

**CAUT Librarians' Committee Discussion Paper
on
Library Councils**

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

For over twenty years academic librarians have been discussing and debating library councils. Despite this ongoing dialogue, it appears that very few universities have library councils and, where they are in place, they often fail to operate in a satisfactory and effective fashion. Now, at the end of the 90's, as the financial situation in higher education continues to deteriorate, librarians are becoming increasingly aware of the vital importance of their participation in library and university governance. The need for properly mandated library councils has become crucial.

The history of library councils in Canada extends back to the seventies when librarians first started advocating the establishment in their institutions of a collegial body that would be analogous to a faculty council. In 1979, a joint CACUL-CAUT committee published the Guidelines on Academic Status for University Librarians. Under the section on "University and Library Governance," the guidelines stated: "All librarians should be members of a Library Council which is chaired by the Chief Librarian. The Council should have responsibility for the development of policies and procedures for the operation of the library as a whole and should be responsible to the Senate or equivalent body." (Item V.2) This statement and definition echo throughout the professional literature, and similar statements have appeared in a number of CAUT documents. The CAUT Policy Statement on University Governance, for example, includes a clause under the section on "University Administration" which says, "There should be a library council predominantly composed of academic librarians along the lines of faculty councils where size warrants." (Item 4.12) In 1993, the Independent Study Group on University Governance devoted a section to chief librarians and library councils, and the report states: "All universities should put in place constitutional structures for the proper functioning of the library." (Item 4.6)

Tom Eadie, a member of the CAUT-CACUL group which produced the joint Guidelines, explains the rationale behind the recommendation in a recently published article: "We thought a Library Council could serve as a forum in which policy issues could be discussed before decisions were taken, and where there could be professional discussion of broad issues, and major changes or initiatives." (Eadie 79) As such, Eadie continues, the library council would be "a group of academics protected by academic freedom, and employees under a collective agreement, with every right to question and criticize administrative actions with no sense of personal implication in these actions." (79) Richard Ellis*, writing in the CAUT Bulletin also developed this theme when he stated. "It [the Library Council] should consider all policy matter relating to the library, both academic and non-academic. It should be specifically responsible for the initial formulation of academic policy originating in the library policies which would subsequently be considered by senate." (Ellis 10)

The Ideal Council

The ideal library council necessarily varies from institution to institution depending on the particular circumstances, but there are some fundamental principles that define its collegial nature. Firstly, the library council must be mandated as a policy-making body, not merely as an information-sharing committee. Discussion at the council should include any issue which has an impact on the librarians, the library, or the university as a whole. For the council to be effective, however, there must be some mechanism for ensuring that recommendations reach the university at large and do not just remain within the enclosed library governance system. The reporting structure must be defined to allow the council to submit recommendations to any appropriate person or group, whether it be the chief librarian, the senate library committee, the senate or any other university body.

The second defining quality is the membership of the council. It should include all of the university librarians, who meet as peers - administrative and non-administrative librarians alike. Whether or not to include representatives from other constituencies has to be determined on an individual basis. Some institutions have a bicameral system with a library council composed only of librarians and another body which includes elected members from other groups.

When possible, the mandate and structure of the library council should be negotiated and defined in the collective agreement. This results in a formal structure that must be respected but which can also be changed by agreement between the administration and the membership.

Inclusion of the library council in the collective agreement means that other clauses in the contract can refer to the council; moreover, certain discussions can be mandated to take place at the council, such as a discussion relating to new positions or recommendations regarding the acquisitions budget. Members of other committees can be nominated from the library council in the same way that the faculty council nominates senators or board members.

Positive Aspects

Much has been written over the years about the positive effects of such a library council. Dorothy Milne, in a paper delivered at the Canadian Library Association convention in 1989, describes a number of positive results: "The advantages of a library council lie in the fact that it is a collegial body that includes all librarians on staff, and this is best suited for purposes where broad-based communication is the key to success." She discusses the benefits of the improved communication, for example, better solutions to problems, and an increased understanding between the different departments and management levels. She points out further that the librarians' motivation and morale are increased when they are informed and consulted regarding issues and developments. There is also a positive effect upon professional development when librarians meet as peers and share their experiences. Milne emphasizes the political benefits that result from this increased involvement in library governance: the librarians' profile within the university is raised, which in turn increases their level of participation in university-wide governance.

Hierarchical Nature of Library Governance

Why then, when library councils have been advocated in the profession for over twenty years, are there so few in existence? And why do the existing councils fail to function satisfactorily? A

primary reason is the traditional structure of library management. The hierarchical nature of library administration, with succeeding layers of employees reporting upwards, does not encourage the establishment of a library council, which requires a flattened collegial structure. Moreover, establishing a committee where all librarians meet as peers, regardless of position, is difficult when both the staff and the administrators are accustomed to a process which passes decisions upwards for final approval. Both within the library and within the university at large, library governance is not viewed as analogous in any way to the collegiality that has historically defined the academy. As Richard Ellis explains, "In the process of continuing to direct and define their role, universities have paid little attention to libraries and academic librarians as active participants in the process. The reason for this lack of attention seems to be an assumption that the library carries out policy made elsewhere and is not properly a party to the deliberations of university senates and similar bodies." (Ellis 9)

This failure to adjust to a new view of librarians as contributing partners in the governance process often results in the inability to establish a truly collegial body. Predictably, administrators are often unwilling to relinquish the power which resides in the decision-making responsibility, and librarians are often unwilling to accept the responsibility inherent in decision-making. However, a library council can only function effectively if the administrators share the power and the librarians assume the responsibility. As Dana C. Rooks points out, in an article discussing the role of academic library directors, "A cornerstone of managerial success is the ability to fully utilize the diversity and talents of library staff at all levels to achieve identified goals, to compete for funding, and to build alliances within the community." (Rooks 53)

Role of Library Administration

An important factor in the successful functioning of the library council is the relationship it enjoys with the library administration. If the council is to be a productive, collegial body which contributes to the development and well-being of the university, there must be a good working relationship between the council and the chief librarian. Thus the position that the chief librarian fills on the council must be carefully defined.

One possible model includes the chief librarian as an invited guest rather than an ex-officio member of the council. With this structure, the position of the chief need not be compromised if the council is making recommendations which he or she cannot endorse. If, for some reason, the chief wishes to distance him or herself from the council's recommendations this can be done by virtue of the fact that the chief is not a member of the committee. On the other hand, endorsement of council recommendations by the chief librarian is always possible thereby giving them extra weight in the university community.

In any case, if the chief librarian is the agent by which recommendations are carried forward, there must be a mechanism established to ensure that a written report is delivered to the committee on the final decision.

In an alternative model, the chief librarian is included as an ex-officio member of the committee but sits as a peer with the other librarians. The chief librarian could be either non-voting or a fully participating member. In many instances, the chief librarian may also be the chair of the library council. Some institutions, however, report that this structure often results in a lack of efficiency and collegiality with the council degenerating into merely an information-sharing forum

steered by the administration. If the chief librarian is the chair then he or she must also value the collegial nature of the council and allow it to operate as a policy-making body.

The library council should be a collegial forum that engages the librarians and the administration in positive discussions about the direction the library will take. It is not meant to be, nor should it attempt to be, a management group. The council is the forum in which policy is debated and recommended; it is the responsibility of the library administrators to implement the policies. A failure to distinguish between the two functions can result in problems if the administrators fear that the library council will encroach on their managerial responsibilities.

The importance of the library council as a governance body cannot be overemphasized. Whatever the structure, however, it must be a council which allows the defining principles to operate. Through a collegial council the librarians participate fully in important discussions which effect the library and the university at large. With a policy-making body, which has the power to recommend to any university body, the librarians exercise influence in the university at large and make valuable contributions to the future of their institutions.

*Tom Eadie and Richard Ellis are now chief librarians. Eadie is university librarian at Trent University and Ellis is university librarian at Memorial University. Both Trent and Memorial have Library Councils.

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