

## "Just The Way We've Always Done It" Who Shapes The New Normal for Academic Libraries?

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Résumé de l'article

En mars et avril 2021, mes co-chercheur.e.s et moi-même avons mené des entrevues semi-structurées avec des bibliothécaires universitaires de partout au Canada au sujet de leur travail pendant la pandémie de la COVID-19, qui comprenaient leurs réflexions sur « le retour à la normale ». La plupart des participant.e.s étaient réticent.e.s à revenir à « l'ancienne normalité » sans une myriade de changements inspirés par les adaptations nécessaires au COVID. Cependant, des préoccupations ont été soulevées quant à savoir si leurs idées seraient mises en œuvre ou même entendues par leurs administrations. De plus, de nombreuses.eux participant.e.s se sentaient déchiré.e.s entre prouver leur valeur via le travail productif (et mesurable) et le travail de soin qui semblait nécessaire et urgent, mais qui n'était pas extérieurement valorisé. Ce document souligne la nécessité de se recentrer sur la construction de structures de gouvernance collégiale des bibliothèques qui incluent tous.les travailleuses.eurs des bibliothèques. De plus, il y a des indications que la pandémie de COVID-19 présente une occasion unique de le faire, car, une fois hors de « l'espace sacré » (Ettarh 2018) du bâtiment de la bibliothèque, les participant.e.s ont montré une résistance aux récits d'austérité généralement invoqués pendant une crise. Bien incarner nos valeurs commence par la mise en place et le développement de structures de gouvernance de bibliothèques partagées. Si les changements inspirés par COVID doivent se concrétiser, alors notre vision des soins et du développement de liens doit être inclusive pour nos propres travailleuses.eurs, afin de faire fructifier notre pouvoir collectif et construire un avenir qui sert tout le monde.

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# “Just The Way We’ve Always Done It”: Who Shapes The New Normal for Academic Libraries?

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## ABSTRACT

*In March and April of 2021, my co-investigators and I conducted semi-structured interviews with academic librarians across Canada about their work during the COVID-19 pandemic, which included their thoughts about going “back to normal.” Most participants were resistant to returning to the “old normal” without myriad changes inspired by the COVID-necessitated adaptations. However, there were concerns raised about whether or not their ideas would be implemented or even heard by their administrations. Additionally, many participants felt caught between proving their value through productive (and measurable) labour and the care-work that felt necessary and pressing but was not externally validated. This paper highlights the need for refocusing on building library collegial governance structures that include all library workers. As well, there is indication that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to do so, as, removed from the “sacred space” (Ettarh 2018) of the library building, participants showed resistance to the austerity narratives typically invoked during a crisis. Embodying our values starts with establishing and building on shared library governance structures. If the changes inspired by COVID are to come to pass, then our vision of care and relationship-building must be inclusive to our own workers, to harness our collective power to build a future that works for everyone.*

**Keywords:** *academic libraries · collegial governance · COVID-19 pandemic · library labour · library value*

## RÉSUMÉ

*En mars et avril 2021, mes co-chercheur.e.s et moi-même avons mené des entrevues semi-structurées avec des bibliothécaires universitaires de partout au Canada au sujet de leur travail pendant la pandémie de la COVID-19, qui comprenaient leurs réflexions sur « le retour à la normale ». La plupart des participant.e.s étaient réticent.e.s à revenir à « l'ancienne normalité » sans une myriade de changements inspirés par les adaptations nécessaires au COVID. Cependant, des préoccupations ont été soulevées quant à savoir si leurs idées seraient mises en œuvre ou même entendues par leurs administrations. De plus, de nombreuses.eux participant.e.s se sentaient*

déchiré.e.s entre prouver leur valeur via le travail productif (et mesurable) et le travail de soin qui semblait nécessaire et urgent, mais qui n'était pas extérieurement valorisé. Ce document souligne la nécessité de se recentrer sur la construction de structures de gouvernance collégiale des bibliothèques qui incluent tous.tes les travailleuses.eurs des bibliothèques. De plus, il y a des indications que la pandémie de COVID-19 présente une occasion unique de le faire, car, une fois hors de « l'espace sacré » (Ettarh 2018) du bâtiment de la bibliothèque, les participant.e.s ont montré une résistance aux récits d'austérité généralement invoqués pendant une crise. Bien incarner nos valeurs commence par la mise en place et le développement de structures de gouvernance de bibliothèques partagées. Si les changements inspirés par COVID doivent se concrétiser, alors notre vision des soins et du développement de liens doit être inclusive pour nos propres travailleuses.eurs, afin de faire fructifier notre pouvoir collectif et construire un avenir qui sert tout le monde.

**Mots-clés :** bibliothèques universitaire · gouvernance collégiale · pandémie de COVID-19 · travail dans les bibliothèques · valeur de la bibliothèque

**I**N an ACRLog post entitled “A Guide to the ‘New Normal’ for Academic Libraries,” Steven Bell writes the following:

The new normal is a concept that signals that everything we've taken for granted over the last 20 years is being melted down, re-thought and cast into a new reality. The old rules are broken and new ones must replace them.

If Bell's sentiment rings true to working librarians in 2022, then the twist here is that this blog post was written in 2009, in response to changes in the U.S. economy as a fallout from the 2007-08 financial crisis. While the 2009 “new normal” may have been greatly exaggerated, putting aside our fixation with the “exceptional present” (Meyers et al. 2021, 2), time will tell if the same can be said for the current new normal in those libraries reopening physical services during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Writing for *Inside Higher Ed* in June 2020, Christopher Cox gave his early predictions on how academic libraries would change as a result of COVID—an extensive list of new services, the predictable divestment from print resources, and the ubiquitous “doing more with less.”<sup>1</sup>

If we believe a primary difference between these two posts is the enormity of the respective crises and their expected impacts on libraries, there are also many notable similarities: both Bell and Cox are men and library administrators,<sup>2</sup> both evoke the

1. Cox's post is a mixed-bag, but he interestingly ends on a prediction of increased librarian activism, including for worker rights and employee safety. Although he primarily chooses *libraries* as the presumed actors in these change scenarios, librarians are at least acknowledged and mentioned numerous times. Comparatively, Bell's (albeit briefer) post only refers to libraries; librarians are not mentioned.

2. While I don't wish to imply that either of these two qualities should disqualify them from sharing their views, it is notable that they have access to the platforms that allow them to do so when many

spectre of economic strain to drive change, and both primarily refer to *libraries*—not librarians, not library workers—in their post not only as the change-object, but as the primary actor, needing to be “nimbler, and more responsive than ever before” (Cox 2020). If the COVID-19 pandemic differs in its severity and impact from previous crises affecting librarianship, then why should the response be the same tired calls for austerity and resilience? If libraries need to change, who decides these changes? Whose voices will be considered, and whose will be left out?

Working from home throughout 2020, one of my own most prominent sources of stress and worry was the loss of control over my work and the limited ability to shape the changes that were happening, certainly to the world at large but also to my library, my university, and my profession. Interviewing other librarians not only allowed for some bastion of connection during a time of isolation but also provided access to other perspectives on what Canadian academic librarians were dealing with during this time and their thoughts on the future. Nearly all study participants had ideas about how libraries should change in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; though not all perspectives and ideas were compatible, many participants shared uncertainty about what would change and who it is that would change them. I contend that the question of the new normal in academic libraries starts with library governance; collegiality of decision-making processes determines the agency of library workers to shape the meaning in their work and the framing of library value.

One observed difference between the current new normal and past crises (exaggerated or not), is that the majority of librarian study participants were hopeful, even yearning for large-scale changes. Celeste,<sup>3</sup> a study participant, summed up the thoughts of many:

Like, I feel like I want to get back to normal, but then immediately I'm like, but normal was not that good . . . I kind of worry that like, back to normal means we could go back to sleep . . . I guess I don't want to go back to normal. I want things to be better than normal. How do we do that?

## Literature Review

Though participation in collegial governance by academic staff is often considered one of the core tenets of academic freedom (Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) 2018a) and “one of the defining qualities of the university” (CAUT Librarians Committee 2000), there has been very little scholarship concerning the state of collegial governance in academic libraries. As recently as 2016 when Revitt do not, particularly considering my primary subject here is who has the privilege to shape the larger changes to libraries as a field.

3. All names have been changed. Ellipses in participant quotes indicate words or phrases removed, either for clarity, or to ensure anonymity.

and Luyk published their critical review of Canadian library councils, they reported that scholarly literature concerning the governance structures and decision-making processes of Canadian academic libraries was “almost non-existent” (61). Ribaric (2014) describes the role of the library council as “to provide high level direction, including planning and policy-making, and discussion of the affairs of the library” (279). Both the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) have issued statements endorsing collegial or shared governance in academic libraries, with library councils or similar structures recommended as the primary decision-making body (CAUT 2018b, CAPAL 2015). Collegial management has long been a fixture of library administrator job ads (Howze 2003); however, there remains evidence that library councils often do not function well as a decision-making body (Jacobs 2008; Revitt and Luyk 2016; Revitt and Luyk 2019) and that librarians, particularly as workers in a “classic female profession” (Sonne de Torrens 2014, 83), have had difficulty gaining control of decisions affecting their work.

Revitt and Luyk (2016, 62) measure collegial governance by “how much input librarians have into the priorities, planning, and policies of the library as well as participation in institutional committees and policy work that transcends the library.” Fister and Martin (2005, 33) further describe collegial decision-making structures as requiring three essential contributions: “professional expertise, trust, and a disinterested urge to further the work of the whole. Authority rests neither in the individual nor in a higher body that organizes the work, but in the members of the group.” I appreciate and draw upon the conceptions outlined in both of these articles when discussing collegial or shared governance throughout this paper. Additionally, I respect CAUT’s (2022) policy statement on collegiality, where it is stressed that collegiality is “not congeniality or civility” and is rather defined by characteristics such as adhering to democratic principles, protecting individual participants, and ensuring inclusiveness.

The recent publication of Soehner and Roe’s (2022) article “Conspiratorial Thinking in Academic Libraries: Implications for Change Management and Leadership” indicates there is still much work to be done in developing collegial governance structures at academic libraries. Soehner and Roe overlook the concept of shared governance completely. Instead, they prefer to characterize librarians who agree, for example, that “the powerful people in my workplace conceal important information from employees” as “organizational conspiracy theorists.” Even as their own data demonstrates that their survey respondents are disinclined to buy into conspiracies, and even as they admit these “organizational conspiracy theories...have

the potential of being true,” Soehner and Roe resolutely ignore myriad implications of their research on library leadership and governance structures.

The article was immediately met with a barrage of well-reasoned calls for retraction, including an extended blog post from Meredith Farkas (2022), who pointed out that employees with low job satisfaction could likely be dissatisfied with the decision-making processes of library leadership. Kendrick’s (2017) work on low-morale and burnout experiences in academic libraries revealed that negligence by library administration is often a contributing factor, “especially with regard to poor leadership, ineffective communication, and feelings of being undervalued” (30). Vaisey (2014) additionally found that, although many librarians reported adequate job satisfaction, there was an “undercurrent of unhappiness” centered around collegiality and respect.

It is interesting that the motivations Soehner and Roe identify for becoming an organizational conspiracy theorist—“a loss of control over their work, a lack of understanding of the reasons for the change, and a need to maintain a positive self-image”—are almost perfectly opposite to common reasons for promoting shared governance, such as those presented by CAPAL (2015):

Collegial processes not only significantly increase the professional librarian’s investment and ownership of administrative initiatives but serve to promote them as well.

Participatory decision-making increases morale, creativity, and contributions among professionals and is associated with effective leadership.

Similarly, Lesniaski et al (2001) write of transitioning to a shared governance model in their libraries,

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. (233)

Fister and Martin (2005) go so far as to hinge the survival of librarianship as a profession on the widespread adoption of shared governance. These shared governance models acquire even more importance during an era of rapid change like the COVID-19 pandemic, where Todorinova (2021) reported increased dissatisfaction from librarians with how some administrations communicated the rapid changes.

However, one notable problem with even the most functional of library shared governance models is the frequent exclusion of non-librarian support staff; while the expectations on these library workers are increasing, these increased responsibilities have not often been met by higher pay or increased decision-making power (Fister and Martin 2005; Lesniaski et al 2001). The librarian participants in this study had



many concerns about their administration's communication (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022b); however, Glusker et al (2022) found that intra-library communication issues may be even worse for non-librarian staff, who perceive many communications as being only directed at librarians.

Library governance models are intimately connected to library values. While Vong (2021) decries academic managerialism culture for conflicting with the declared library value of inclusivity, her proposed solution of applied critical management studies is inadequate compared to the prospect of shared governance structures. Fister and Martin (2005) write that, "On an ethical level, bringing library structures and reward systems into alignment with contemporary library work is a matter of social justice" (34). Similarly, CAPAL (2015) argues that if libraries are to play a critical role in democracy, they must themselves be governed with democratic values. While Popowich (2021) argues that libraries as institutions have a storied history of deferring to the interests of state power when faced with perceived conflicts in their stated values, he also notes a growing "internally focused critical librarianship" (8), focusing on necessary reforms within librarianship itself, particularly those reforms that attempt to reconcile demonstrating library value with embodying our values (see Arellano Douglas 2020).

Myriad LIS scholars have connected the rise of managerialism to the neoliberal value agenda in academic libraries (see for example Vong 2021; Nicholson 2015; Almeida 2020; Lilburn 2017; Beilin 2016; Popowich 2021; Seale and Mirza 2020). Also characteristic of that same value agenda are a normative state of crisis (Almeida 2020; Meyers et al. 2021; Seale and Mirza 2020; Nicholson, Pagowsky and Seale 2019) and a reliance on technological innovation (Levesque 2020; Popowich 2019). These are both particularly interesting to consider in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which ushered in an era of library collections and services mediated largely through technological tools, due to a very real global crisis. Resisting the neoliberal value agenda requires diverting authority from its traditional centres, including managers required to uphold the corporate agenda of the university. For the library in particular, it requires a divestment from the physical space and print resources that Ettarh (2018) refers to as *sacred*.

## Methods

This article arises from a study I conducted with two co-investigators, Nicole Eva and Mary Greenshields. Two other articles also report on results of the study, one focusing on empirical changes to librarian work during this time (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022a) and the other focusing on care in librarian work during the COVID-19 pandemic (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022b). The following methodology description

has been taken from one of these articles (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022a) with slight edits.

As the goal of this study was to explore in-depth individual experiences, my co-investigators and I determined that semi-structured interviews would be the best method of capturing participants' thoughts, feelings, and understandings of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guiding interview questions and topics were identified and are included in the Appendix. Approval for the study was granted by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee on January 18, 2021 and by the Thompson Rivers University Research Ethics Board on February 9, 2021. Early attempts to capture the phenomenon of librarian work during the COVID-19 pandemic have generally been through surveys (see Todorinova 2021; Eva 2021; Willenborg and Withorn 2021 for example), which inherently capture a wider breadth of experience; however, my co-investigators and I wanted the chance to both probe into the depths of our participants' experiences and to follow up or clarify any points that were raised.

The scope of this study was limited to those working in non-administrative librarian positions at Canadian post-secondary institutions.<sup>4</sup> While the observations of other library workers, such as library technicians or assistants, would undoubtedly be interesting and noteworthy, we determined that their work and experiences would be distinct from that of librarians, in part because of the additional struggles faced by this group of workers who often faced greater job insecurity or had to work on-site while librarians continued to work from home. Librarians in administrative positions were also excluded, as it was expected that relationships with library administration would loom large in many of our participants' responses. Towards the end of each interview, study participants were asked specifically what the phrase "back to normal" meant to them; however, for many of the study participants, their thoughts on the future of librarian work had already permeated many of their previous responses.

In an effort to recruit a representational cross-section of librarians from Canadian universities, a recruitment email was sent to the following listservs: Canadian Association of Academic Librarians (CAPAL), Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) Librarians, and Jerome (Alberta Library Association). My co-investigators and I also sought participation via Twitter, where we are connected to a large network of Canadian academic librarians. The recruitment strategy was inherently attractive to those librarians who wanted to tell their story, as there were no participation incentives offered other than the prospect of a conversation. Some participants explicitly mentioned the unique aspects of their own experience that

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4. See McLay Paterson and Eva 2022a for more details about the specific job duties of study participants.



motivated them to share their story, while others mentioned that they connected with the expressed motivations of the research.

Interviews were split as evenly as possible among the three co-investigators and were assigned based both on availability and to keep the workload distribution even. In a few cases where study participants had prior work relationships with one or more of the investigators, the participant was offered a chance to interview with one of the co-investigators that was not known to them. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the questions, opportunities for refusal and withdrawal from the study were clearly outlined both in the signed consent form and verbally by the investigators at both the start and the end of interviews. Interviews were conducted via web meeting using Microsoft Teams software in March and April 2021, generally lasting between 30 and 60 minutes; they were recorded, then transcribed by the co-investigators. Transcripts were then reviewed both for accuracy and assurance of anonymity. Participants were given the option on their initial consent form to review the transcript at this stage; nine participants did so, which resulted in further cursory changes to three of the anonymized transcripts.

I collaborated with my co-investigators on determining an inductive coding process for thematic analysis of the anonymized transcripts. As each of us had transcribed our own interviews, we had a thorough familiarity with our own subset of the data and preliminary ideas of the themes. We were then able to read and review the other investigators' transcripts as an initial check to our own ideas against the entire data set. A sample transcript was chosen and coded independently by each of us. These initial codes were discussed and collated to create a preliminary coding structure with identified themes and subthemes. The preliminary structure was tested, as each co-investigator then coded a third of the interviews with the help of NVivo software. Codes were added, combined, or removed in this process through discussion, identification of examples, and mutual agreement. Themes and subthemes were also refined. I then recoded the entire dataset using this final structure; minor refinements were made during this process, discussed and mutually agreed-upon. For this particular article, concentrating on themes related to returning to work and returning (or not) to normal, I identified additional subthemes within the initial structure to further parse the data and recoded once more for these subthemes in particular.

While this work contains elements of ethnography, invested as it is in the current culture of academic libraries and the "meanings that its participants ascribe to it" (Asher and Miller 2011, 3), it also draws on the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research, acknowledging that because "we are social and

historical beings, our actions come out of the context and situation, the backdrop of history to which they belong” (Fielding 2017, x). As a working academic librarian, I must acknowledge my investment in these interviews and the results. The major departure here from the aforementioned methodological traditions is that I am a fully entrenched participant in both the culture of academic librarianship and the phenomena of its changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, like Strega and Brown (2015), I “reject not only the possibility of objectivity, but also its usefulness” (9); instead, I ground myself in a deep knowledge of and commitment to the academic library community. I seek goals of anti-oppressive research: “community-building, empowerment, and more nuanced understandings” (Potts and Brown 2015, 26), and I pursued these interviews in part as a liberatory practice, both to connect individual experiences to broader trends and to provide a measure of catharsis through witnessing.

### ***Participants***

Twenty-one librarians answered the initial call, and nineteen interviews were completed during March and April of 2021. Participants came from across Canada, representing 17 different post-secondary institutions. Fourteen (or 73.6%) of our participants were women and five (or 26.3%) were men, which is consistent with the gender identity ratios reported by the CAPAL 2018 *Census of Academic Librarians* (2019), where 73.58% respondents identified as women, 24.20% as men, and less than 1% as non-binary or other genders. Eleven participants were tenured or permanent employees, while the remainder were tenure-/permanent-track. While all career stages in terms of years of experience were represented in the study, only permanent and permanent-track librarians responded to the call; the experience of librarians with precarious or temporary employment during the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore not captured by this study. All participants’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms and additional details about the participants’ lives and jobs have been minimized in this paper to protect their anonymity. Occasionally, general details about participants’ work situations have been included when that information adds context to their words without threatening their anonymity.

### **Results and Discussion**

Analysis of participant responses highlights the need for renewed investment in collegial governance in libraries. As well, there is indication that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity to do so, as participants showed resistance to the austerity narratives typically invoked during a crisis. Ongoing library discussions centred around the reopening of the library to in-person service mostly

did not include the librarians in our study; however, the importance of a collegial process for large-scale decision-making had already shown itself in those libraries that had already reopened, either temporarily or with limited services. When discussing the spectre of back to normal, the majority of participants were concerned about returns to campus being handled thoughtfully, rather than enthusiastic about the prospect. Most participants shared ideas of how libraries should change after COVID-19, with their suggestions centering around both service changes, often specific to the participants' work area, and the future of remote work. Finally, at various points throughout the interviews, participants mused on their own value as librarians and the overall value of libraries, often locating that value within invisible, unproductive labour that is expected of librarians, though often not highly prized by library administration.

### ***Return to Work***

At the time our interviews took place, most of participants' institutions had started the planning process for reopening the library for in-person service, with many expecting to reopen for September 2021. Very few of our participants (even those from smaller libraries) expected to play an active role in the reopening process. About half of our participants reported that their libraries had already reopened, either for brief periods, or ongoing with limited services, such as some form of curbside pick-up. While the librarians in our study continued to work from home, non-librarian staff had largely been asked to return to the library building. None of our participants whose libraries had reopened reported being consulted or involved in the process; neither, as far as our participants knew, were the frontline staff who had returned to work in the building. Celeste told us,

I heard then through the grapevine that people actually working on site . . . were really scared because they felt like now there's going to be people just unmasked in the library. And, is that going to be safe? And just the way it was communicated to them, their concerns weren't being taken seriously.

In another article from this study (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022b), we discussed how communication from administration was a defining feature of whether participants saw their administration as effective during COVID-19. However, there are indications that the return-to-work implementation was more than just a failure of communication but also of collegial governance. Jana, a librarian at a large research university, described her library's reopening committee:

basically, administration and a bunch of managers making decisions, and a lot of the folks don't really have—frontline responsibilities, we'll say.

While nearly every participant expressed uncertainty about their institution's reopening plans, the uncertainty itself was not expressed as a cause for anxiety among participants. Rather, participants were anxious about the possibility of reopening too soon or for the wrong reasons. Andrew told us about his institution's reopening plans, speculating on decision-makers' motivations:

There's a very gung-ho attitude about reopening in September, like everything's gonna be normal and it's going to be face-to-face, and it's all going to be fine. And that is a very positive attitude to have. But there are concerns that have yet to be addressed about whether or not . . . the drive to normalcy is the primary consideration around planning or health and safety is the primary consideration around planning.

The drive to normalcy as a motivating factor in its own right was mentioned by a number of participants, with attitudes ranging from disinterest to derision at "normalcy" as a motivating factor. Previous writing on library governance has pointed to librarian disenfranchisement from key decisions (Revitt and Luyk 2016; Jacobs 2008; Ribaric 2014; CAUT Librarians Committee 2000), and at many institutions, reopening committees were a case in point.

### ***Back to Normal***

Participant comments on their thoughts towards "back to normal" were interesting in many ways. While nearly all participants immediately associated going back to normal with a return to campus and a resumption of face-to-face library services, only three participants mentioned being excited about that prospect writ large, and of those, that excitement was predicated foremost upon health and safety concerns being addressed. One participant excited for a return to in-person was Leanne, an early-career librarian. She said,

I am a really social person, and so there is also excitement to get out of the house and there is excitement to see more than just my partner on a daily basis. And so that is really exciting to me . . . the fact that this might happen. And then also for teaching, I'm really excited by the idea of being able to teach in a classroom again when it's safe to do so, because I get cues from people I teach from, and it's really tough to do online.

However, even in her excitement, Leanne was a thoughtful advocate for ensuring safety concerns were respected throughout the process. She went on to say,

I think people are pushing for this to happen slightly too soon, and I've felt that for the entire pandemic, really, that things are happening too soon, and then that means we have to backtrack again . . . And so that's frightening and frustrating.

Much more common from study participants were those who rejected the prospect of back to normal altogether. About a quarter of participants dismissed the concept as impossible, like Paul, a mid-career librarian, who said,

I think the reaction just to that word is that nobody knows what that means anymore.

Meyers et al. (2021) describe how library administrators employ a combination of a “once-glorious-kingdom-under-threat” narrative with a “forces-beyond-our-control” narrative to bolster power and support (5). However, reactions from our participants indicate many cracks in the veneer of librarianship as a “once glorious kingdom.” Furthermore, varying COVID-19 pandemic responses served to highlight exactly which forces *could* be controlled, given the proper motivations. The majority of participants acknowledged face-to-face, post-COVID normality as a looming possibility—one to which they actively did not want to return. Some participants gave rationales related to their specific work environment; however, some like Maria reflexively shifted their focus to a larger scale:

I'm thinking about things like capitalism—ok, yeah, let's not go back to that.

Many of the responses linked labour issues within the academic librarian profession to larger social justice structures, as in this response from Jana:

I guess when I think back to normal I also think of expectations being adjusted for the way that we are, like, evaluated or asked to do things. I do feel like in the last year or so a lot of people, a lot of managers, have been pretty good about being like, shit is wild, I know that you can't do as much as you could before, and that's fine. But back to normal: I think of just my administration being like, everyone's back on site, meetings will all be in person, and you will all be expected to do the same amount of work that you were doing before. Like, just like a lack of recognition that the last year has been—so many people have seen tremendous grief and trauma, and when people say back to normal to me it just negates all of that, and it's just like that never happened . . . I think it's because it doesn't, you know, recognize all of the things that have changed in the last year, and I think really suggests, if we're thinking about work, specifically, really suggests a way of working and a return to structures that were flawed or problematic in the first place.

Jana's point concurs with Ettarh's (2018) argument, long before the spectre of the COVID-19 pandemic: “The library's purpose may be to serve, but is that purpose so holy when it fails to serve those who work within its walls every day?” It took the COVID-19 pandemic for (some) administrators to consider the needs of library workers, alongside those of patrons, and these accommodations are not something our participants want to see lost.

### *New Ideas*

Common between both participants excited about returning to campus and those dreading the prospect were ideas about how to improve the structures and processes of academic librarianship, most stemming from changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost every study participant shared a wide range of ideas

related to changes to library services, the future of remote work, or in some cases, both.

### *Service Changes*

Proposed service changes were often very detailed and specific to participants' areas of expertise but were clustered around two prominent themes: decentering the library from the traditional focus on print collections and the physical building, and keeping librarian and staff capacity issues at the forefront.

While Caitlyn identified much of her professional role in pre-COVID times as being closely identified with the physical library, she advocated for using the pandemic to reconsider much of the library's overall image:

We're so defined by our space, and if our space was pretty much closed off for the better part of a year . . . then who are we? But I think we've done quite well with still offering you know a lot of stuff . . . how amazing is that?

Ettarh (2018) writes that the “physical space of a library, like its work, has also been seen as a sacred space,” and that the devotion to and centrality of the library building is designed to evoke vocational awe in workers. Long-term removal from that space and its resources did not appear to make our participants less proud of their accomplishments, but it did appear to remove much of the inviolate aura of the library space and the physical resources.

Krista, a mid-career librarian, went even farther with her critique:

How many things have we been doing in libraries that are [big emphasis] relics of another time? Tied to like mass print, circulation of books that we continue to structure our days and our services around—that are not necessary [thoughtful pause] or necessarily serving people well in terms of the work that we do. And I would really like to reconsider some of those practices in terms of work . . . I don't want the old normal as the new normal.

The advent of so many new services and adaptations due to the COVID-19 pandemic made librarians like Matthew worried about the prospect of maintaining new services along with all of the in-person ones:

Staff are going to get really exhausted and tired out . . . there's a decline in people's satisfaction or . . . morale because it's been going on for quite some time and you just can't keep on going and going and going and going without something breaking. You know, at a library that has ambitious plans, it needs to be balanced by sufficient staffing numbers.

Others, like Melanie, concurred, referring to her workload as “unsustainable.” Seale and Mirza note that the “work of academic library workers also often involves care work and maintenance . . . despite how other types of library work are often more valued in the workplace itself” (2020, 3). Care and maintenance work, or immaterial labour, in library services include both relationship-building tasks and technology



and infrastructure maintenance (Popowich 2019); neither type of task is readily measurable or quantifiable as a value metric. Levesque additionally characterizes an innovation or prestige-driven focus on technology as detracting from core duties, such as systems maintenance (2020, 9).

Even so, several adaptations from the COVID-19 pandemic era were frequently seen as possible balms (though not full solutions) to ease a heavy workload. In addition to the relief provided by the lack of commute in the remote environment (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022a), online meetings and consultations were frequently touted as being more efficient for both librarians and users. Consultations were seen by study participants as a case in point for how many COVID-19 pandemic adaptations had brought accessibility to the forefront. Ironically, in closing the library building, many libraries (and librarians) became accessible to a wider number of users. Hannah, a librarian at a mid-size teaching institution, commented,

The other thing that I've noticed about my research consults, and I think this is fantastic, is that I'm getting students that I don't normally get in person in the building . . . I have had so many mature students, so many students over 40, having research consults with me, and I just can't help but think it's the—ease of being able to, you know, pick your time, you can be at home, your kids can be in the other room, you're working. So that's kind of thrilled me and so I intend to continue to offer online appointments into the future.

While the increased accessibility brought on by the surge in digital resources and services was applauded by our participants, they were equally disinclined to embrace tech solutionism as an uncritical path for libraries going forward. For Jeannette, a librarian at a large research university, the transition to digital resources is enmeshed with advocacy for ebook publishing reform and the rise of Open Educational Resources:

I think I've had more conversations this year with profs about unlimited access versus 3 user access, and even an understanding that the Amazon ebook is not going to work for your class.

Many scholars have drawn the connection between neo-liberal value metrics and the rise of surveillance technology (Nicholson, 2015; Seale and Mirza 2020; Nicholson, Pagowsky and Seale 2019; Lilburn 2017; Beilin 2016). Comments from study participants indicate that COVID-19 pandemic working conditions resulted in further resistance to both. If the surge in digital resources and remote learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is to continue, Andrew pressed the importance of librarians advocating against both *TurnItIn* specifically, and test-proctoring software in general. Multiple participants pointed to the unique position of librarians to take leadership in and advocate for ethical learning technologies and digital resources; however, the capacity for libraries to progress seemed for participants (in the absence of a staffing windfall) to hinge on the willingness to question or reexamine what have been

traditionally thought of as core services and the ability of librarians to take part in those conversations that will direct the future path of our profession.

#### *Remote Work Futures and Governance*

Bound up with the thoughts and conversations about the future of library services were participants' investment in the future of the library as a work environment. Bethany commented like many other participants that she “literally can do my job from home.” Bethany was one of a number of participants calling for a “cultural shift” in libraries as a work environment. She went on to say,

You know what? I've super enjoyed the privacy that comes from this. So, nobody else in the department is watching me come and go, and it's been part of this need for cultural shift, in that it was a pretty toxic—the kind of environment where you couldn't be too successful because people are jealous and, like, I'm [redacted age] on Friday, and I'm tired of that in the workplace.

Elena, a mid-career librarian, also commented on perceived improvements to the work environment ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic:

I think the improvement in communication and sharing of information across the system has been good. And yeah, I just hope we don't have to go back into our office, five days a week . . . it's not backed up by anything right? Other than, that's just the way we've always done it, which I have always hated as a reason.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for working conditions going forward to be governed through collegiality and conversation, rather than defaulting to the pre-pandemic organizational norms. Elena discussed raising the topic of post-pandemic working conditions at her Library Council, with the goal of “starting the conversations now as opposed to waiting until it reopens and then everything just goes back to normal ahead of time.” Elena's plan makes good use of the intended purpose of Library Councils, as defined by CAUT (2018), Ribaric (2014), and others. Lesniaski et al. (2001, 234) write that “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.”

However, while Library Councils and shared governance structures emphasize collective decision making for the common good (see Revitt and Luyk 2019, for example), participants were adamant that this did not mean that all workers should be treated the same. Just as collegiality is not synonymous with congeniality (Revitt and Luyk 2019; Fister and Martin 2005), collective decision making must still accommodate individual needs. For example, Leanne, who was excited about the return of in-person services for herself, was conscious about recognizing that her own preferences may not work for everyone:

I don't want a cookie cutter approach. I just don't think that's the best call...and I don't know if these discussions are even being had right now . . . . Well, right now the cookie cutter is everyone works remotely all the time, right? . . . and then prior to COVID, working from home was just not really seen as something people did culturally in the organization.

Building the trust required to challenge the organizational status quo is key to the maintenance of shared governance (Fister and Martin 2005, 35), just as one goal of working together is to “*realize each person's aspirations*” (Lesniaski et al. 2001, 238, emphasis mine). In addition to advocating for a more collegial, deliberate approach to the work environment for librarians, some participants pointed out that work from home privileges—or even the academic freedom privileges to encourage advocacy—were not currently afforded to other library workers, such as technicians. Andrew referred to the current situation as an opportunity,

to advocate for people who have less power, temporary positions, lower rank, less power in the library, and who may not have the language, the experience, or the relationships to be able to challenge how administration does things.

Revitt and Luyk (2016) argue that “centralized decision-making processes undermine fundamental needs and values of highly skilled and educated professionals” (72); I would extend their argument to say that the needs of all workers are undermined by exclusion from collegial decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, as Jana put it, the goal is for libraries to become “more open to the different ways that people work and kind of what they need to be...successful and engaged in their work.” In Elena's words, “we've proved we can all be productive at home, right?”

### **Value**

Proposals for large-scale changes to working conditions and core services are necessarily entwined with conversations about library value, and by extension, librarian value. Most study participants suggested to some degree that both the traditional centres and demonstrations of library value should be shifted.

Seale and Mirza (2020) contend that,

the core question—what is value?—feels even more important as we see undervalued and underpaid service and maintenance workers suddenly becoming “essential” but remaining underpaid and under-protected. Academic librarianship, as we have seen in our privilege to work from home, can and does turn to weak but still present notions of professionalism and prestige, which seek to devalue and hide the centrality of care work to the profession.

(11)

The most prominent theme related to where participants located the value of their work was in relationship building with their communities and in providing support,

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5. Lesniaski et al. (2001, 236) found that librarians “often supervised paraprofessionals who...knew their areas of responsibility far more deeply than their alleged supervisor.”

particularly for students. Almost everyone referred to this support and community building as either a central pillar or their work, or if not, what they hoped to redirect their energies to for future work. Maria discussed the anxieties of transitioning her student support work to a virtual space:

But really, it's just been trying to keep our foot in the door and reminding the professors that we're there, because I'm seeing that once I'm able to have a really good impression with students through instruction...I'll recognize their names come through [on] an email list. So that was a huge concern for me: making sure that the students are supported, because that's who we are. They still come. They still are coming too. They'll still come, they still need you, right?

Though participants repeatedly cited the ease of transitioning their duties to the remote environment, relationship-building activities with the campus community were frequently cited as having suffered due to the online modality. Just as outreach activities were seen to suffer from the lack of a physical presence (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022b), Jana told us,

so much of the work that I have found really gratifying in the time of COVID, but also challenging is, because we're all virtual, that care work . . . looks different and sometimes is more difficult to deliver.

Maintaining emotional labour and relationship-building tasks alongside more quantifiable work products felt like job creep, as the work “is no longer considered ‘extra’ but instead is simply viewed as in-role job performance, which leads to more and more responsibilities and less time in which to accomplish them” (Ettarh 2018). However, if choices will need to be made, participants raised the alarm that adaptations made during the COVID-19 pandemic may end up competing with what they perceive as more ideal methods of fostering connections. Elinor summarized this tension when discussing her library’s workshops:

we used to do our workshops in person, which made them much more personal and helped us have really good relationships with people; but we've discovered that when we do certain hot topics online, we can get—as opposed to only having room for 20 people to sign up, we can have 150 people sign up, and I don't think they're going to want to move away from that.

Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale (2019) deride the library predilection towards technocratic and simplistic solutions to “the complex social problem of education” (59); quantifiable approaches measure educational programs not by their “contributions to the common good, but by the degree to which they help advance economic growth” (Lilburn 2017, 96). Relationship-building cannot be adequately captured by quantitative metrics that favor breadth over depth. However, the dissonance between work that participants saw as valued by their administration and work they felt was valuable to their communities was one of the strongest themes throughout the interviews. As an example, Elena discussed some current

organizational restructuring at her library, where former full-time roles were replaced with short-term contracts:

It's a devaluing of the work that we do, which influences our morale . . . . It's a library administration thing, it's a university administration thing, and it's our provincial government, so they all kind of work together to make you feel like the work you do, is not particularly valued.

When valuable, meaningful work doesn't show up in metrics, particularly in a climate of funding-cuts and potential layoffs, librarians felt an extra pressure to prove their worth to their administrations. Vong (2021) connects this excess pressure on librarians to prove their worth with the rise of managerialism and rightfully concludes that the current level of audit culture is unnecessary, while Almeida declares it "has already colonized so much of our work and our time" (2020, 7). Managerial culture also affects workers' thought processes: Caitlyn described having to push back against her own urge to appease, saying, "I'm trying to make it a bit more like, 'what do the students want' and not 'what does administration think we should be doing.'" Leanne, like many other participants, connected her internal need to prove value with both the overall climate of job loss and her work moving away from a visible role:

I've often found a need to prove that I'm working, and this is not even coming from necessarily my direct supervisor, who's great, and really supportive; but it's just this feeling of like, needing to prove my value in this context that where there's funding cuts, and there is like all this stuff happening, and also prove my value because the work is not as visible, right.

Arellano Douglas (2020) writes that we need to "reframe the conversation around assessment from one of demonstrating value to one of embodying a value of care and connection in learning for both students and librarians" (48). Responses from study participants overwhelmingly support re-centering care (McLay Paterson and Eva 2022b) but imposed metrics brought on by audit culture limit a large-scale adoption of this approach. While the majority of our participants still felt hopeful a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, a weaker, yet still present, theme in interview responses involved participants who enjoyed their work as librarians but felt a growing distance between themselves and their administration and their institution. Jeannette summed up her feelings:

Yeah, I still like being a librarian and I still feel like I'm valued, not necessarily by my university administration, but by my colleagues, for our ability to sort of work in this environment and still be present. So, I still feel positively about my work.

Howze contended of library collegial governance in 2003 that the "'sharing of authority," while an attractive notion, is tempered with shared responsibility, which

many librarians are not willing to assume” (43). Fister and Martin (2005) agree that collegial management sometimes fails, that it is possible members could “cower under their desks and wait for a Dean or Provost to solve the problems that they should be solving themselves” (36). However, Fister and Martin go on to conclude that libraries badly need a shared governance model that “that makes the most of its members’ talents, invites and nurtures creativity, and allows dynamic responses” (36). Responses from this study indicate that the care work of building a better library was where librarians were willing to invest their time, that it was productivity for productivity’s sake that needed to change. Consider this final quote from Celeste:

I actually do feel like my work is important. I know I help people every day. I help students, I help researchers, I know that I help even a little bit to advance scientific knowledge. That to me is a very important job that I care a lot about and I find a lot of meaning in, and that has not changed. But . . . I’m less willing to buy some of the BS productivity stuff and the self-care stuff that I myself peddle [sometimes] because a yoga at lunch does not do a lot when you are scared for your health and the health of your family, like that’s a drop in the bucket, right? And this constant imperative to, like, produce, produce, produce no matter what situation you’re in, no matter what stress you’re under. Like, I don’t want to be part of that anymore, so. That’s that.

Librarian participants were eager and ready to build a better normal, if only they are empowered with the agency to make the necessary changes.

## Conclusion

Removed from the library building and faced with a panoply of new directions for librarianship, participants were drawn to the potential in what they saw. While purveyors of crisis narratives have often wielded the threat of change to assert power (Meyers et al 2021), study participants repeatedly resisted and questioned any dictates of library and university administration that they saw as being imposed uncollegially. Ultimately, it is not the *crisis* of the COVID-19 pandemic that calls for changes to academic libraries but the clarity achieved through witnessing, experiencing, and responding to that crisis. Participants overwhelmingly rejected the idea of returning to the old normal and nearly everyone volunteered ideas of how they would like to see the profession change. The major unanswered question was whether those changes would happen and who has the power to effect them.

Embodying our values starts with establishing and strengthening shared library governance structures. Indeed, for many administrators (and workers), the conception of good leadership will need to shift drastically away from managerialism, where authoritative decision-making and singular vision are prized, to a leadership of facilitation that trusts, supports, and recognizes the expertise and perspectives of library workers. Library councils should be empowered as true decision-making



bodies; and the onus is on library leadership to foster a true culture of collegiality by practicing transparency, proactively encouraging a gamut of perspectives, and actively building support for both equity and academic freedom. Librarians participating in decision-making bodies must internalize the reality that collegiality can be difficult and uncomfortable; discussion and the sharing of concerns must be prioritized over the appearance of unanimous accord. Organizational trust is borne out by the gift of contrary perspectives, particularly if those perspectives come from colleagues whose views have been diminished, sidelined, or dismissed, either due to their identity as a member of an equity-deserving group or their role in a position typically excluded from agency in decision-making processes. If changes inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic are to come to pass, then our vision of care and relationship building must be inclusive to our own workers, to harness our collective power to build a future that works for everyone. We can't come through these years having learned nothing.

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## Appendix A: Guiding Interview Questions

### *Before Starting:*

- Review consent form and purpose of study
- Ask for any questions
- Start recording

### *Demographic Questions:*

Gender:

Employment status (ie. tenured/permanent, probationary, limited term, part-time):

Length of time at current workplace:

Position Title:

How many members are in your household?

- Number of dependents:

Tell me briefly about your position at the library.

### *Initial Response*

Tell me about your library's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What were the most immediate changes made?

- Your role in these changes?
- Feelings about these changes?
- Has your library been affected by layoffs or furloughs? If so, how did these affect you, either personally or in your work performance?

### *Now:*

What is your work situation now?

- Do you work primarily from home? The office? Elsewhere?
- Tell me about your work hours now.
- What is your daily schedule like? How many hours do you typically work in a week?
- Comparison to pre-COVID
- Describe any changes in your living situation in terms of members in your household? Do they work from home, outside the home, do domestic labor, or attend school?

- Have the changes described above affected your own work? If so, in what way(s)?

What are your library's plans for re-opening? What is your expected role? How will it impact your work schedule/location?

Tell me about one of your job duties that you spend MORE time on now than you did before COVID

Tell me about one of your job duties that you spend LESS time on now

Since COVID-19, have you been asked to take on any new duties that were not previously part of your workload?

- How or why did these duties fall to you?
  - **How do they fit with the rest of your workload?**
- Did you require any additional training?

Tell me about how COVID-19 has affected your relationship and communication with colleagues

Tell me about how COVID-19 has affected your relationship and communication with administration

When I say the phrase "back to normal" what is the first thing you think of?

How do you feel about your job now?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about how COVID has impacted your workload? and /or your relationship with your work?

***Debrief:***

- Remind participant about various supports and withdrawal procedures