

# ***Collegial Leadership in Academic Libraries***

*David Lesniaski, Kris (Huber) MacPherson, Barbara Fister, and Steve McKinzie*

## ***Abstract***

Three college libraries developed alternative models of library management derived from the academic departmental model of shared governance. Each college's model reflects institutional cultures but shares certain philosophical assumptions. This presentation will provide case studies of the development of these models and will explore the benefits of such models as well as the practical challenges.

## **Introduction**

Management literature has been saturated in recent years with exhortations to flatten organizations and develop teams for greater organizational effectiveness. Academic libraries have embraced team-based models, but rarely do they take advantage of a management model that is close to home: the academic department. Dickinson, St. Olaf, and Gustavus Adolphus colleges created management structures that rest on the premise that all librarians in our organizations are capable of leadership, that all librarians have a stake in the

library's future, and that the traditional, hierarchical model used in most academic libraries can stifle the productive engagement of librarians in management of the library. These models embrace features of academic governance: all librarians are expected to participate in management decisions, all are required to be thoughtful and engaged professionals, and all are afforded the benefits of academic freedom along with the responsibility to exercise it wisely.

## **Putting Collegial Leadership in Context**

Our advocacy of collegial leadership in libraries is based on a long theoretical and practical history. As early as 1934, Danton argued for democratic principles of library governance, believing such governance would be more efficient than the traditional hierarchy. He also noted alternatives to hierarchical governance then being developed in both the business and academic sectors<sup>1</sup>. Several writers since have advocated one form or another of participative management in libraries<sup>2</sup>. The Dickinson College Library was the first institution formally to institute collegial management and shared decision making, including the rotation of li-

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*David Lesniaski is co-college librarian and Kris (Huber) MacPherson co-college librarian at St. Olaf College. Barbara Fister is college librarian at Gustavus Adolphus College. Steve McKinzie is from Dickinson College.*

brarians from within the department into the college librarian position, in 1975.<sup>34</sup> Since then, the libraries at St. Olaf and Gustavus have also adopted a collegial model of governance. While many academic libraries have adopted some version of group decision-making which has points of contact with our model, they operate within an overall still-hierarchical structure that preserves authority at the higher levels.

Collegial management at all three of these institutions has both worked and flourished over a considerable period of time. But even at these institutions, the model has not achieved permanent endorsement. At Dickinson College, massive changes in the institution's senior administrative staff led to a rethinking of the campus's organizational structure less than two years ago – a rethinking that included the library and its collegial model. Last spring, Dickinson abandoned its long-standing collegial system and adopted returned to a more hierarchical and traditional library structure. This year, the St. Olaf College library began to lay plans to hire a permanent college librarian. Consequently, each of us champion in this paper an approach to library management that has been a large part of our individual library's past but may not be a large part of its future. Though collegial management may not survive at our institutions, it has had an extraordinary history of success that needs to be told, and it has stellar advantages that need to be recognized.

The definitions and practices of collegial governance have changed over the years, and each of us implements collegial governance differently. However, we all advocate these principles as a foundation for collegial governance: 1) shared leadership responsibilities and shared decision-making are the norm; 2) in particular, the position of college librarian rotates among the librarians; 3) management structure and lines of reporting are fluid and relatively non-hierarchical; 4) emphasis is on process and communication rather than authority and structure.

Collegial governance should be a familiar concept in the academic library. It is the standard model for the governance of academic departments. Indeed, libraries often function as academic departments in all respects except governance. There are differences between libraries and other departments, but a significant point of contact is that libraries have an instructional role that is critical for students' learning. We maintain that if the library's academic program is central to its mission, that academic program should drive the planning and implementation of the service and "business" side of the library. And we believe that

collegial governance provides the best framework for managing rigorous and creative academic programs.

But how do libraries actually adapt to such a model? At Gustavus, we previously had a vestigial hierarchy, laid out neatly in a pyramid-shaped chart, that mimicked standard library organization: we had a director, heads of technical and public services, and the remaining librarians in a third tier. But having three layers of hierarchy among six librarians makes about as much sense as having a captain and first mate in a rowboat. It suggested that our most important work was administrative, when in fact it was not, and that some of us had more authority than others, which wasn't necessary or helpful. In fast-changing times, we couldn't work within a system, however vestigial, in which some of us stood around waiting for orders—or in which people best positioned to make informed decisions felt compelled to go through layers of command for approval. And in practice, we usually ignored those vestiges of traditional hierarchy. It made sense to us that the best decisions are made by a group of people working together with a shared knowledge base and shared sense of responsibility for the entire operation. We found it surprisingly easy to redesign our roles and the ways we interacted along collegial lines because we already had practice—we were faculty, used to the negotiation and the consensus-building involved in self-governing systems, and we were an academic department. It wasn't a huge adjustment for us to start acting like one. Nor was it difficult for the faculty to adapt to it, since the institutional culture values individual contributions and collegiality and resists formal chains of command. Persuading the administration the change should be made proved to be—and continues to be—the only difficulty.

### **Collegiality in Practice**

At Gustavus each librarian has three roles to play: as a specialist (in government documents or systems, for example) as a generalist (collection development, reference, and instruction are tasks all librarians share) and as a manager (by exercising leadership and joint decision-making about the library's budget, collections, and curriculum). One of us takes on the additional task of coordinating efforts and serving as the chief liaison with constituencies outside the library. This is an add-on to the job and small adjustments in workload can be made to accommodate it, but the additional duties are minimal—because the work is shared—so we don't rotate out of our jobs or shuffle other responsibilities in any significant way. There is a small stipend for the additional work—the same as is paid to chairs of the largest

departments. Every three years the librarians choose a College Librarian through an in-house process of seeing who wants to serve and, if more than one person is interested, learning what each one sees as important and compelling about the task. There's a vote taken and the recommendation of the department is forwarded to the academic dean who ultimately makes the appointment at her or his discretion. Whoever is put forward needs to be credible both within and beyond the library. Transitions aren't difficult because everyone is already, in a sense, doing the job—in fact, there's much less time needed to “get up to speed” than when a new director is hired. And seeking leadership from within our own library doesn't mean we lack fresh talent—it simply means we don't have the costly overhead of an executive search or, in fact, of an executive. Instead, we're able to pay competitive salaries at entry level and attract strong candidates that want to participate in managing the library and have the skills to do so.

At St. Olaf, we are a larger group of about two dozen librarians and staff, there are three libraries on campus that work together, and the collection is also larger. Hierarchy might seem a reasonable method by which to run this complex organization. But we grew from a more modest entity, and our habits were developed from working with a consultative director (who retired) and working in a tiny set of offices where everyone overheard decisions being made and took the opportunity to toss in their two cents worth. We were already used to participating extensively; our challenge in the beginning was to formalize an ad hoc structure and to ensure that all were able to participate equally, particularly as we grew in size and when most of us were spread out over a new building where we no longer were party to each conversation.

Like Gustavus, St. Olaf librarians are faculty members. We serve on campus committees and have an extensive liaison program with other academic departments which includes collaboration on collection development and teaching.<sup>5</sup> Our status as peers and colleagues eased the cross-campus acceptance of the transition from long-term director to rotating leadership; as pointed out earlier, this is how academic departments operate. Our roles as librarians are similar to those described for Gustavus; however, the “additional task of coordinating efforts and serving as the chief liaison with constituencies outside the [Libraries]” is sufficiently large at St. Olaf that the one who serves as College Librarian generally leaves behind her regular duties in order to assume the new. Or, as our current College Librarians have worked it

out—two share the leadership duties and remain in their old positions half-time as well.

At Dickinson, our structure mirrors that of both St. Olaf and Gustavus in a number of ways, but there are some significant differences – differences that reflect our history and our particular needs. For us, the change from a hierarchical to a collegial model came about in the middle of the nineteen seventies. The librarians who largely engineered the change had two goals. They wanted a collegial, shared approach to decision making. They also wanted to heal the rigid and bitter divisions then existing between technical and public services, divisions that were largely personal but exacerbated by the traditional hierarchical structure of the library. The new model (patterned after other academic departments at the college and working in much the same way as both St. Olaf and Gustavus) included an elected chair that served for a three year term, a revamped model of peer-reviewed evaluation for librarians, a shared approach to important departmental decisions, and a more holistic vision of librarianship. This latter feature, unique among the three collegial libraries here discussed, meant that all librarians would work in reference or public service, and that all librarians would catalog. Specialties could still emerge and individual interests could be pursued, but the old antagonisms between public and technical service would not be tolerated. Henceforth, we would become a new kind of library staffed by one kind of librarian—a holistic professional.

### **Management Issues**

Managing the library always has been the responsibility of librarians. At the most local level, there may be little difference between librarians' managerial responsibilities in a collegial setting or in the more traditional hierarchical model. However, management is not the same as leadership, and where the two models diverge most substantively is in their attitude toward leadership.

Are most librarians capable of leadership, or is the role of college librarian so demanding of special skills that only a few can fulfill the demands of the position? The literature, of course, is contradictory on this point.<sup>6</sup> Just what are the qualifications for a successful college librarian? One study of advertisements in 1995 came up with these elements as common to many postings:

- a vision of ... [role of technology, instruction, etc.]
- demonstrated leadership/management ...
- a clear understanding of ...
- evidence of managerial vision

- evidence of creative leadership
- evidence of effective communication
- ability to guide ...<sup>7</sup>

One way to read these lists of preferred qualification is that the desirable library leader has a comprehensive understanding of both the internal workings of libraries and the mission of libraries within the educational setting, an ability to motivate people to work together, and an ability to do the communication and political work inside and outside the library in order to fulfill the library's mission. These do not seem to be attributes limited to a select few; indeed, most librarians certainly ought to have these abilities no matter what their work. These are competencies which can be nurtured as one matures professionally. Which of these abilities need to come to the fore at any time often is contextual. By encouraging distributed and changing leadership our model allows individuals' leadership talents to emerge in accordance with the library's needs. Moreover, by sharing leadership and decision making, there is less burden on the individual serving as college librarian to be all things to all people. Finally, because leadership is distributed among several long-term people, institutional memory is preserved and transitions in leadership are less disruptive than in hierarchical models.

Libraries aren't staffed only by librarians but by librarians and paraprofessional staff. The departmental model of faculty peers working together needed to be extended to be more inclusive. At Gustavus, we worked through a process of defining explicitly, in so far as it's possible to do so, where the locus for decision-making lies in different situations, acknowledging the fact that our paraprofessionals manage major functions of the library and make decisions about them routinely. Our previous organization chart was a map of who "reported" to whom, though in fact reporting relationships were not at all important. Librarians often "supervised" paraprofessionals who needed no supervision at all and, in fact, knew their areas of responsibility far more deeply than their alleged supervisor. The major point of contact between supervisor and paraprofessional was during an annual performance review—which gave the employee a chance to educate their supervisor, but beyond that was not particularly effective. The chart didn't accurately depict the organization.

Our new chart is a map of where decisions get made. Some decisions are made by individuals, some by committees and task forces, some by larger groups—the librarians make decisions together about collection development, paraprofessionals make decisions together about student staff

training, for example—and a few decisions are made by the entire staff. The process is carried out with two principles in mind: we need to respect those that have the knowledge and experience to make decisions in the areas under discussion and we need to share information so that anyone who might be affected by a decision—or simply has a good idea—can add to the conversation. A fine balance has to be struck between autonomy and collegiality. Few of our decisions involve all members of the organization. People who know what they're doing should have a chance to call on their expertise without being second-guessed. A group charged with a task must be able to move forward without having to constantly check in for approval. It's also important that no one has a decision made that affects them without having a chance to be part of the conversation. Toward that end we're developing an organizational map that tells us where decisions get made and by whom and an organizational conversation that keeps us all informed.

The new organization chart was developed as paraprofessionals rewrote their job descriptions to reflect the variety of work they do and the level of responsibility they carry. The language of the old job descriptions, we found, was totally out of line with their actual work. So was their compensation. We have applied for upgrades of all positions. It has been an uphill battle and appeals are still pending, but at least three employees have moved from hourly to administrative appointments with somewhat improved compensation. Erasing the meaningless reporting relationships from our organization chart has also given us a chance to experiment with doing away with nominal supervisors. If problems arise, the chair will address them with the people involved. New employees will have a mentor to help them through the initial period of employment. Long-term employees will no longer be evaluated by librarians but will write a self-evaluation to document their work history for the Human Resources department.

What is the biggest challenge at Gustavus? Early on, I would have said finding the right way to fold paraprofessionals into the collegial model. We started out by acting like a department, but departments don't have numbers of paraprofessionals so we needed to address that. The paraprofessionals weren't sure where they stood and didn't have ingrained habits of self-governance as the librarians had from their faculty status, and the differential in status and remuneration needed to be addressed as well. I think we're well on our way to coming up with a working solution to those issues. Now the greatest threat is from the administration, who view self-governing sys-

tems with suspicion and are uncomfortable when they aren't sure who to lean on. Our president doesn't believe librarians should be faculty at all and thinks it may be wise to merge us with Information Technology. Though he, apparently, doesn't see advantages to our collegial model, it does put us in a stronger position with the faculty to resist these changes.

The librarians and staff at St. Olaf took several years to work out new patterns of interaction and decision-making. The new organizational structure took the form of two charts with concentric circles: one to describe the departmental structure and one to describe the cross-departmental committee structure. Each has at its center the College Librarian[s] and the Library Faculty who have responsibility for the overall management of the libraries. The All-Library Meeting has a critical function – it is here that major issues which affect all in the libraries are debated and developed (vision, mission, annual agendas and priorities, new programs, departmental structure, leadership, outreach, etc.). All committees have librarian and staff participants and the committees are responsible to the All-Library Meeting. The transition to a self-governance model was not always easy. To begin to rely on each other rather than an omniscient director took trust and strong feelings of self-worth, as well as hours spent in discussion and debate. We found that as we became more experienced at consultation and inclusion, the number of people involved in committees and the amount of effort put into committee work could be reduced, to the gratitude of many.

The collegial model works best under certain circumstances. Internally it is crucial to have a stable, well-functioning team of long-term librarians able to rotate into the position of college librarian. There should be an effective method for bringing paraprofessionals into this model, with more emphasis on where and how decisions are made and less emphasis on lines of reporting and organizational structure. It may be necessary to make long-term investments in the skills of both paraprofessionals and librarians in order to maintain a community of individuals willing and able to work in such a flexible and holistic environment. Reward systems may have to be modified to recognize everyone's greater involvement in managerial and leadership roles. Externally, for this model (as for any other) to flourish, it needs the support and understanding of other college faculty and the college administration. It also requires a personnel system flexible enough to accommodate changes in many different job descriptions. Finally, this model is more likely to flourish in settings where organizational democ-

racy already has strong roots, and where individuals believe the future is theirs to make.

### **Performance: Successes and Failures**

At Dickinson, the best testimony of the effectiveness at our model might be sought in the kinds of individual librarians we attracted and the kind of people we were able to retain. New librarians liked the notion of a library where their voices could be heard and their opinions aired in a collegial climate, and they appreciated the notion of participatory management, one that enabled them to see first hand how the library was managed and governed. With time, they all realized that their responsibilities would grow, with an anticipated turn as college librarian, without having to wait for someone to retire or move on to another institution. It is always difficult to make comparisons and hiring can be a very subjective enterprise, but we believe that Dickinson's model attracted some of the best in the profession. The model, in and of itself, went a long way to making Dickinson's library a very good place to work and a very challenging place to work professionally.

At St. Olaf, we could list many successes, including a very quick transition from an ineffective online system to our current system, coordinated development of a heavily used collection, further development of an already well-respected instructional program, and the continued professional activity of both librarians and staff at local and national levels. Perhaps a more objective measure comes from a faculty survey last year: library support for teaching mattered "some" or "much" to 96% of faculty, and 86% of faculty recorded that "its [i.e., library support] effect on my attitude toward work" was positive.

It could be argued that any of these accomplishments might happen under any system of governance. This, however, proves our point: that collegial leadership is at least as effective as a hierarchical system of governance. What cannot be measured is the individual sense of accomplishment and empowerment we all felt under our collegial systems and which we all lacked under our previous systems of governance.

At Gustavus, we don't have empirical proof our organizational structure is more effective than others—who does?—but in terms of anecdotal evidence, two things indicate it is a viable model. The first time a librarian with no previous administrative experience stepped into the College Librarian's position, the Dean announced she wanted a strategic plan for the library within a matter of months. The priorities for the next capital campaign depended on our

articulating our needs effectively. It was a challenge to get it done in time, but it gave us an opportunity to work together and communicate openly and resulted in a document that expressed our shared values and goals. We learned to trust ourselves and one another to take on leadership in a shared mode—a form of leadership that is, in effect, a free-market system of exchange for ideas among peers. And it turned out to be an excellent rehearsal for what was to come.

Ten weeks after we handed in the strategic plan, the campus was hit by a tornado. Every building on campus was damaged or, in some cases, destroyed. Most of the library's windows imploded, rain was driven in through broken windows and a damaged roof, and our power supply was cut off for several weeks. We had a few short weeks to clean up and jury-rig operations so that students could finish out the year. During the summer we rebuilt. Every book, every stack had to be moved for recarpeting. Damaged collections had to be dealt with and new furniture and equipment chosen and installed. We not only managed to put the library back together, we used a plan developed by a group before the tornado to rearrange our floor plan totally and, while we were at it, we built the new electronic classroom called for in our strategic plan.

Previously, our organizational structure was built around specialized and fairly narrowly-defined roles that had few points of intersection, and those points were uncomfortably located at nearly-meaningless supervisory junctions. We stepped out of those narrow definitions and found we didn't really need them, nor the false supervisory relationships that laced them together. And it turned out to be a good thing, because they would have been blown away by the tornado in any case. It can't be proven that our collegial organizational model made the difference, but the structure we devised survived a significant test and helped us make good use of the opportunity.

Sometimes the changes we face in this profession feel as sudden and powerful as a tornado. A collegial organization, built on trust, respect, and shared goals, provides both the strength and the flexibility to make the most of change.

### **Reality Check**

Realistically, we must acknowledge that this model has drawbacks. Collegial governance can be a "hard sell" to administrators and others (including those in the library!) who value traditional hierarchy. There may be resistance to this model with each new college administration. Internally, it requires careful nurturing of individuals at all levels within the libraries, and that nurturing has to be communal. There

isn't one "boss" who gives praise and support—that has to come from everyone. Individuals have to create their own opportunities and everyone has to work together to help realize each person's aspirations. Just as each individual is responsible, to some extent, for the accomplishments of others, the team environment and governance of the library also need attention and nurturing—this model will not continue to be effective without regular attention to matters of process, communication, and community. There are higher expectations on this model of governance (after all, no one ever gives papers advocating hierarchical model—it's taken for granted). Collegial leadership works best when there is long-term personnel stability and an effective mechanism for the long-term retention of librarians and staff. While leadership can be learned, this model also requires active recruitment of individuals excited about the possibility of working in a self-governing system. It may be necessary to convince those already in the library, especially individuals not comfortable with thinking holistically, of the desirability of this system. Finally, it may be necessary to implement flexible personnel policies including training, education, and rewards especially for paraprofessional staff in order to encourage leadership from within.

As mentioned above, administrative changes at Dickinson led to abandonment of collegial management at the institution that pioneered it. St. Olaf is currently suffering from a lack of support on the part of the current college administration. We lost our direct access to the academic dean, which resulted in less timely administrative decisions. We lost many tenure-track positions (tenured/tenure-track librarians are now the minority) which resulted in a tiny pool of long-term librarians able to rotate into the college librarian position. Finally, as part of a college-wide reduction in faculty, we lost nearly twenty percent of our FTE, which resulted in great burdens placed on all individuals within the libraries. While we didn't have a tornado tear through our building, there have been incredible stresses on the libraries over the past half-dozen years. That we survived—and are moving forward with the overwhelming support of the faculty—is testimony enough to our effectiveness and the effectiveness of our governance. If there is any failure on our part it was our inability to convince the new college administration of the value of this style of governance. Perhaps our error was in supposing that evidence and persuasion could prevail against prejudices and pre-set agendas.

Despite our new direction, we still value what we learned together from our decade under this model. We learned

how to make decisions effectively as a team, and how to make even very difficult decisions in a manner which respects honest differences of opinion. We learned to be leaders within the libraries and as on-campus representatives of the libraries. Perhaps most importantly, everyone in the libraries has a well-developed sense of the mission and importance of the libraries, an understanding of their individual role in fulfilling that mission, and a belief that we have proven we have the capacity to maintain a first-rate program by ourselves under a democratic structure we created.

Collegial management proved effective in three academic libraries. The reasons for its decline have little to do with what organizational structure is best able to advance the library's mission. The real enemy of shared decision making is an administrative perspective that their power diminishes as others are empowered. Perhaps the lessons learned from these three experiments can be applied in a modest way, within a traditional structure. Collegial management as a governing principle might be too utopian for a dystopian world. If that's the case—if sharing decision-making among a self-regulating community of peers is an impractical ideal—the wider implications for higher education are bleak.

### Notes

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