The Limits of Democracy in Academic Libraries in a Revolutionary Age

Phillip J. Jones and George J. Fowler

Academic librarians stand at a revolutionary crossroads analogous to the one faced by the Second Continental Congress in 1775. Librarians need not declare independence or build a nation-state, but they must reinvent themselves. It is primarily through strategic planning that an academic library charts its future and sows the seeds of continued relevance. Librarians write extensively on planning and leadership, but this body of work shows discontinuity, particularly where strategic planning and leadership intersect. This work celebrates teamwork and informal leadership; however, it views the formal authority vested in specific individuals with some suspicion. Many authors suggest that anyone can lead, but fail to define the limits of this leadership.

The authors of this paper will present a very different argument: there must be one leader per unit who chooses the unit's path. They will draw upon their professional work, the theories of the organizational psychologist Elliott Jaques, and the military experience of one of the authors to challenge the prevalent, but fatally flawed notion that every library employee is a leader. This notion must be discarded. The library's chief officer must determine the organization's path. The choice and implementation of a strategic direction requires individual accountability and authority. Moving a library forward can lead to paradigmatic shifts calling for library personnel to adopt new approaches to their work, which can provoke resistance. A recent article illustrated this point as it quoted an administrator who was pushing her staff to undertake initiatives in the area of scholarly communication: “Going forward it’s very dysfunctional for librarians to think they get to choose what they get to do.”

Successful strategic planning requires bold, competent, and decisive leadership vested formally in managers. In our rush to critique traditional organizational structures we denude academic libraries of the potential for the clarity and vigor required to make them excel. And in the process we delude ourselves. The irony is that as academic libraries enter an era of revolutionary reformulation they need more than ever the core principles of traditional management.

Blurring the Limits of Democracy: A Review and Critique of the Literature

A thorough review of the library literature's treatment of leadership and planning is beyond the scope of this paper, but this section will address three interrelated erroneous assumptions commonly made by authors. The first, and arguably most serious, is the assertion that every employee is a leader. A definition is in order. Peter Hernon writes, “Leadership, which has been defined variously, involves factors such as motivating and inspiring people to create and carry out a shared vision to guide future actions of the organization.” With reference to a shared vision Hernon ties leadership to strategic planning, a position that he

Phillip J. Jones is Head of the Fine Arts Library at the University of Arkansas, e-mail: pjj01@uark.edu; George J. Fowler is Associate University Librarian for Information Resources and Technology at Old Dominion University, e-mail: gfowler.the.librarian@gmail.com
shares with Donald Riggs. The latter writes, “Resultsoriented library leaders employ the principles of strat-
egic planning while determining future directions.” These assertions are clear, but ambiguity emerges when authors neglect to distinguish between the formal leadership that those with managerial authority must exercise to be effective and the informal leadership that all individuals can exercise as they influence their co-workers. Hernon states that leadership is not “a function confined solely to library directors and their senior management team; leadership should be evident at all levels of the organization, including teams and groups.”

Citing the work of organizational psychologists, Bonnie Osif states that “there are many leaders, not just one. Leadership is distributed. It does not reside solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at every level who, in one way or another, acts as a leader to a group of followers.” These sentiments appear in various guises throughout the library literature. However, they blur leadership and follow-
ership, and evade—within the critical context of strategic planning—the question of who makes the final decision about a library’s direction.

The second problematic position in the literature, which is tied closely to the first, is the uncritical support of organizing academic libraries by teams and the corresponding reluctance to pinpoint accountabil-
ity and authority. John Lubans, who has written for many years on teamwork, is a prime example of this approach. He accepts the idea that a team is accountable to administrators, but suggests that the members are accountable collectively.” Carla Stoffle, Robert Renaud, and Jerilyn Veldof assert that “administrators must be willing to give up a great deal of decision-making authority and become more comfortable with being challenged, having to explain, not having the last say, and living with ambiguity and uncertainty.”

These positions are untenable. Referring to the work of Elliott Jaques, Irene Owens acknowledges in teams that “a key problem... is that organizations do not hire, fire, and promote teams but, instead, hire, fire, and promote individuals.” Phillip Jones expresses a related position: the individual employee, and not the group, has a contract with the employer. Unless the team becomes the unit that the employer hires, evaluates, and fires, each employee must be accountable as an individual, and lacking managerial authority, the team cannot formally sanction a poor member. Stoffle and her co-authors refer to “not having the last say,” but do not qualify this phrase. If the director of the library chooses not to have the last say in a consequential matter—such as strategic planning—whom does the provost (or other appropriate senior administrator) hold accountable if it fails? Given the greater call for accountability in higher education, it is unlikely in such an instance that the provost would be “comfortable with... ambiguity and uncertainty.”

As Harry Truman understood so well, the buck must stop on one desk.

The third error is the unfounded critique of hier-
archy. Elaine Martin writes that before teams appeared the “managerial layers created faulty communica-
tion systems and time-consuming work processes.” Krisellen Maloney posits that “hierarchical organiza-
tional cultures.... are internally focused, lack flexibil-
ity, and are associated with strong top-down decision making and control.” Paula Warnken is especially harsh: “Hierarchical—pyramid-like—organizations are no longer effective. Flatter—indeed, Web-like—organizations and self-directed work-groups allow for more flexibility and more opportunities for communica-
tions, both within and beyond traditional library boundaries.”

Distaste for hierarchy is almost universal in the library literature, as is the assumption that it is unsalvageable. However, the literature yields no compelling alternatives and rarely places academic li-
braries within the context of their parent institutions. Teams have replaced some hierarchies and flattened some libraries’ organizational charts, but colleges and universities remain stratified. Everyone may want to report to the provost, but this wish is unrealistic. Rather than castigate hierarchy, libraries would be better served by coming to grips with hierarchy—indeed, by harnessing it—and in this proposed project to rehab-
bilitate hierarchy, the authors turn to Elliott Jaques.

**Defining the Limits of Democracy: Elliott Jaques**
The late Elliott Jaques (1917–2003) produced a pro-
vocative body of work over a lengthy career. His de-
fense of managerial hierarchies and the accountabil-
ity and authority of the individual run counter to the dominant discourses within librarianship, but deserve a fair hearing. He condemns the “group-oriented panaceas” outlined in professional literature: “Indeed, they avoid the issue of accountability altogether, for to hold a group accountable, the employment contract would have to be with the group, not with the individuals, and companies simply do not employ groups.
as such.” Authority is secondary “and flows from accountability in the sense that there should be just that amount of authority needed to discharge the accountability.” Jaques admits that many hierarchies function poorly. He acknowledges the problems of excessive layering and the failure of managers to add value to the work of their employees. However, he affirms, based on research over the length of his career, the value of correctly configured hierarchy: “managerial hierarchy is the most efficient, the hardest, and in fact the most natural structure ever devised for large organizations. Properly structured, hierarchy can release energy and creativity, rationalize productivity, and actually improve morale.”

The last quotation begs the question: what is “properly structured” hierarchy? Jaques has an answer: “requisite organization.” A comprehensive definition of “requisite organization” is beyond the scope of this paper, but organizational structure and the cognitive ability of incumbents are key ingredients. The complexity of the organization’s mission determines not only the cognitive ability required of the chief executive to plan strategies to execute the mission, but also the correct number of strata for the organization. Jaques measures the cognitive ability of an employee by the most complex task he or she can undertake, which Jaques measures in discrete periods of time. An employee’s ability should correspond to that person’s role in the organization. A requisite organization is comprised of cascading strata, which correlate to the discontinuous complexity of the tasks performed at each stratum. For example, a large corporation with seven strata requires the chief executive to work on tasks ranging in a period up to twenty years, the immediate subordinates (at Stratum VI) need to work on tasks ranging up to ten years, and so forth, down to employees on the lowest stratum, at which employees would work on tasks ranging up to one day. For managers to plan strategically, supervise effectively, and add value to their subordinates’ work they must possess the cognitive ability and occupy the corresponding stratum one above their direct reports. Other elements, “requisite practices,” contribute to a successful organization, but structure is key. Jaques admits that improperly structured (e.g., excessively layered) managerial hierarchies are common and evince the dysfunction so many critics suggest are inherent in hierarchy, but he insists that properly structured ones can unleash the full capabilities of employees at every stratum—and are in harmony with the representative democracy in which we live. It is to the nexus of managerial democracy and democracy that we now turn.

Some readers resist Jaques’s theories because at first glance they appear “undemocratic,” but dissection indicates congruence between democratic principles and his vision for managerial hierarchies. The workplace should be fair and just. Communication should flow up and down; employees with no upward influence will stop offering their expertise. Managers must be able to work as pro tem equals with their immediate subordinates in a team mode. However, democratic values cannot impede the organization’s ability to discharge its mission, which places a clear boundary for democracy in managerial hierarchies: the manager must make the final decision. In his defense of hierarchy and aligning it with democratic values, Jaques criticizes those who equate managerial authority with oppression. Boss should not be an expletive: “there is [no] gain to be had by swinging to the unrealistic pole of denying the overwhelming value of the constructive use of authority.” Requisite organization and practices keep authority in check and directed toward an organization’s goals. If librarians could lower their hackles, the theories of Elliott Jaques might help them structure their libraries for a revolutionary age. Perhaps even more radical, they might also find inspiration from a surprising source: the military.

**Defining the Limits of Democracy: The Military**

In the U.S. Army—a profession where decisions can cost or save lives—organization and leadership are critical. The army has had over two hundred years to hone leadership in peace and war, in immediate action and long-term planning, and at the highest echelons and lowest levels. It has not wasted that time. The army has experimented with different organizational structures and styles of leadership, including team-based ones. The latest iteration began in 1977 and culminated in 2003 when the army codified the concept of Command and Control (C2) in Field Manual (FM) 6-0. One chief tenet of FM 6-0 that encourages C2 states that the “most important resource in any army is its people, who must be organized to undertake and complete military activities.”

Words such as “command” and “control” are acceptable and expected in the military, but are highly
disregarded in organizations where concepts like democracy and “everybody’s a leader” are touted as the solution to their problems. Furthermore, C2, which is widely misunderstood, is an anathema to many civilians, particularly librarians. It is considered restrictive, authoritarian, and top-down, thereby preventing subordinates from “free thinking” or participating in the overall mission. As detailed in FM 6-0, however, “C2 is not a one-way, top-down process that imposes control on subordinates. C2 is multidirectional, with feedback influencing commanders from below, from above, and laterally.”

C2 has the following characteristics: ability to (1) identify and react to changes in the situation, (2) provide a continuous, interactive process of reciprocal influence among the commander, staff, and units, and (3) reduce chaos and lessen uncertainty. Another misconception about the army’s command environment is that subordinates are expected only to obey orders. To the contrary, the army requires subordinates to exercise their own initiative, albeit within the framework provided by their commander. This environment requires trust, communication, and mutual understanding and consists of two key components: commander’s intent and subordinates’ initiative.

The former contains no surprises and is in line with most civilians’ perceptions of military operations. This component “is a clear, concise statement of what the force must do and the conditions that the force must meet to succeed.” It cascades throughout the army and “is nested with the commander’s intent of the commander two levels up and describes the boundaries within which subordinates may exercise initiative while maintaining unity of effort.”

This intent is considerably more than an order—it codifies the end state the commander expects and subsequently should enable subordinates to make decisions in line with the commander’s intent.

Subordinates’ initiative, on the other hand, runs counter to the predominant civilian views of the army. Initiative is key to this component, which is the assumption of responsibility for deciding and initiating independent actions when the concept of operations no longer applies or when an unanticipated opportunity leading to achieving the commander’s intent presents itself. Subordinates decide how to achieve their missions within delegated freedom of action and exercise initiative during execution, but they have an absolute responsibility to fulfill the commander’s intent. They are also required, not just permitted, to exercise initiative when an opportunity or threat presents itself.

Most civilians are unaware of this latitude of action. It is this latitude that makes the army so versatile, effective, and enduring.

Individual accountability and authority, as they are in the work of Elliott Jaques, are the bedrock of operations in the army. FM 6-0 states, “In any command, only one officer commands…. Commanders may exercise command through others by delegating authority; however, delegation does not absolve the delegating commanders of their responsibilities to the higher commander.” This delegation is accomplished via the chain of command, which “fixes responsibility and sources of authority at each level while, at the same time, distributing them broadly throughout the force. Each commander has designated authority and responsibility in a given sphere.”

By combining accountability, authority, direction, initiative, one leader at each level, delegation, and C2, the army has created an environment that maximizes the potential of every soldier at all levels, while also providing guidance to align all action towards a unified goal. The subordinate leaders and individual soldiers do not determine their missions, but they have the authority and responsibility to determine how to accomplish them. This clear limit to democracy is in alignment with the insight of the library administrator quoted at the beginning of this paper. Academic librarians—even faculty librarians—cannot choose what they get to do, but the discipline of the U.S. Army suggests that they should enjoy the trust and support of their managers and the opportunity to influence the decisions and directives above them. Indeed, with these privileges come responsibilities: they must embrace their own authority and accountability and take appropriate initiative. And for those librarians who are managers, they have the responsibility to set direction for those who report to them and delegate the proper degree of authority in order that their subordinates accomplish their own goals and the mission and larger goals of the library. The reciprocal, multidirectional elements of C2 in the army provide academic librarians with tremendous potential as they weigh
the optimal organizational structures and practices for their libraries in a revolutionary age.

Appropriate Leadership for a Revolutionary Age

It is clear that academic libraries face some key decisions as they navigate the challenges of the unfolding electronic age, a revolutionary period for scholarly communication and academe. What is less clear, at least in the professional literature, is who ultimately plans the strategy for academic libraries and decides their course. Although academic libraries are neither corporations nor the military, the work of Elliott Jaques and the discipline of the U.S. Army offer libraries relevant ideas for fine-tuning their organizations and a corrective to the overly democratic themes in the literature. As the authors sketch in this section a vision of appropriate leadership for academic libraries in the coming decades they suggest that some longstanding principles of managerial hierarchies are timeless.

This vision of leadership is multifaceted and includes components of both structure and practice. It starts with the organizational chart, which as the keystone of the library can either promote sound strategies or undermine them. Establishing a properly ordered hierarchy is as critical for any library as setting a sound strategic direction. In order for academic libraries to meet the challenges of the future, librarians must stop romanticizing flatness in their search for an organizational nirvana. Flatness should not be a goal, any more than stratification. Elliott Jaques recognized that hierarchies are imperfect, but not inherently so. Every organization exhibits some hierarchy. The key is getting it right—a challenging, but not Sisyphean task. The theories of Elliott Jaques suggest that the discontinuous layers of the complexity of the work to be performed in the library indicate the appropriate number of strata, the basis for a “requisite” library. This number will vary across libraries, but the principle is invariable.

Another critical principle of managerial hierarchies that libraries must retain is that accountability and authority must be vested in individuals, not groups, a principle strictly upheld in the military and the work of Jaques. Accountability and the concomitant authority form the sinew that holds the structure and practices together. Teams in the workplace offer synergy but veil accountability. Libraries can use ad-hoc teams to complete specific projects, but clear accountability requires a regular hierarchy of departments and other units, with one person at the helm of each unit. Project teams and committees also need a chairperson or manager who is accountable for the group’s work. Team-based paradigms tempt administrators who believe that the complex and dynamic nature of the academic library now mandates a new approach to organization, accountability, and authority; in other words, institutional agility and synergy cannot occur in a traditional environment. The career of Elliott Jaques and the example of the U.S. Army indicate the opposite, provided that the library (1) employs managers who are suited to their roles and (2) follows the requisite practices that complement the organizational chart.

The former is essential, although the origin of its success or failure lies partially outside the library, especially for the position of the library’s chief administrator. Search committees and academic administrators who consider the qualities that they seek in the managers of their libraries need to pay close attention to the cognitive abilities of candidates. The professional discourses of librarianship and those outside the profession often focus on personality and related concepts such as emotional intelligence and empathy, which Jaques dismisses as “widespread use of spurious leadership training by means of a bastardized psychotherapy administered to all managers.” Cognitive ability is sine qua non for managerial success. The role of dean or director requires drawing on complex data and shifting circumstances in order to plan strategically and prepare the library for the future. The incumbent must be able to think at a higher level of complexity than all other library personnel. Superior cognitive ability will enable the library’s top administrator to create a compelling vision—in line with the larger vision for the college or university that the library serves. Owing to the dean or director’s ability and accountability to the provost or other administrator, the dean or director must serve as the library’s chief planner and strategist. This role cannot be delegated. Furthermore, these properties flow down the organization. In order for managers below the dean or director to serve as the chief planners and strategists for their individual areas and create a vision around which their staff can rally, one in line with the vision for the entire library, they also must have the cognitive ability appropriate for their role and placement on the organizational chart.
Requisite practices are also essential to the smooth functioning of libraries and reinforce the library's structure and the properly situated high order cognition that propels the library. These practices help the library to thrive in an era of rapid change. The library's dean or director has the responsibility to create a climate that encourages experimentation and taking risks, all within the framework of the library's mission and the principles of individual accountability and authority. The chief officer is also responsible for setting measurable goals for the library, as are the subordinate managers for their units. However, managers must calibrate their supervision and not micromanage. The example of the U.S. Army shows that subordinates should have access to the necessary resources, guidance, and support to perform their jobs, as well as freedom in determining how to meet their goals within the ideal boundaries set by their managers. Such an environment is suited to academic libraries and promotes excellence, creativity, and accountability. However, managers must lead. The future of academic libraries depends on this proposition. Managers cannot abdicate their role as strategists, and once they have made a final decision, they must stand behind it. Managers cannot be squeamish about the use of constructive authority. In spite of the ambivalent treatment of authority in the professional literature, managerial authority is essential to the workplace. Authority should not be about self-aggrandizement or control for the sake of control; rather, it must be about the ability to complete tasks that move an organization toward an articulated vision. The academic library in the revolutionary age needs individual accountability to effect change, which in turn requires authority to ensure compliance when personnel fail to support the library's objectives. Personnel in academic libraries should have latitude in executing their jobs, but they cannot do as they please. This type of dysfunction can be a library's undoing.

Librarians, especially those in faculty positions, may bridle at these concepts, but the typical academic library more closely resembles a complex managerial hierarchy than an academic department of professors with a rotating chairperson. As do professors, faculty librarians should enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of shared governance and have input into a library's mission and goals. However, it is one thing for a library faculty to decide the criteria for promotion and quite another to determine the library's mission, vision, and goals. The chief officer of the library must determine the latter points. Academic libraries, particularly those with tenured or continuous appointments, will experience some tension between shared governance and administrative authority, but one person must ultimately choose the library's path. Librarians, including tenured ones, cannot be allowed to thwart the mission. There must be clear limits to democracy in the academic library.

One remaining requisite practice for the library merits discussion: communication. Strategic communication furthers the library's vision and is essential to good leadership. Communication should flow not only from the top down, but also from the bottom up and across units. Although managers are unable to disclose certain proprietary information, extensive dissemination of nonproprietary information enables all personnel to understand the library's goals and increases the chances of broad support of managerial objectives from librarians and staff. Secrecy occludes these objectives and rarely promotes enthusiasm for them; it also can lead to distrust of management. Multidirectional communication, including debate of important issues before the manager makes the final decision, provides an opportunity for non-managerial personnel to participate as fully as appropriate in their libraries, even if they do not ultimately determine the library's direction. In summary, strategic communication helps to build a sound organizational culture within the academic library and cannot be overlooked.

**Conclusion**

Everybody is a leader. This catchphrase resonates with the library profession's democratic ethos and reflects its collectivist values. This orientation to leadership has inspired an extensive body of professional literature and practices that show ambivalence toward managerial hierarchy and formal authority vested in the individual. The majority of the professional literature suggests that our organizations must disperse accountability and authority, as well as embrace flatter structures and more democratic methods. Drawing on the work of Elliott Jaques and examples from the U.S. Army, the authors of this paper take a different tack and argue that libraries must define the limits of democracy in the workplace and appoint—and hold accountable—one person with the suitable cognitive ability to lead each unit. Jaques and the army provide us with germane models for structuring our organiza-
tions and the requisite practices to address the complexities that we confront. Denigrating hierarchy in search of a flattened ideal is fruitless and distracts the profession from what should be the focus of our organizations: planning strategically to chart the right path and tackling the real problems that we face. At this critical juncture we should harness hierarchy and support, not undermine, the constructive use of authority in libraries. If everyone is a leader and leadership is not defined, no one is a leader. Like the Second Continental Congress, we have entered a revolutionary period that will present some obstacles, even threats. And as we librarians meet in Philadelphia, the historic host city of that congress, to present our research and discuss best practices, let us remember that certain principles of management are timeless.

Notes
2. For the sake of brevity, the paper will focus primarily on the library literature of the last decade, although the literature’s treatment of leadership has remained fairly constant over the last generation. For citations to earlier works on the topic see the references in Phillip J. Jones, “Individual Authority and Individual Accountability: The Missing Links,” Library Administration & Management 14, no. 3 (2000): 144–45.
18. Ibid., 129.
19. Ibid., 128.
20. Ibid., 127.
22. Ibid., 310.
25. For a succinct description of these practices see Jaques and Clement, Executive Leadership, 310.
29. Ibid., 166.
30. Ibid., 167–70.
31. Ibid., 21.
33. Ibid., 1–3.
34. Ibid., 1–2.
35. Ibid., 1–17.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 1–4.
38. Ibid., 5–24.
41. Jaques and Clement, Executive Leadership, 234.
42. Jaques and Clement, Executive Leadership, 15.