

## A Seat at the Table Academic Librarian Participation on Canadian University Faculty Association Executive and Collective Bargaining Teams

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### Article abstract

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# A Seat at the Table: Academic Librarian Participation on Canadian University Faculty Association Executive and Collective Bargaining Teams

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reports on research into librarian participation on faculty association executive and collective bargaining teams at 46 Canadian universities at which librarians are in the same bargaining unit as professors. The goal of this study is to determine the extent of such participation on these key committees, whether such participation is mandated by governing documents or a matter of custom (or neither), and what barriers librarians face to such participation. The authors analyzed these associations' constitutions and bylaws and then conducted interviews with faculty association leaders and librarian activists. Findings indicate that nearly half of the surveyed associations either have a mandated seat for librarians or make every effort to include librarians on their executive committees, and more than a third do the same for their collective bargaining teams. Many associations have had a librarian as faculty association president and a handful have had a librarian as chief negotiator. The most-cited barriers to taking on these leadership roles in the association are workload and the lack of or unsuitability of course release for librarians. The level of librarian participation in faculty associations across Canada is very encouraging, but many issues need to be addressed if librarians are to have a full seat at the table.*

**Keywords:** *academic librarians · Canada · collective bargaining · faculty associations · higher education*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Ce document fait état de recherches sur la participation des bibliothécaires aux équipes de direction et de négociation collective des associations de personnel universitaire de 46 universités canadiennes dans lesquelles les bibliothécaires font partie de la même unité de négociation que*

*les professeur.e.s. L'objectif de cette étude est de déterminer l'étendue d'une telle participation à ces comités clés, si une telle participation est mandatée par les documents constitutifs ou une question de coutume (ou ni l'un ni l'autre), et quels obstacles confrontent les bibliothécaires à une telle participation. Les auteur.e.s ont analysé les constitutions et les règlements administratifs de ces associations, puis ont mené des entretiens avec des dirigeant.e.s d'associations de personnel universitaire et des bibliothécaires activistes. Les résultats indiquent que près de la moitié des associations interrogées soit ont un siège obligatoire pour les bibliothécaires dans leurs équipes de direction ou font le maximum d'efforts pour y intégrer les bibliothécaires, et plus du tiers font pareil pour leurs équipes de négociation collective. De nombreuses associations ont eu un.e bibliothécaire comme président.e d'association de personnel universitaire et une poignée ont eu un.e bibliothécaire comme négociatrice.teur en chef.fe. Les obstacles les plus cités à l'exercice de ces rôles de leadership au sein de l'association sont la charge de travail et le manque ou l'inadéquation de la libération des cours pour les bibliothécaires. Le niveau de participation des bibliothécaires dans les associations de personnel universitaire à travers le Canada est très encourageant, mais de nombreuses questions doivent être abordées si les bibliothécaires veulent avoir une pleine place à la table.*

**Mots-clés :** associations de personnel universitaire · bibliothécaires universitaires · Canada · enseignement supérieur · négociation collective

**A**CADEMIC librarians at Acadia University have been heavily involved in the faculty association since the early 1990s; for at least the last 20 years, there has always been a librarian on the association's executive and on the collective bargaining team. Librarians have held the highest-level positions in the association—president, chief negotiator, senior grievance officer—on numerous occasions. We have long suspected that the deep integration of librarians into the faculty association, notably through the inclusion of librarians on the executive and on the bargaining team, has had a significant beneficial impact on our terms and conditions of employment as defined in the collective agreement and experienced in the workplace. While the situation of librarians at Acadia is almost certainly not unique in Canada, we suspected that it may not be the norm either. We undertook this two-part research project to (a) gather data on librarian<sup>1</sup> participation on key committees at faculty associations across the country and (b) identify any correlation (or lack thereof) between such participation and favourable employment conditions such as, but not limited to, salaries and research leaves that are similar to those of professors. This paper shares the results of the first phase of our research, focusing exclusively on librarians' participation on faculty association executive and bargaining teams.

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1. For the sake of brevity, and with no disrespect intended to archivists, by "librarian" we also mean archivists who are in the same bargaining unit.

## Literature Review

Although the focus of our inquiry is on Canadian universities, we broadened our literature review to include research conducted across North America due to the scarcity of research in this area. This review reveals that most research on academic librarians and faculty associations focuses on the history of unionization for librarians (Dekker 2014; Jacobs 2013; Hovekamp 2005), the extent of academic librarians' inclusion in faculty associations and bargaining units (Carmack and Olsgaard 1982; Riley and Moist 2018), the benefits of unionization (Applegate 2009; Carmack and Olsgaard 1982; Garcha and Phillips 2001; Hovekamp 1995, 2005; Kandiuk 2014; Lee, Rogers and Grimes 2006; Mills and McCullough 2018; Spang and Kane 1997), librarian issues in collective agreements (Aby 2009; Harrington and Gerolami 2014), and the degree of parity between librarian and professor salaries and working conditions (Harrington and Gerolami 2014; Kandiuk 2014; Kandiuk and Sonne de Torrens 2018).

There has been very little attention paid to librarians' active participation in the functioning of their faculty associations. The only research we can find into the matter (beyond anecdotal accounts of librarian participation at individual institutions) are Garcha and Phillips's survey, conducted in 1999, and Kandiuk's survey, conducted in 2013. Garcha and Phillips's (2001) literature review notes that "little, if anything, has been published about the extent to which librarians are actively involved in their unions" (122), and this remains true some 20 years later. Garcha and Phillips (2001) surveyed librarians who attended the American Association of University Professors Summer Institute at Northern Michigan University in 1999 by distributing paper copies to be completed and returned by fax. They received 108 completed surveys (for a response rate of 54 percent) and found that 32 respondents had served on a local executive board, with 14 serving in the capacity of president, vice-president, secretary, or treasurer; ten had served on a bargaining team. Garcha and Phillips (2001) also asked about participation on various other union committees (e.g., grievance, nominations); the fact that there were 146 responses to this question indicates that some of the 108 respondents served on more than one committee. Curiously, despite the fact that one of the three main stated goals of their survey was to investigate librarians' active participation on union committees,, Garcha and Phillips did not devote any of the discussion section of their 2001 paper to this topic; they merely presented the results of their findings in tabular form. Kandiuk (2014) looked at (among many other things) the percentage of respondents who had been members of faculty association bargaining teams and whether librarian membership on those teams was a matter of custom or a constitutional requirement. This is no insignificant matter; Kandiuk (2014)

rightly observes that an “important step in getting librarian proposals into collective agreements is to ensure that librarians are represented at the bargaining table as full members of the bargaining team” (205). Her results, reported in her 2014 chapter, indicate that of the 140 members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) librarians’ email discussion group who responded to her survey, 26 had served on a bargaining team. Of those 26, six had done it twice and four had done it three or more times. Kandiuk (2014) also asked respondents if a librarian was typically included on bargaining teams. Seventy-two people replied to this question, with 43 percent saying that a librarian is included, 44 percent saying a librarian is sometimes included, ten percent saying a librarian is not included, and three percent saying they didn’t know. She further asked if there was a designated spot for librarians on bargaining teams. Seventy people replied to this question, with 26 percent saying yes, 53 percent saying no, and 21 percent saying they didn’t know. The last question from Kandiuk’s (2014) survey that is of particular relevance to our study is whether including a librarian on the bargaining team is the result of “usual/past practice” or required by the association’s constitution or other governing document. There were only 12 replies to this question so the usefulness of this particular result is quite limited, but seven people indicated that it was past practice and five indicated that it was a stated requirement. Another limitation of Kandiuk’s (2014) study, insofar as informing our research goes, is that the sample is made up of librarians who happen to be members of the CAUT librarians’ email group, so there is no way of knowing whether the results are representative of all, most, or even many CAUT member associations. Theoretically, all 70 people who answered the question about a designated spot for librarians could have come from the University of British Columbia or the University of Toronto. It really captures what the surveyed librarians know about their participation on bargaining teams rather than what that participation rate actually is across the country. However, to our knowledge, Kandiuk’s (2014) work is the only published research to date that investigates the constitutional requirement—or lack thereof—for librarian participation on bargaining teams. Our study aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a detailed analysis of the level of librarian participation in faculty associations across Canada with a particular emphasis on librarians in leadership positions such as president or chief negotiator.

## Methods

To make the purposive sample as consistent as possible, only unionized faculty associations that represent librarians in the same bargaining unit as professors *and* are members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), and whose home institutions are members of Universities Canada, were included. Within this

defined sample, faculty associations of small affiliated institutions were excluded; for example, we included the University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association but not the St. Thomas More College Faculty Union. The final sample consisted of 46 associations.

Our goal was to identify how sampled faculty associations approach librarian representation on certain key committees: do they explicitly require it, do they merely encourage it, or are they silent on the matter? By “certain key committees” we mean the main executive committee (the terminology varies from association to association, but we are referring to the main decision-making body whether it is known as the executive, the board, or the steering committee) and the main bargaining team that is responsible for actually bargaining at the table with the employer (not pre-bargaining committees, side tables, or bargaining support committees such as research or media committees).

To achieve this goal, we first tried to gather copies of all publicly available (online) constitutions, bylaws, and/or terms of reference of faculty associations in our sample. We were able to find current documents for all but two of the associations in our sample. Next, we searched all of the documents for any mention of librarian or librarians and read through all sections where the make-up of the main executive or bargaining committees is defined. Where these documents clearly mandated librarian participation, we took them at their word and assumed that the associations obeyed their governing documents. For example, the Queen’s University Faculty Association (2022) constitution states:

There shall be an Executive Committee of the Association consisting of the Officers of the Association, the Chair of the Council of Representatives, the Chair of the Grievance Committee, the QUFA Co-Chair of the Joint Committee to Administer the Agreement (JCAA), the Chair of the Political Action and Communications Committee (PACC), two Members-at-large, one representative from among Librarians and Archivists, one Continuing Adjunct representative, one Term Adjunct representative, and one Equity representative. The positions of Librarian and Archivist, Continuing Adjunct, Term Adjunct, and Equity representative should be filled regardless of whether other members of these constituencies hold positions on the Executive Committee. (8)

We only found two associations where librarians were clearly mandated on both the executive committee and the bargaining team. For all other associations, where such documents either mandated a librarian on one of these committees, merely encouraged librarian representation, or were silent about it, we contacted faculty association leaders and known librarian activists at these institutions and conducted open-ended interviews to determine the extent of librarian inclusion. We were able to arrange interviews with representatives from 36 associations, including the two associations for which we were unable to attain documents. Thirty-four of these



representatives were librarians and two were association presidents. Whenever possible, we spoke with the representatives through an online meeting or over the phone. Most interviews lasted around 30 minutes. Five of the respondents answered our questions over email when we were not able to arrange a time for an interview. Extensive notes were taken for each interview but the interviews were not recorded. We asked each of the respondents the following questions:

- Is there a guaranteed seat for librarians on the executive or bargaining team, either formally or informally?
- What is the extent of librarian participation in your association, particularly in committee work and leadership positions?
- Are there any barriers to librarian participation in the faculty association, particularly in taking on leadership roles?

## Results

From the original sample of 46 institutions, we were able to draw data from 44 constitutions or bylaws, 36 personal interviews, and our combined knowledge of our own faculty association. Our review of the publicly available documents found only two associations where a librarian position was mandated on both the executive and the bargaining team. Through interviews with 36 representatives of the remaining associations, we were able to identify two more associations that also have this mandate.

The documents, interviews, and our own knowledge of our home association revealed a total of ten associations with a clear mandate for a librarian to sit on the executive: the primary decision-making body within the faculty association. A further eight associations have mandates for a librarian to sit on other governing bodies. Only four associations have a formal mandate for a librarian on the bargaining team.

From the interviews we learned that at least 12 associations have an informal understanding that every attempt should be made to have a librarian on the executive. In our own association, this involves the nominating committee for the executive reaching out to librarians (through the librarian on the nominating committee) to see if there is anyone willing to serve. If there is, then their name is put forward by the nominating committee. At least 18 associations leave it up to the personal interest of the librarians and the will of the membership. In most cases this means that all members have equal opportunity to put their name forward for positions within the association but there are no places reserved specifically for librarians and no particular effort is made to encourage librarians to volunteer. Additionally, at least 13 institutions have an informal understanding that every effort

should be made to have a librarian on the bargaining team. At Acadia, it is understood that the team should have representation from all of the various member groups, including librarians. Ultimately, the bargaining team is populated by the chief negotiator in consultation with the executive and voted on by the membership, but there has been a librarian on the team for at least the last 20 years.

	# of associations	% of associations surveyed (n=46)
Librarian clearly mandated on <b>both</b> executive committee and bargaining team	4	8.7%
Librarian clearly mandated on executive committee	10	21.7%
Librarian clearly mandated on bargaining team	4	8.7%
Librarian encouraged on executive committee	12	26%
Librarian encouraged on bargaining team	13	28.3%

**TABLE I** Summary of librarian participation on faculty association executive and collective bargaining teams.

Through the interviews we were able to learn much about the extent of librarian participation in their faculty associations, librarians' experiences with taking on leadership positions, and the barriers that keep librarians from getting more involved. We include our own answers about the situation at Acadia in the following results. Twelve of the interviewees said that there has been a long history of librarian involvement in their associations. Nineteen of the representatives we spoke with said that currently, librarians are actively involved in their associations. Seven said that librarians often take on leadership positions, while 16 said that at least one librarian had been president of their association at some point in their association's past and five said that at least one librarian had been chief negotiator. Seven stated that they believed librarians were respected by other faculty in their associations and were treated very much as equals.

There were some issues highlighted as well. Eleven interviewees indicated that although many librarians may be active in their associations, it tends to be only a small number of the total librarians who sit on committees or take on leadership positions. Six interviewees felt that new members were not getting involved in their associations and they needed to do a better job introducing new members to the work of the association.

Through the interviews, several barriers were identified that might make it more difficult for librarians to participate or take on leadership roles in their faculty



associations. The biggest barrier, identified by seventeen respondents, was librarian workload. Fourteen raised the issue of course release for taking on leadership roles and noted that course release does not work as well for librarians as it does for professors. Other barriers identified were a lack of awareness of association issues on the part of librarians, feelings of inadequacy or imposter syndrome, internal politics, a lack of respect from other faculty, the differences between librarians and other faculty, insecurity of non-tenured librarians, and a fear of stigma for being involved in the union.

## Discussion

At least 22 of the 46 associations we examined in this study have either a formal mandated position for a librarian on the association's executive or informally make every effort to ensure that there is always a librarian on the association's executive. Seventeen associations do the same for the collective bargaining team. Four associations have a clear mandate to include a librarian on *both* their executive and bargaining team. These are much higher numbers than we were expecting. Of course, we would like to see these numbers even higher, but overall it appears that librarians are in a good position to make sure librarian issues will be well understood and represented in collective bargaining and in faculty associations more broadly. It is also very encouraging that at many institutions, librarians have taken on the highest leadership positions in their faculty association (e.g., president, chief negotiator, senior grievance officer) and feel respected as equal partners with other faculty.

Nearly half of the people we interviewed remarked that the bulk of librarians' association service work is taken on by a small subset of the total librarian complement. Even at some institutions where the majority of librarians or even all librarians participate at least somewhat in the association by attending meetings and/or taking on light committee work, there is sometimes still a small group of "regulars" who are frequently heavily involved and take on leadership roles. The expertise and credibility that comes from this kind of experience is undoubtedly valuable but having that expertise and credibility—and the influence that results—concentrated in the hands of a few is rarely a good thing in the long run. There is a real danger of burnout and a considerable strain put on other areas of librarian duties and obligations for these few librarians who are heavily involved. Having some seasoned activists among the librarians who can be counted on to step up when necessary is wonderful, but also worrying if no new librarians are coming along to take their place. If there is no succession planning happening, librarians are likely to be left underrepresented in the association, which could have significant consequences for years to come. Several of the representatives we interviewed expressed their concern

that new librarians are not getting involved in the faculty association. Many cited a lack of awareness among new librarian hires about the role and importance of the association and the need for associations to reach out to new librarian members to ensure that they are informed and empowered. Out of all the people we interviewed, only one had positive comments on this subject, indicating that “many” newer librarians were getting involved in the association. Clearly, librarians and their associations need to pay more attention to succession planning to ensure that librarians’ status, salaries, and working conditions are not eroded in the future.

But succession planning for the future is difficult, especially so when there are already so many barriers to librarian participation in the present. Nearly a third of those we interviewed initially said that there were either no barriers or no “real,” “specific,” “direct,” or “formal” barriers to participation. When pressed, however, most went on to list numerous barriers. The barrier most frequently cited—by half of those interviewed—was librarian workload, with lack of course release a close second. Workload-related barriers are a complex tangle of librarian complement, retirements, leaves, replacements or lack thereof, year-round responsibilities, and personal characteristics that are far beyond the scope of this study. Course release, on the other hand, seems like something that should be relatively straightforward to sort out, but this is not the case. Course release is the reduction of teaching duties for professors in particular circumstances so that they can devote some of what would normally be teaching time to other activities such as supervisions, major research projects, administrative duties, or particularly demanding service activities such as serving as president or chief negotiator for the faculty association. For the majority of librarians, who do not teach credit courses as part of their regular responsibilities, the equivalent of course release is release time; but the operationalization of the concept of release time for librarians is maddeningly problematic. There is usually no obvious equivalent for librarians to the discrete unit of the course, which is easily removed from a professor’s workload, and which instantly and reliably frees up a significant amount of time. Much of our work is interconnected and not easily divided into units that can simply be dropped or re-assigned. Furthermore, much of our work is not on a regular schedule: dropping a certain responsibility might free up time over a short period, but not consistently over a longer period. Finally, passing on work to a replacement (if there is one) often entails work in itself: preparing the work for another person, training and/or supervising the replacement, and eventually getting back up to speed on the work the replacement has done during the release period. At Acadia, we were able to work out a solution where the librarian in the role of association president was able to get a half-time release from librarian duties for eight months with a half-time replacement for that period. This kind of solution is extremely rare. The most often-cited solution is to offer the librarian a stipend in

lieu of a course release. While the stipend is very welcome, it does not do anything to relieve the workload issues. With no release time, the workload problem for a librarian taking a leadership role in the association will be exacerbated; and if there is release time but no replacement, the knowledge that *other* librarians' workloads may be increased is a real deterrent.

## Conclusion

In this first part of our research project, we have attempted to gather data on librarian participation on key committees at faculty associations across the country. Through a thorough examination of publicly available documents and interviews with association representatives, we have gathered information from most of the 46 associations in our research sample. Nearly half of these associations have either mandated spots on their association's executive committees for a librarian or make every effort to ensure there is a librarian on the committee. More than a third do the same for the bargaining team. Overall, librarians appear to be quite active in their faculty associations, but interviews identified that there are some issues with getting newer librarians involved and a number of barriers to active participation. The biggest barriers are workload and the lack of an appropriate equivalent for course release for librarians. There is a lot to celebrate in our findings, but still many issues that need to be addressed if librarians are to have a full seat at the table. As Kandiuk (2014) notes:

For those who have bargained, one of the most fundamental lessons learned is that it is virtually impossible to achieve improvements for a minority group in bargaining unless there is a member of that group at that table. It is also the physical presence of that individual that prevents proposals from being abandoned or traded off in the final hours of bargaining. Securing a designated spot for librarians on the bargaining team is extremely important and may require proactive efforts on the part of librarians to modify existing union structures and governing documents. (206)

It should be noted that this first part of our study does have some limitations. We were not able to find the constitution or bylaws for two associations, and we did not hold interviews with ten of the 46 associations. The interview questions were simple and broad and very much relied on the knowledge of the individual participants. Many very interesting issues were revealed spontaneously through the interviews, but it might be beneficial to follow up on these issues with a more detailed survey informed by the interview conversations.

This study lays the groundwork for a subsequent study that aims to determine whether there is a correlation between librarians' participation on association executive and bargaining teams and favourable employment conditions such

as, but not limited to, salaries and research leaves that are similar to those of professors. Another potential research question arising from this study is the relationship between librarians' active involvement in their faculty associations and librarians' perception of themselves in relation to other faculty, and acceptance and understanding of librarians and librarian issues by professors.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anthony Pash is an academic librarian at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. His research interests include radical children's literature, graphic novels in academia, critical information literacy, and labour issues in higher education. Anthony has been an active member of the Acadia University Faculty Association since 2005, serving in numerous roles including president and chief negotiator.

Erin Patterson is an academic librarian at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Her research interests include Canadian copyright law, censorship, intellectual freedom, and labour issues in higher education. Erin has been an active member of the Acadia University Faculty Association since 2001, serving in numerous roles including president and chief negotiator.

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