

Library Staff Morale in the Academic Hierarchy

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Morale Llama
at UC Berkeley
Library

Presenters:

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Today's talk:

Abstract: *Academic librarians have increasingly gone public with their experiences of low morale and burnout, yet less attention has been paid to the workplace experiences of library staff. As Kaetrena Davis Kendrick notes in her work on the persistent harm of low morale among librarians, “the cost of silence can be high.”*

We decided to examine that gap in the research. In exploring the landscape of library staff morale, we hypothesized that the nature of the academic library's hierarchies, and staff roles within them, would be major factors in levels of morale. We also sought to investigate questions of organizational culture, opportunities for professional development, and management style.

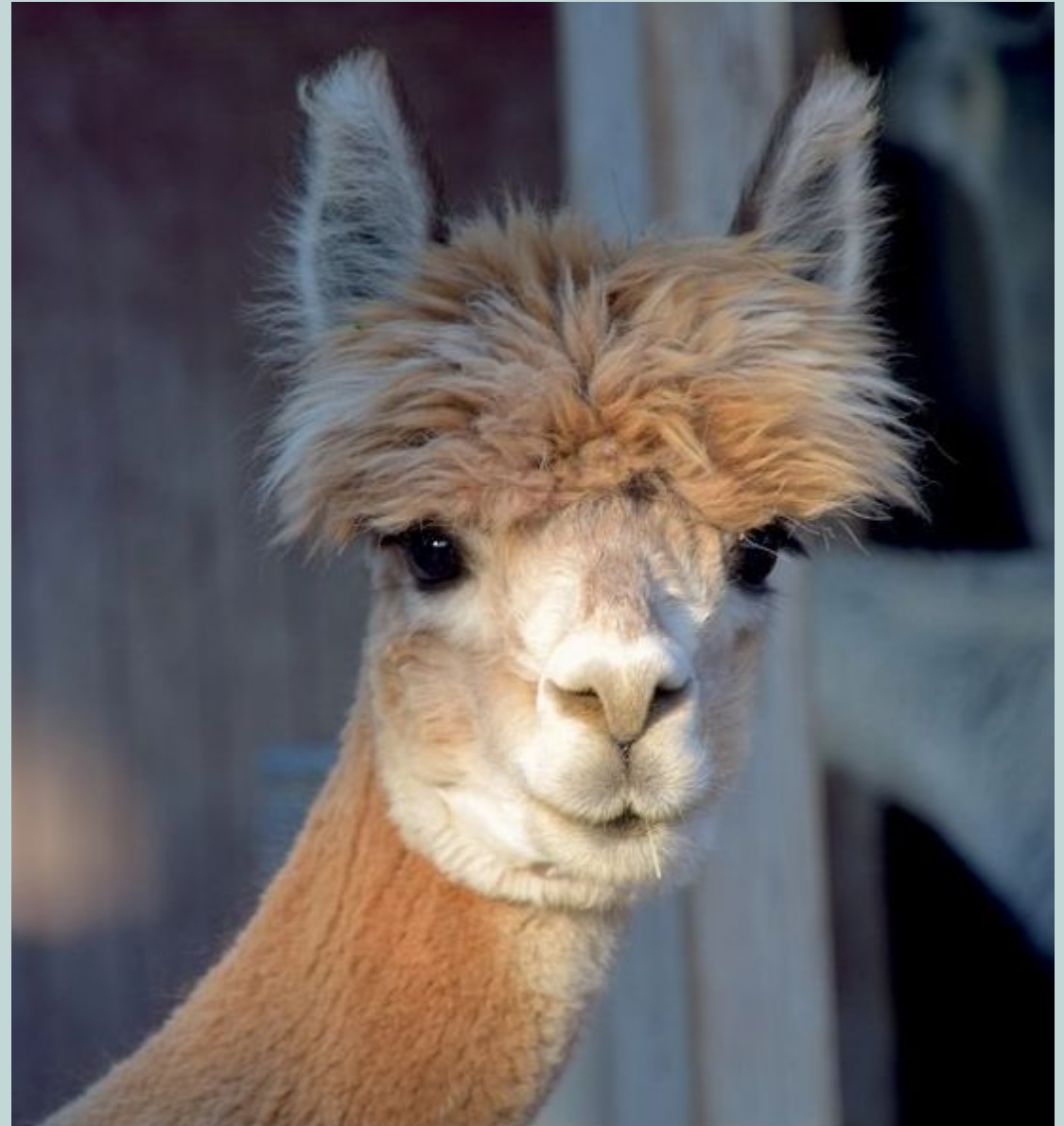
Our research team, including library staff, former library staff, a recent MLS grad and MLIS student, and librarians, conducted 34 structured interviews with academic library staff nationwide (purposefully excluding UC staff). The interviews took place during a three-week period in May-June 2020, and provide perhaps the final snapshot of library staff life in the pre-COVID era. Interviews were transcribed by a student who was trained by a member of our team, and de-identified transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXDQA.

In this talk, we present our findings, some of which surprised us. Among other things, the findings establish that efforts to address equity in compensation, provide professional growth opportunities, and create more collegial work environments, in particular addressing the librarian-staff divide and the need for manager advocacy, can all improve staff morale. In addition, we suggest concrete ways to make changes in libraries in order to assess and improve morale across staff hierarchies, and we offer resources for workplace development and support for staff.

Photo credit: [Pixy.org](https://www.pixy.org/)

We'll address:

- Why we're interested in staff experiences
- Our research process
- Who we talked with
- What they're saying



Background, Methods, and Interviews:

The inspiration:

- [Kendrick's paper](#) on low librarian morale →
- We found other work on *librarian* morale or burnout...
- ...but almost no one was looking at *staff* morale!
- Natalia and Ann got talking...

Articles

The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study

Kaetrena Davis Kendrick 

Pages 846-878 | Published online: 07 Sep 2017

 Download citation  <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325>  Check for updates

 Full Article  Figures & data  References  Citations  Metrics  Reprints & Permissions [Get access](#)

ABSTRACT

A dynamic body of knowledge about workplace bullying and burnout in academic libraries exists; however, there is a significant shortage of library and information science (LIS) literature regarding the related problem of low morale in any library environment; additionally, literature focusing on workplace bullying and burnout is quantitative, limiting insight into the animate experience of these events and inquiry into associated long-term effects. A phenomenological study was conducted to understand academic librarians' experience of low morale. Emergent themes connected workplace abuse, mental and physical health impacts, systemic influences, and the long-term consequences of low morale on LIS career trajectories.

Our initial questions:

- Librarians with an MLIS sometimes work in staff roles... yet few staff make it to librarian roles. How easy is it to make this jump?
- What chances do staff have for engaging work at their role within the hierarchy?
- What happens if you want to “rise up the ranks” and take on more complex work, but can’t?
- Does library structure play a role in staff morale?
- Why so few studies on staff? Librarians are not the only ones running the library, and in many ways are less essential than staff.

Developing our project:

- Natalia and Ann invited Celia to provide qualitative support.
- Natalia drew on her experience as staff, and invited Bonita to share her staff perspective as well.
- We won a statewide (LAUC) grant to hire a student to transcribe, and provide small gifts to interviewees.
- We applied for and received human subjects/IRB approval.

Recruitment

- We emailed *external* library listservs and state associations, and screened interested interviewees to ensure they matched our target group.
- On campuses where the word spread, we had to turn people away!
- We completed 34 interviews, and each participant received a \$25 gift card to Powell's Bookstore for their time.

12:29

Do you work at an academic library in the United States?

Yes

No

Is your position considered

A librarian position

A library staff position

Other (please specify)

Leading the interviews:

- UC Berkeley colleague Dori Hsiao graciously let us try a test interview with her.
- We interviewed by phone or Google Meet in May-June 2020 (during the early pandemic shutdowns)
- One person asked questions and the other took notes/asked follow-up questions.
- “Semi-structured” interviews meant that we had a set of questions, but flexed to staff interests.



Demographics

Institutions:

23 colleges/universities in 16 states.

Public institutions and larger institutions were overrepresented; West and Midwest were also overrepresented

Gender:

29 female

4 male

2 NB

Race:

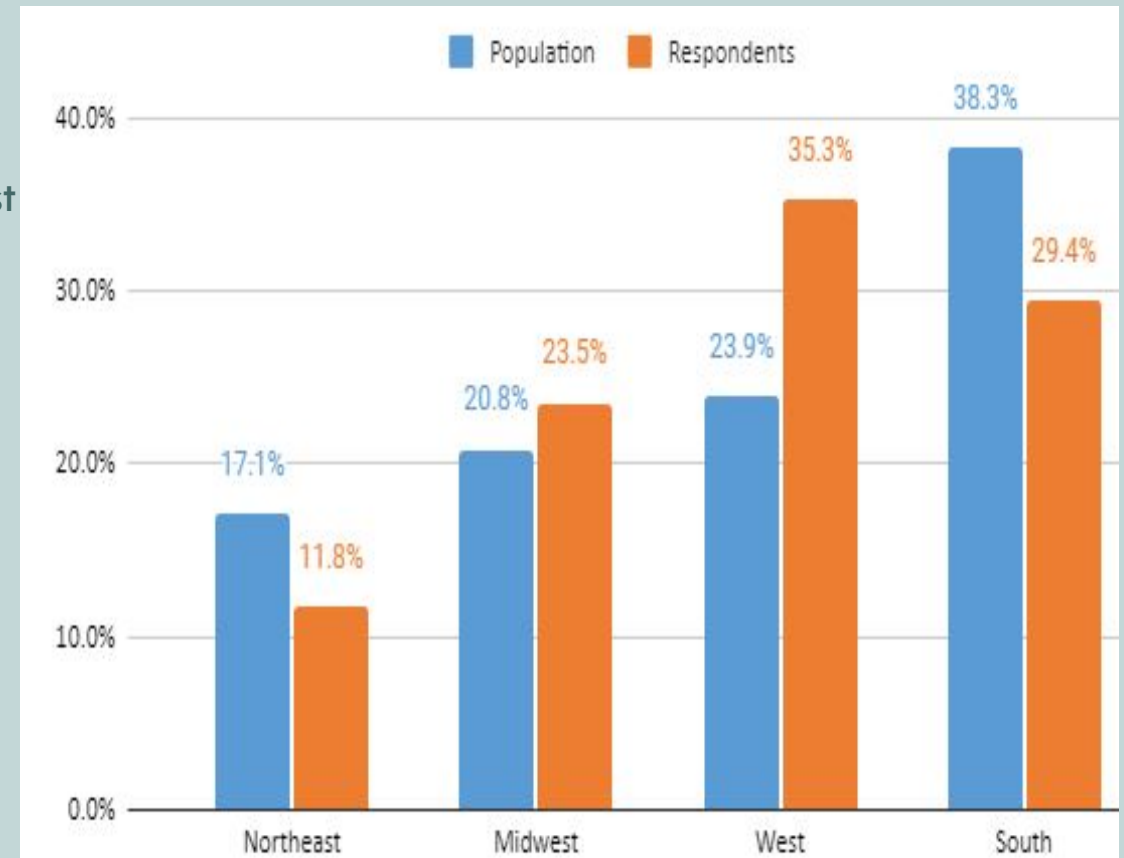
29 white

5 staff of color*

* Staff of color self-identified Black, African, Asian, Latinx/South American descent

Age:

About 1/2 were under age 40, and 1/2 over



From interview to transcript:

- We recorded audio on *two* devices, to avoid data loss, then transferred to secure Box folder.
- Student Tara van Hoorn transcribed the interviews, highlighting areas that might be identifying.
- We then reviewed each transcript for format, and redacted identifying information, to produce a clean final transcript for coding.

Coding themes

- We used MaxQDA, a qualitative software, to highlight quotes of interest and explore themes
- Each of us took a separate area, letting us dive deeply into the theme we were working on

The screenshot displays the MaxQDA software interface. On the left, the 'Documents' pane shows a list of files, with '05_Samantha' selected. Below it, the 'Code System' pane shows a hierarchical structure of codes, including 'Workspaces', 'Flexibility', 'Impacts of COVID', 'Morale' (with sub-codes 'Low Morale' and 'High Morale'), 'Hierarchy' (with 'Room for Growth'), 'Faculty-Staff Divide' (with 'Perception of Staf...'), 'Disparities' (with 'Racial Concern', 'Gender Concern', 'Class Concerns', and 'Age Concern'), and 'Management' (with 'Senior Leadership' and 'Direct Boss').

The main window shows a document titled 'Document Browser: 05_Samantha (145 Paragraphs)'. The text content includes:

102 **Librarian-Staff Relations**

103 *I: Can you talk about what your perc... is like?*

104 It depends on the librarian. The one... one making purchasing decisions fo... faculty, that's what they are. They ar... instruction, or things like that. So the...

105 And though actually the attitude towa... different. All the librarians in tech ser... is more public service versus tech s... what we do, is a big part of it. They g... people for the most part are more g...

106 *I: Which, I think it sets a tone that ca...*

107 Yeah. We have unit meetings like or... versus the people that work at the d... documents people are still at [the m... of like internal things like thought bo... cubicles, pretty much cubicles. The... room deal. For the most part we're p...

108 **Future**

109 *I: Cool. So where do you see yourse...*

110 Umm... honestly I think it's about tin...

111 *I: Oh wow yeah.*

Blue brackets on the right side of the text indicate coding: 'Faculty-Staff Divide' spans paragraphs 104-105, and 'Workspaces' spans paragraphs 106-107. A blue lightning bolt symbol is drawn over the 'Faculty-Staff Divide' bracket.

Findings:

1. The librarian-staff divide

A disconnect between staff and librarians caused **frustration amongst staff**. This was exacerbated when librarians held faculty status.

- Staff try to structure their work and influence their organization, but are often blocked by librarians. While some librarians are collaborative, others are dismissive, cherry-pick the good tasks, and dump “lower status” work on staff.
- Staff felt satisfied when they could work with librarians as peers on a team project.
- Staff appreciated that this project focused on *staff* experiences. Being seen and validated matters tremendously.

“I think that morale is pretty low among our staff. They really feel that there’s a faculty-staff divide, for one.” -Joseph

2. The impact of management

Staff with low morale were often in toxic settings or had micromanaging or unsupportive bosses.

Yet **feeling supported by and connected with an immediate boss** was critical for high morale. Managers who support staff growth and autonomy are crucial, as is transparent communication from management at all levels. As Opal commented:

“My boss is very uplifting. He doesn’t seem to have a big ego, he just wants to get things working, to have everyone happy... he’s always asking what he can do to help us, and not meddling unless we ask for help. So we’re really free to grow, I gotta say.” -Opal

3. The impacts of family and education

Education: The majority of staff we interviewed had an advanced degree, or were in a graduate degree program. Staff saw education as necessary--but it didn't guarantee career progression!

Caregiving: A majority of staff had a spouse or kids, and family needs often impacted their career choices.

Class: Many staff brought up ways that class impacted their career--either smoothing it, or challenging it through e.g. student loans:

“Our director has volunteered to help me find scholarship money because I couldn't get any more loans to go back to school... I do wanna go back if I can get the financial assistance.” - Linda

4. The impact of hierarchy

We expected a direct relationship between place in the hierarchy and morale. Instead, **morale depended more on organizational factors such as the ability to progress, workload, respect, and funding for new hires.**

“The person who was applying for the [librarian] job said ‘Well, how long do I sit at the reference desk?’ and they said ‘You’ll never sit there more than two hours. We would never do that to you!’

“And I was thinking, what am I? Every person who’s pissed off at the world, I’m dealing with them 8 hours a day. And you can’t handle it for two hours?” -Amy

RECOMMENDATIONS:

How to strengthen library staff morale

- Foster respectful *peer* collaboration between staff and librarians.
- Fight for fair pay and classification.
- Provide job security and flexible schedules that allow for caregiving.
- Provide professional development funds and paid conference leave.
- Ask staff for and use their comments on potential library changes.
- Invite staff to collaborate on committees and library initiatives.
- Ensure that those who can't afford an MLIS can still advance.
- Provide pleasant, well-lit workplaces and access to campus amenities
- Be a good teammate -- fill your own darn copier tray!

Thank you—and please
contact us with questions!

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Photo credit: [Johema](#)