

Moonlighting as a Leader

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INTRODUCTION

Early-career librarians who work in scholarly communication roles at research institutions are often tasked with leading high-priority initiatives with limited support. Librarians taking on this work must balance working across department lines (Hackstadt, 2020), both within the library and across the institution, while lacking the positional authority to enact meaningful change. In this context, positional authority refers to leadership determined by role, a role that exists within a hierarchical structure in order to account for paths and missions for an organization. Often, positional authority in higher education may be above department head level. Balancing working across departments both within and outside of the library while knowing you do not have the agency to determine a path forward can be a daunting task.

Scholarly communications is defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2020) as

the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the community, and preserved for future use. The system includes both formal means of communication such as publication in peer-reviewed journals, and informal channels, such as electronic listservs.

When operating optimally, scholarly communication work in higher education is collaborative. This work, given the goals it serves, is “boundary-spanning” (Hackstadt, 2020), cutting across department lines to support the broad objectives of scholarly communication librarians’ functional specialist roles. And yet, given the outline of themes among the literature and my own experiences, it has the potential to be highly extractive work.

This chapter discusses the various challenges I have encountered as an early-career librarian working in scholarly communications and presents practical ways to think about these issues. While this chapter is written from my perspective, particularly in drawing upon themes and experiences in scholarly communications and scholarly communication-adjacent work, this chapter holds relevant themes for anyone working as a leader without positional authority. It is important for librarians in these situations to recognize that while they may not be able to effect institution-level change, they can open the door for conversations that may not have previously occurred in their respective institutional contexts. They can ask difficult questions with an eye toward finding allies to help answer the questions they are grappling with. Here, for the individual librarian, it can be about doing something rather than expecting themselves to do everything.

EXPERT OR EARLY-CAREER

Academic librarianship, and higher education as a whole, likes to use the term *expert*. On the one hand, being hailed as an expert in a given topic is a celebration of our credentials, the hard labor that underscores our achievements, and a certain recognition of our individual roles so that we acknowledge the expertise of our colleagues. On the other hand, the term *expert* has the potential to add additional problems to “boundary-spanning” (Hackstadt, 2020) roles. I often sit with this question as I find myself labeled an expert around topics such as Creative Commons, open education, or open access. Does this mean I eschew my expertise and experience in these areas? Absolutely not. But I remain hesitant with this type of positioning because I find it can lead to othering and isolation in the day-to-day work of librarianship.

When I am positioned as the solitary expert on a topic, additional barriers form around my work that may prohibit what I think of as the most sustainable approach we have toward systemic change in the work of scholarly communications—an understanding of how every role in our field impacts this vast and interconnected system and how we all can contribute to moving scholarly communication initiatives forward. Being a solitary expert, while often well-intentioned in our organizations, is extremely problematic when experts lack the positional authority needed to have their expertise determine the vision or values around a given institutional priority. Solitary expertise can also undercut the necessary collaborative nature of any “boundary-spanning” (Hackstadt, 2020) role. For example, solitary expertise models frequently lead to managing referral handoffs from colleagues on a case-by-case basis. This looks very different from co-consulting with my peers and learning together from each other’s experiences. The latter leads to stronger project outcomes and has the added benefit of contributing to cross-training skill sets within library staffing.

It should not go unnoted that often when people discuss “early-career” professionals, they assume that this is the first career of the individual in question. When doing so, people are, oftentimes, unable to draw connections between the early-career librarian’s existing skill sets and their new role (Williams & Fife, 2022). This fact positions early-career scholarly communication librarians to be seen as both lacking institutional knowledge and entering their first professional experience. The lack of institutional knowledge is most

often viewed as a deficit by others throughout the university community or colleagues who have achieved promotion, adding an additional barrier to building working relationships by prioritizing institutional history over moving forward toward goals for the future. There is a unique irony to being constantly reminded of your early-career status while also finding yourself leveraged by your organization as the expert in all scholarly communication topics, be that copyright, open education, research metrics, digital scholarship, and so on.

ISOLATION OR IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Librarians doing this work must manage up and sideways while battling the insecurities of being isolated as the primary expert on a topic. Managing up and sideways is a common feature of those serving as functional specialists as well as institutional experts. While you may lack positional authority, you are periodically required to educate administrators and peers on key topics in your field. Further, you must guide rather than dictate how they address or respond to the topics under your purview to minimize confusion due to the importance of these programs on an institutional level. This situation is not driven by what we describe in the literature as vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) or some sense of duty to our field, but rather by the experience of being positioned as a leader of high-priority work.

While you have the freedom, or more commonly the expectation, to serve as the solo expert managing this high-priority work, lacking positional authority while attempting to navigate the politics of management and institutional history can increase feelings of imposter syndrome. It is common to hear the term *imposter syndrome* bandied about in our profession. In fact it can be used to shrug off a lot of experiences and imply that simply given enough time you will find your groove, your confidence, that you in fact have nothing to worry about — “You’re doing great!” This is a crucial point when we consider early-career librarians leading scholarly communication initiatives. Dismissing lived experiences as imposter syndrome suggests there is some magical moment in which your expertise will eclipse your doubts—a magical moment that somewhat conveniently no one can in fact help you identify. Nicola Andrews (2020) states that “while it is admirable to want to help others overcome their difficulties, it is worth pausing to examine how these circumstances may result from concrete factors other than imposter syndrome.”

Colleagues and your institutional leaders may offer the idea of imposter syndrome as the reason you are experiencing difficulties or feeling doubtful of the direction your work has taken, instead of acknowledging and discussing what structures or workflows you’ve encountered that could be addressed and improved. Imposter syndrome is in many ways a tool presented to scholarly communication librarians as a mechanism to cope with, or explain away, our daily work experiences. A participant during an Open Education Conference 2022 session stated in the Zoom chat: “Being given responsibility without the authority to do it is the ultimate gaslighting strategy employed in our work” (Gong & Larson, 2022). This epitomizes the concern I hold that overuse of imposter syndrome as a mechanism to address challenges faced by early-career scholarly communication librarians minimizes the more systemic or embedded challenges in our institutions and structures.

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines gaslighting as “psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence, and self-esteem.” We can think of institutional gaslighting similarly, as the experience of having a perception of reality forced on our relationship to our work by the organizations we work within. This is especially significant when that perception is brought forth from a leader with positional authority to a leader without positional authority. Institutional gaslighting is a powerful way to describe the experiences that many scholarly communications librarians may find themselves navigating: trying to establish their footing as an expert and lead without the support structures to make real change. The community I have found within scholarly communications has validated my experiences and members have shared stories of their own that often mirror what I describe. These shared experiences have helped me remain grounded in the good work we are all doing, see new approaches to solutions I may not have seen on my own, and continue moving forward.

HIDDEN LABOR AND LEADERSHIP

Learning about your leadership style on the fly in an isolating environment like this can be difficult, and it is not something that many early-career librarians are equipped to handle by either their library schools or their organizations. This is particularly true for librarians coming into their position later in life who are assumed to have experience that they lack or whose experience outside the role of librarian is disregarded. Those who have prior experience in similar fields may also find themselves overlooked as “leadership material” because of marginalized identities (Cooke & Kitzie, 2021) that include race, sex, or gender expression.

Moonlighting as a leader can look like working behind the scenes to make progress when we do not hold the committee chair role, when we are not the dean or department head, and sometimes even while knowing our labor will be credited to others and ultimately completely hidden. Hidden labor in this way becomes yet another form of institutional gaslighting for the librarian providing leadership without positional authority (leadership that operates behind the scenes and can necessitate performing positionality to prompt engagement from colleagues or achieve the next deliverable of a project). Another way hidden labor can manifest is when you are required to break and rebuild the foundation of a program while also maintaining a functional, running service, which may be necessary to meet obligations to instructors and students, but also a way I have been complicit in hiding my own labor. This type of leadership—if it remains unexposed—runs the risk of continuously minimizing the labor and costs that institutions must be prepared to support to achieve sustainable institutional infrastructures for our work. Our field needs to begin to recognize and grapple with the fact that leadership responsibilities are innate in the way organizations position many of these scholarly communications or scholarly communication-adjacent roles.

Another type of hidden labor exists in the precarity of early-career librarians moonlighting as leaders without having achieved promotion or tenure. While it would be easier

to brush this aside, the promotion structure of any given institution is a point of consideration when deciding how to approach your role's leadership. Whether you are tenure-track or not, higher education structures rely on the recommendations of your administration and peers for you to retain your position. This creates a background white noise, something unnamable, that can add an additional tension around where authority resides for those moonlighting as a leader. There is a balance in this tension that early-career leaders without positional authority must grapple with on an individual level, a balance that is likely struck somewhere between self-advocacy and self-protection while striving to complete effective work.

While there aren't one-size-fits-all answers, radical honesty has proven to be the most important strategy in my toolkit when I have questioned undertaking an assignment. This might require asking questions about how things will transpire given my rank, or how the institution has historically handled such assignments in terms of rank. When successful, such an approach cultivates intentionality and has created space for a leader with positional authority to seek input from others as well as strategize on which tasks they prefer to undertake alongside me or with my support.

REFLECTING ON MOONLIGHTING AS A LEADER

The more I have reflected on what it means to moonlight as a leader, the more I have questioned writing this chapter from the scholarly communications lens. While it is the lens I have the most experience with, I do see the potential for these trends to present themselves across the field of librarianship, particularly among functional specialist positions. These types of positions are generally the most "boundary-spanning" (Hackstadt, 2020) of roles in academic libraries—not in the sense that other positions do not also span boundaries, but rather that these positions are required to work across departmental and college lines in order to achieve the initiatives and work set out in their position descriptions. What could be unique to scholarly communication positions is that the types of initiatives that fall under their purview channel higher stakes situations and are often under a more intense spotlight.

This spotlight is likely due to the institutional visibility of the initiatives themselves, which often require buy-in from provost offices or other administrative roles external to the library. These situations tend not to leave a lot of room to openly experiment or iterate work, and you may face pressure to fall in line with library or university objectives even when they are in conflict with your views as the expert. Higher stakes are implicit if you fail to meet expectations within set time lines even if you do not have the resources needed to succeed. Stakes of this nature are amplified by an early-career, pre-tenured status.

It is necessary to acknowledge that there is more nuance to the pressures faced by both leaders with positional authority and those without than this chapter can fully explore. Every leader, regardless of positional authority, is faced with pressures, objectives, time lines, and additional expectations that are outside of their control and that can create a domino effect for everyone working on these priority initiatives. Whenever possible,

leaders who have positional authority should communicate with those moonlighting as leaders when the directions the work is taking are influenced by forces outside either of their scopes to change. This provides an opportunity for anyone moonlighting as a leader to deepen their institutional knowledge. Such an opportunity can also cultivate trust to encourage early-career professionals to ask for advice and support navigating political issues at play.

In my experience serving at public universities in smaller, rural states where research is a priority but funding for higher education falls behind our peers, it has been a challenge to advocate for change. I have found it difficult to advocate for change as the newest voice in the room while also maintaining space for my own librarianship. This is particularly true when meeting goals required for tenure and promotion that fall outside of the initiatives I have been tasked to lead without positional authority—initiatives that frequently run on tight time lines. Conversely, being the newest voice in a room allows for a different perspective of the work I do. For those who have been embedded in a specific institutional perspective, it is easy to overlook the unique power of fresh eyes—an ability to see beyond the institutional history or organizational politics to identify workflows, practices, and policies that may be missing or inefficient.

STRATEGIES TO MOONLIGHT AS A LEADER

Practical strategies have allowed me to build my own sense of confidence and ability to prepare for challenges. The following strategies were uncovered through a significant amount of trial and error:

- Take ownership of your calendar. When your days are filled with committee meetings, or meetings to prepare other colleagues and leaders for meetings, autonomy in scheduling your days allows you to build in time for solitary preparation so you can enter these spaces with more confidence. Eventually, you will find yourself able to anticipate when you'll need this kind of preparation time as opposed to when you won't.
- Ask questions. When in doubt, ask questions. This is of particular importance for early-career librarians or ones who may be new to an institutional context or position. Questions allow you to not come from a place of defense but seek to clarify your understanding and ideally build a shared vocabulary among your collaborators and leaders with positional authority.
- Remember your perspective is valid. Share it! It can be scary to share your thoughts if you find they sound significantly different from the perspectives around you. Try to recognize and acknowledge the nuance of the many perspectives around these complex topics, which often helps make this a discussion.
- More communication is better. Send follow-ups to meetings. Send reminders of action items. Send updates to supervisors and administration, and so on. This means more work, but it also means you have documented the steps you

have taken, or are taking, when unanticipated tensions and roadblocks inevitably arise. This approach also allows for leaders with positional authority to provide course correction if you are off track and ideally to step in to support you when needed.

While you may not find the kind of support you need immediately, or even where you would like to find it, look for support in unlikely places. Take note of who responds with curiosity to questions you ask in group settings at your institution; they may be potential allies and collaborators with whom to brainstorm. When you find a librarian in the profession you gravitate toward because of their work or intersecting interests, do not hesitate to reach out with questions. Those conversations can lead to a community network that will be essential to counteracting the institutional gaslighting you may experience and allow you to find your own identity while moonlighting as a leader.

By providing approaches that have helped build personal confidence around my work, I hope to potentially mitigate the sense of isolation that others with similar experiences may be feeling and ultimately open a conversation around this type of hidden leadership in the profession. Moonlighting as a leader, in my view, is about an ability to see multiple sides and elevate voices of your institution precisely because you may be more approachable for your peers than the institutional leaders. It is about explaining the current trends in a fast-paced field, whether that is openwashing (World Wide Web Foundation, 2016), or the state of journal unbundling or inclusive access (Inclusiveaccess.org, n.d.), or why the work of open is not and never will be free, in a clear and confident manner. Moonlighting as a leader is ultimately about knowing when to say the hard thing.

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