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Ruminations on Tenure

By Ronald Wheeler, Jr.

Reference Librarian & Lecturer, University of New Mexico School of Law Library

As a newer law librarian having just completed my first year in a non-tenure track position, I often find myself wondering what my professional life would be like if my position were tenure track. After some reflection and discussion with peers, I've formulated the following thoughts on the subject of tenure for academic law librarians.

Offering tenure to academic law librarians helps to contribute to the recognition of law librarianship as a profession in and of itself. Having tenured law library faculty helps to promote the understanding that many law librarians have more education, more responsibility and less pay than some of their law professor colleagues. Given this reality, it is understandable why many feel that law librarians should, at least, be given the title and corresponding status of tenured faculty. Tenure recognizes the law librarian's ability to contribute to the academic discourse of librarianship and of the law by encouraging and rewarding research, writing and other scholarly activities. Tenure puts law librarians on an equal footing with those we serve, our law professor peers. It establishes a kind of equality factor between the law professor and the law librarian.

Offering tenure to reference librarians, especially those who teach Advanced Legal Research as I do, is an important step in recognizing the importance that legal research skills play in the practice of law and in legal academe. The ability to thoroughly research an unfamiliar area of law or to update dated research material is an integral part of the legal profession. Legal research skills are, in fact, fundamental skills that lawyers must possess. Reference librarians are the experts in the field of legal research. We study research, we constantly hone our research skills, we read about legal research, we write about legal research and we teach legal research. We do all of the things that other subject area specialists, including law professors, do. In fact, we often play a major role (through our research services) in the attempts of others to achieve tenure. Thus, some would argue, we should be offered the reward of tenure for distinguishing ourselves, and our institutions, through our own

publishing, our own teaching and our other scholarly activities.

One of the ways that the possibility of tenure would change my current job is that it would give me more of an incentive to write and to publish. As it stands right now, although I am interested in publishing, and although I have a director who is helpful and encouraging, the bottom line is that it is not required. When the sun begins to set at the end of the workday, I can go home with a clear conscience without having worked on any of my own materials for publication. If publishing were a part of my job description, it would be seen (by me and by others) as a part of my primary goals, and not as extra stuff. I would be expected to set aside time for my own research and writing. It would be a recognized part of the structure of my daily routine. Additionally, the law school faculty would view writing and publishing as legitimate pursuits for an academic law librarian pursuing tenure. As a non-tenure track librarian, I sometimes wonder whether my writing and publishing efforts are perceived by faculty as the unnecessary excesses of an overachiever librarian whose time would be better spent working on faculty research requests.

Recognition for committee work and for participation in professional organizations like the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) is another reason why tenure looks attractive to me. I have volunteered to serve on both law school and university wide committees within the last year, and I do so because I love it. I love having a voice in the governance of the law school and of the greater university, and committee work is a means to that end. Yet, it is not part of my job description, even though it undoubtedly reflects favorably on me, and on my law library. Recognition via points toward tenure is a way to reward law librarians for such efforts. Additionally, the work I've done on the Patron Services Committee of AALL is again "extra stuff" that reflects favorably on my library and me, but does not count in the way that it would if I were tenure track.

I must not forget to mention the obvious job security that goes along with tenure and that I cannot help but envy. After several years of hard and diligent professional, academic library work, the crowning achievement of tenure is an attractive end result. It is clear that all of the work that I do in my current job is taken into account and recognized vis-à-vis evaluations and verbal kudos from my supervisor and my peers. It is also clear that the ultimate decision as to whether I

will continue to have a job is colored by the amount of “extra stuff” that I do or don’t do. And, in that way, I am recognized for everything I do with continued employment and other forms of praise and recognition. However, tenure is the penultimate (second only to directorship) achievement for an academic law librarian, and the chance to achieve it is one that is coveted (although sometimes secretly) by many. ❁

**Research Instruction and Patron Services SIS
Business Meeting Agenda
Sunday July 21 5:30-6:30**

I. Call to Order

II. Old Business

A. Approval of Minutes from the 2001 Business Meeting
(Printed in the Fall 2001 Newsletter, Vol. 24 no. 1)

B. Financial Report - Pamela Melton

C. Annual Report to Membership - Marc Silverman

D. Committee Reports

1. Patron Services - Gary Hill
2. Web Page - Melissa Serfass
3. Research Instruction - Sheri Lewis
4. Nominations - Lee Ryan
5. Programs - Jessie Cranford, D.R. Jones
6. Volunteerism - Rachel Jones
7. Public Relations - Peggy McDermott
8. Listserv - Coral Henning
9. Teach-In - Gail Partin, Kristin Gerdy

E. Briefs in Law Librarianship - Bobbie Studwell

F. AELIC/Standards of Excellence for Internet Legal Information Services - Jean Wenger

G. Introduction of new officers, board members, and committee chairs - Marc Silverman

III. New Business

IV. Adjournment and Closing Statement - D.R. Jones