his or her service has declined below an acceptable level because of the amount of time served at the desk. The determination of such a threshold is a judgement - that is, it is arbitrary from an accounting point of view, and moreover the pressure of resource shortage makes the threshold moveable. Unless there are mechanisms whereby librarians can control their workload, it will inevitably increase without limit, and the quality of work and of life both will continue to plummet.

3
Particular Issues

3.1
A number of specific issues commonly arise in relation to this workload problem. They are not always distinguished from each other, but they should be dealt with separately to facilitate understanding.

4
Collegiality

4.1
In this context, the level of collegiality is best regarded as a measure of how much input Librarians have into the priorities established for their institution. There are many reasons for arguing that the greater degree of control librarians have over the definition of the library's task, the better, and the question of participation in structures of governance is dealt with in other publications of the CAUT. However, from the point of view of the workload problem, increased participation is the only alternative in view which can provide the basis for determining the threshold at which workload assignments become dysfunctional.

4.2
A threshold set by the librarians involved will have the greatest likely hood of being appropriate, because to the degree that the librarians who carry it out participate in setting it, it reflects their knowledge of the task, and what constitutes the successful accomplishment of the task. Participation in setting the priorities of the Library not only allows librarians to satisfy both demands of their professional ethic, but also brings their collective expertise to defining the task in the most intimately informed way possible. An institution's own librarians are best suited and best placed to know what it can accomplish successfully. And to decide what can be accorded a lower priority which may lead to its not being done. Therefore, an academic library's task priorities must be set collegially by the librarians of that library. This means more meetings, but this cannot be avoided if the workload is not to spin out of control, and without a commitment of collegial effort it most certainly will, meetings or not. It thus becomes incumbent to ensure that meetings and committee work become effective, so they do not constitute the waste of time many Librarians believe them to be. This will mean that supervisors need to participate, and that, as professionals, Librarians' activities will have a component of management decision-making.

5
Task Balance

5.1
A second general issue is the definition of the task. The question of task priorities is related not only to straightforward quantity but also the balance between Librarians' various activities in support of their institution's priorities. As was suggested above, part of the contemporary workload problem is a disproportion of countable, "trench" activities to backup activities such as professional development and governance. Many colleagues tend even to resent meetings as distractions from their "real" jobs. Nevertheless, as was pointed out, surrendering control over governance means

the loss of the ability to set the threshold at which the quantity of workload becomes dysfunctional.

5.2
Similarly, abandoning the opportunity for professional development, both in terms of keeping up and in terms of sustaining an intellectual life, means the loss of control over the quality of one's work, not to mention the humanity of working conditions. It is therefore necessary to ensure that Librarians are enabled to maintain a balance of all of the facets of their worklife: no single, supposedly quantifiable activity can be allowed to consume all of a librarian's time and energy to the detriment of other aspects of his or her task.

5.3
The most important consequence of this principle, broadly stated, is that there must be provision to accomplish all of the preparation and supporting tasks for the "front-end" activities of reference, cataloguing, day-to-day processing and collections activities and the rest. The latter cannot be carried out in isolation. Such provisions might be expressed in terms of employment or collective agreements by measures such as limits on scheduled duties, or leaves for professional development; circumstances will vary widely from one institution to another in this regard. Again, this is best determined by the librarians themselves, and that refers once more to the question of governance.

5.4
More specific corollaries of the principle of task balance can be enumerated and applied to nearly all situations. First, there must be recognition in Librarians' terms of employment (whatever form they take) that academic librarians' work consists in at least three distinct activities: professional practice, academic service, and research or professional development. None of these can be dispensed with if the quality of a librarian's work is to be maintained. The balance among them must be recognised, and the opportunity to accomplish all of them provided in the librarian's job description or terms of employment.

5.5
Second, particularly directed measures are necessary to provide opportunities for librarians to keep up with training for new technologies as they are implemented. We have seen that this has become an increasingly large part of the Librarian's task; it has to be recognised that the decision on the part of a library to implement a new system or database is only rarely a cost-saving measure, but rather is most often a response to a new kind of information need which it is part of the library's mandate to provide. In either case, Librarians cannot provide this service adequately without being fully enabled to operate or facilitate access to the system themselves. Making opportunities for such training will require that both time and resources be provided. Since the amount of time available is finite, an inevitable consequence will be, again, that there has to be a limit on the assignment of other tasks.

5.6
Measures to provide these opportunities should include frequent and regular reserved periods of time for technological training and study as part of normal workload and professional practice, both for systems the institution currently has or is acquiring, and for the exploration of wider developments; funding for travel in aid of these objectives; and provision for project-related professional development leave which is distinct both from regular training time and from sabbatical and other leaves in which the academic Librarian has more latitude for independent study in the manner of Faculty colleagues. Minimum levels for these time and resource allocations should be

prescribed annually or at another suitable interval, and for all the Librarians at an institution, rather than for selected groups such as the Systems Office.

6
Quantitative Limits

6.1
The question of setting quantitative limits to overall workload also arises here. One course which a number of institutions have taken in recent collective agreements is to define the number of hours that Librarians are required to work, most commonly 35 hours per week. This solution has the virtue of forcing decision makers (whoever they are) to provide the resources or decide what will not be done. It also protects librarians against overwork.

6.2
From a purely labour-relations perspective, this might be preferred. However, it is not ideal from either the academic or professional point of view. It draws librarians further away from the faculty model, which is of an independent pursuit of intellectual development. It also runs against the professional service ethic referred to earlier, to which many Librarians do earnestly subscribe.

6.3
In a spectrum of solutions to the question of overall quantitive limits, a move toward the opposite pole is represented by open-ended provisions that Librarians' work assignments be fair, reasonable and equitable, and reached by mutual consent. This of course leaves librarians' assignments open to the dynamic of perpetual increase in quantifiable workload without collateral provisions for professional development and academic service. This model therefore absolutely requires provisions for collegial inputs into the designation of institutional priorities.

7
Consent

7.1
It also depends greatly on provisions for mutual consent. It is noteworthy that recent collective agreements providing for specific numeric limits to hours worked also allow the employer to change librarians' work assignments without their consent. Such terms of employment are inimical to an academic and professional vision of academic librarians, tending to separate them from their faculty colleagues, and categorising them as employees in a more hierarchical context. To go down this road is to surrender permanently the aspiration to have a professional degree of control over librarians' work (and workload).

7.2
Consent is instrumental when the issue of reassignment is considered. Reassignment arises from conditions of retrenchment, which is the object of another CAUT study, but practically it has more often than not been a factor in increasing Librarians' workload, and increasing the dysfunctionality of its balance at the same time. In order for a librarian to have even minimal control over his or her task, and his or her ability to do the task, the principle of consent needs to be preserved. Its value is limited, however, unless there is also collegial control over the determination of institutional priorities in relation to resources.

8
Organizing Time

8.1
A final issue that has occasionally arisen surrounds the principle of librarians' freedom to organize their time. Again, it is notable that those recent agreements which prescribe hours are careful also to provide that, aside from those duties which by their nature must be scheduled, librarians have the right to decide how to use their time in accomplishing tasks. It might be surprising to some that this should ever be an issue, but the need for it in these cases can be regarded as symptomatic of a dynamic which would transform librarians into employees, and reduce their autonomy still further. It is obvious that if academic librarians are to keep a place in the CAUT as academics, this principle of freedom to organise one's time should be preserved.

9
Conclusion

9.1
It is evident from the foregoing that academic librarians in this country are all to greater or lesser degrees facing choices about the nature of their profession, which the crisis in workload makes urgent. There is a tendency to be snowed under, and to have trouble finding energy for what some see as the idealistic pursuits of governance and professional development. However, it is precisely with regard to the handling of these issues of workload that the question becomes critically practical. Unless positive steps are taken to cope with the dynamic of perpetual increase in workload, and perpetual cession of control of the task to non-professional decision-makers, academic librarians' practical fate will become increasingly evident, willy-nilly.

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