Institutions of higher education and academic libraries have long debated the wisdom and propriety of including collegiality among the criteria they use to evaluate faculty for tenure. Our review of the literature summarizes the key arguments in favor and in opposition to this practice, and focuses on the argument that the concept of collegiality can be and is used as a weapon to discriminate against individuals from underrepresented communities. We report on two studies we conducted to explore the extent of this risk to library faculty. In the first, we examined tenure documents from academic libraries at R1 universities to determine how many mention collegiality, how it is described, and how important the concept is within the context of the other criteria described in the document. In the second, we conducted a survey to gauge academic librarians' perceptions of the role collegiality should play in P&T processes and to assess differences in those perceptions among white and BIPOC faculty. A key finding of the first study was that less than half of R1 academic libraries that offer tenure to faculty include collegiality in their documentation. The second study revealed that approximately 36% of the white respondents, and 59% of the non-white respondents thought that using “collegiality” as a factor for evaluating suitability for promotion would negatively affect minority faculty. We conclude by discussing alternatives to using collegiality as a criterion for tenure and evaluation and by exploring avenues for conducting additional research to help academic libraries ensure that tenure and promotion practices are not perpetuating systemic inequities.

INTRODUCTION

Collegiality and tenure are two concepts that are often debated within academia. Collegiality tends to be a loaded term that can have some very insidious connotations particularly among women and BIPOC individuals as it can be used to enforce conformity and silence. However, particularly in librarianship inside large and complex organizations, a degree of collegiality is needed to get new and innovative projects off the ground. Thus, in academic libraries where librarians have faculty status and tenure, the issue of collegiality becomes even more crucial as it relates to organizational culture and efforts toward diversity and inclusion.

Tenure itself, even outside of considerations of collegiality, is an explosive topic. This is especially true in states where academics are under constant threat and the value of their work and the content of their teaching is frequently challenged. Although tenure is intended to safe-
guard academic freedom and offer job security to professors who have proved distinction in teaching, research, and service, it can be seen as protection for those that dare to disagree. Consequently, adding in collegiality to the promotion and tenure process gives rise to many concerns for faculty, particularly female faculty and BIPOC faculty.

Our research aims to provide context for both of these issues within academia and also to explore how academic librarians who have faculty status with tenure feel that collegiality can be weaponized and, also, how it is often essential to doing good work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In its foundational statement on academic freedom and tenure, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) argued that tenure is an essential protection for teachers who support the common good by searching for and expressing truth. Later, they elaborated on the purpose of tenure, noting that, “Tenure provides the conditions for faculty to pursue research and innovation and draw evidence-based conclusions free from corporate or political pressure.” To ensure that the benefits of tenure accrue to individuals who can fulfill these purposes, institutions of higher education in the United States typically require faculty to provide evidence of their ability to succeed in three domains: teaching, research, and service. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) advises academic libraries to establish policies for tenure that match those for all faculty at the institution and endorses a similar set of criteria, substituting performance for teaching.

In their documents outlining standards for tenure, both the AAUP and ACRL recommend that grounds for dismissal of faculty be limited to only a few circumstances: financial exigency, discontinuation of a department or program, or adequate cause. The AAUP describes adequate cause as related to, “fitness of faculty members in their professional capacities as teachers or researchers.” ACRL uses a similar statement, substituting librarians for teachers or researchers. Both explicitly identify specific circumstances that may compromise fitness: incompetence and, in some circumstances, mental or physical disability. And crucially, these organizations both establish an expectation that institutions protect faculty against, “illegal or unconstitutional discrimination by the institution, or discrimination on a basis not demonstrably related to the faculty member’s professional performance.” The AAUP identifies several bases: “race, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation.” ACRL’s list of bases changes sex to gender and gender expression and adds color, religion or creed, ancestry, military status, political affiliation, and citizenship.

Although neither set of standards specifically mentions an expectation for collegiality, several universities have relied on evidence of uncollegial behavior to successfully defend themselves in lawsuits initiated by faculty who were denied tenure. In nearly every case in which collegiality was a central focus, courts have ruled in favor of the university. This has been true regardless of whether or not collegiality is listed as a criterion in the university’s tenure documentation. In justifying these rulings, judges have asserted that collegiality is a legitimate factor to consider because it is vital to the ability of a faculty member to succeed in the officially stated criteria of teaching, research, and service. While courts have acknowledged that accusations of a lack of collegiality can be used as a cover for discrimination, “in the overwhelming number of reported cases dealing with such an allegation, the courts have rejected the claim that collegiality was used as a pretext and have upheld college and university decisions based on a lack of collegiality.”

The first case in which the courts introduced collegiality as a factor occurred in 1981. Since that time, several universities have established collegiality as a separate criteria for tenure. Others have included expectations for collegial behavior within sections of their tenure documents pertaining to teaching and service. In a recent article, Diane Dawson and colleagues examined 864 promotion and tenure documents from 129 institutions of higher education in the U.S. and Canada. They found that, “the concept of collegiality (including related terms) was mentioned 507 times across 213 documents, defined 106 times across 85 documents, and assessed 51 times across 30 documents.”

While the courts have deliberated and universities have revised their documents, numerous faculty and professional organizations have engaged in a vigorous and protracted debate about the propriety of using collegiality as a basis for tenure decisions. The scholarly literature of higher education is replete with arguments about the
benefits of collegiality to the functioning of institutions, the dangers of using such a subjective concept to judge fitness, and the possibility of mitigating those dangers through efforts to clearly describe what collegiality means. A comprehensive account of the panoply of claims would require many volumes. What follows is a review of some of the most common arguments.

Faculty who have sued universities for denying them tenure on the basis of lack of collegiality typically base their case on a claim that universities violated their contracts by considering a factor that was not specifically mentioned. One argument in favor of including collegiality as a criterion in tenure documents holds that doing so aligns stated expectations with the reality of how faculty are judged. Another is that it is wise for universities to require faculty to exhibit collegial behaviors because the presence of those behaviors is associated with employee satisfaction and institutional success. In the Chronicle of Higher Education, Piper Fogg reported on a survey from Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, which found that new assistant professors “care more about departmental climate, culture, and collegiality than they do about workload, tenure clarity or compensation.” An intentional focus on collegiality has been advanced as an antidote to bullying, incivility, and toxicity in academia. The proliferation of the latter set of behaviors within departments has been implicated in administrators’ decisions to step down from their positions. Others have suggested that affirming the importance of collegiality can reduce the likelihood of institutional or systemic discrimination.

Arguments in opposition to using collegiality as a criterion for tenure are much easier to find. The AAUP decried the practice, noting that it has been used to punish those who deviate from predominate norms, that it can result in compliance and obsequious behavior, and “cast a pall of stale uniformity.” Similarly, others have expressed reservations that the use of collegiality as an evaluative criterion, “chills faculty debate and stifles dissent on campus.” Several scholars have decried the use of collegiality on the grounds that its subjective nature makes it extremely difficult for those accused of behaving uncivilly to defend themselves. This difficulty may lead those in positions of power to “overidentify uncollegial behavior as a cause of termination or denial of tenure.”

Perhaps the most commonly expressed concern about collegiality as a criterion, is that it can be used as a cover for discrimination and denial of academic freedom. As evidence of the validity of this concern, Pamela Haag noted that, “Female professors denied tenure on grounds of lack of collegiality during 1970s and early 1980s were all from male dominated departments alleging that they don’t fit in.” Courtney Adams Wooten and Megan A. Condis raised the possibility that seeking unionization, pointing out unethical behavior, or reporting discrimination or harassment could be deemed uncollegial by other faculty. Several scholars have remarked that the potential for accusations of a lack of collegiality is used as a weapon to silence criticism or discriminatory practices. Amelia N. Gibson, for instance, wrote that, “civility and ideals of community-oriented self-sacrifice are often weaponized against women of color when they respond to harmful policies and practices in the academic workplace.” Similarly, Theodore W. McDonald, James D. Stockton and R. Eric Landrum, declared that, “as long as potentially unprincipled administrators have the sole power to define what is and is not civil or collegial behavior, and to punish free speech deemed challenging, invocations of incivility/lack of collegiality will remain a threat to academic freedom on college and university campuses.”

Librarianship is far from immune to these harms. Librarians have been denied tenure for performing diversity-related research. A survey in which librarians of color were asked about their opinions of tenure and promotion policies revealed that of the 60 respondents, 31.7% “felt they couldn’t freely voice their opinions,” only 55% “felt they were fairly evaluated on service,” and 16.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that discrimination against or harassment of library faculty of color is a problem at their library.” Several of the respondents to a survey of female librarians of color, “reported incidences of microaggressions, usually typified by “clueless” or “ignorant” comments and implicit biases, rather than overt hostility.” A majority of the respondents revealed that they undertook a high level of service. This is consistent with research in other areas of academia demonstrating that women of color experience a “cultural tax,” in the form of greater service expectations, which can make it more difficult for them to achieve tenure. Bharat Mehra argued that tenure policies in Library and Information Science do not recognize the value of diversity-focused scholarship. He urged other LIS professionals to “challenge the hegemonic LIS comfort zones, puncture the academic boundaries of exclusion, broaden a narrow “white-ist” discourse, or dismantle biased tenure and promotion policies not reflective of a racialized environment.”

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Many accounts of the negative impacts of judging faculty based on collegiality expectations have concluded with recommendations for improving the system. A common suggestion has been to provide more precise definitions of collegiality along with tools to measure it. This has been proposed as a means to reduce subjectivity, bias, and discriminatory applications. One advocate of this view stated that, “establishing a widely known menu of identifiable not-so-subjective criteria could, in the majority of cases, reign in discriminatory impulses.” In addition, some have argued that using a broad, representative group to develop the definition would further mitigate against biased or discriminatory judgments of collegiality. Others have claimed that adding transparency to the ways in which collegiality judgments are made will yield additional benefits. Those include improved mentoring, increased willingness of faculty to speak freely, and reduced toxicity of the institutional environment.

Several scholars have been far less sanguine about the ability of improved definitions of collegiality to reduce negative impacts on underrepresented groups. Ann Blankenship-Knox and colleagues saw better definitions as helpful, but noted that many other improvements are needed. Those include documenting collegiality concerns and raising them with faculty when they arise, and providing emotional intelligence training. Gudrun Nyunt and colleagues advocated for bias awareness training that, “should take place on a regular basis, be interactive, involve discussions on concrete domains of work, and be required for faculty mentors and promotion and tenure committees, if not all faculty.” And other scholars have questioned the wisdom of explicitly evaluating faculty on collegiality at all. Alvin Snider questioned the wisdom of enforcing “niceness,” noting that even unpleasant individuals can be valuable colleagues. Courtney Adams Wooten and Megan Condis argued that the impulse to include collegiality as a criterion stems from a desire to privilege actions deemed normal and urged those evaluating candidates to focus on their ability to perform their job, rather than how they “should look, be, speak, or act.”

**COLLEGIALITY AND TENURE: ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?**

The goal of this paper is to investigate the compatibility of collegiality and tenure in academic libraries based on two research studies the researchers conducted. The first study of promotion and tenure documents revealed that some R-1 universities (39.7%) grant tenure-track or tenured-faculty status to librarians in their university library system, and 32.7% of these institutions mention “collegiality” in their promotion and tenure documents. Just 41.2% of these institutions utilize the terms “collegial” or “collegiality” in their P&T documents, and only 17.6% of these institutions clearly and objectively define or express their concept of collegiality. It is important to note that there are multiple interpretations of collegiality and that it can be conveyed in a variety of ways in promotion and tenure agreements. Several institutions communicate their sense of collegiality using terminology such as “cooperation,” “collaboration,” “respect,” and “professional behavior.” This emphasizes the necessity for a standardized definition of the term and for institutions to give explicit definitions and evaluation criteria for collegiality. However, just four of the seventeen universities with collegiality in their tenure standards include it in the “library” portion of their publications. It is mentioned in distinct parts by the remaining institutions, indicating it is not as significant in the P&T evaluation process as the librarianship category.

In a second study, the researchers administered a survey to investigate how academic librarians view the use of collegiality as an evaluation factor in the promotion and tenure evaluation process. While some respondents agreed that it should be included in the P&T paperwork and annual job performance reviews, the majority of respondents claimed that it should only be considered during the performance review and not during the promotion and tenure review. A significant proportion of respondents were uncertain regarding its inclusion as a metric. The majority of respondents (89.3%) who claimed they recognized the concept of collegiality as described in their library’s tenure guidelines agreed that collegiality should be included. However, over half of the non-white respondents (58%) were adamant that collegiality should not be incorporated. They voiced worry that the concept of collegiality can be abused and contribute to prejudice against underrepresented groups. This is a significant finding because it implies the possibility of bias and discrimination when collegiality is used as a criterion for evaluation.

In addition, less than half of respondents thought that collegiality should be included in annual job performance evaluations (43.5%), which is comparable to the percentage of respondents who believe it should be
included in P&T papers (41.6%). Respondents who worked at R-1 or R-2 universities, which typically have larger libraries with more staff, were more likely to want collegiality to be included in P&T documentation (47.4% vs. 33.9%) and annual job performance reviews (54.4% vs. 28.9%) than those who worked in smaller libraries. The data showed that a large proportion of respondents were concerned about the potential detrimental impact of employing collegiality as an evaluation factor on underrepresented faculty. Many respondents stated that collegiality may be used as a tactic to further marginalize people who are in the minority, and that underrepresented academics would be punished for speaking up. Respondents also stated that collegiality is a subjective criterion, and latent biases play an essential part in the judgment of it.

According to the findings of the study, there is a wide spectrum of opinions on whether the concept of collegiality should be included in the promotion and tenure decision-making process. Although collegiality is recognized as a positive attribute of an effective work environment, and it contributes to the success of academic libraries, its use as a criterion for promotion and tenure evaluation is viewed with some skepticism. When collegiality is treated as a subjective criterion, it is possible for bias and discrimination to arise, which adds validity to the expressed doubt. In addition, the study emphasizes the need for policies and training to ensure that the technology is used fairly and objectively.

CONCLUSIONS

Collegiality is a complex and subjective concept that is difficult to define and evaluate in the context of academic librarianship, according to the findings of the two studies we have performed on this topic. While collegiality could contribute to a positive work atmosphere, there is much debate about whether or not it should be a criterion for tenure and promotion. This dispute is most pronounced among non-White academic librarians, who fear that the inclusion of collegiality could result in bias and discrimination against underrepresented groups. Academic librarians who had a clear understanding of the idea of collegiality were more likely to believe it should be included as a tenure and promotion criterion. Those who stated they lacked a firm grasp of the idea of collegiality were more likely to believe that it should not be included. This shows that a more precise definition of collegiality is required to ensure that all participants in the promotion and tenure process understand the idea. If a more precise definition can not be provided, the concept should be omitted from tenure documents.

Future research could investigate the effect of collegiality on academic librarians from underrepresented groups, focusing on how the concept is defined and evaluated in the context of their work. Additionally, future studies could investigate the effectiveness of training programs targeted at enhancing the evaluation of collegiality, particularly those that address concerns linked to unconscious bias and cultural differences. Another possible direction could be to investigate additional techniques to evaluate collegiality, such as incorporating peer assessments or using collegiality as a factor for job performance evaluations rather than tenure and promotion.

As academic libraries continue to evolve, it is essential that we make sure that the evaluation standards for academic librarians are fair, objective, and reflective of the complexity and evolution of the profession. By continuing to examine the relationship between tenure and collegiality, researchers could ensure that university libraries remain vital and productive organizations that foster teaching, learning, and research with a positive work environment.

NOTES

6. AAUP, “Recommended Institutional,” “Dismissal procedures” section, para. 1.
15. Ibid., 858.
16. Ibid., 833.
20. Ibid., 7.
25. Cipriano and Buller, 46.
29. Ibid., para 5.
30. Ibid.
34. Haag, 59.
40. Damasco and Hodges, 291.
41. Ibid., 297.
42. Anantachai and Chesley, 318.
43. Ibid., 313.
46. Ibid.
48. Pertnoy, 216.
49. Wooten and Condis, 9; Blankenship-Knox, Platt, and Read, 42.
50. Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, and Galindo, 279.
51. Pertnoy, 203.
52. Blankenship-Knox, Platt, and Read, 42.
53. Ibid., 41.
56. Wooten and Condis, 7.
57. Ibid., 4.