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Teaching and its discontents: How academic librarians are negotiating a complicated role

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Abstract

Teaching is a core role for librarians in academic contexts, although most librarians are not formally prepared to teach and encounter significant challenges in the role, including complex relationships with campus colleagues. The purpose of this research was to explore how community college librarians, an understudied population, understand their teaching role. Online interviews lasting fifteen to seventy-four minutes were conducted with thirty community college librarians who provide information literacy (IL) instruction. Participants were recruited by direct email invitation and were asked questions relating to their instructional practices. Interview transcripts were analysed qualitatively, with a specific focus on participants' experiences of the teaching role. Participants reported positive relationships with students, and significant challenges in their relationships with disciplinary faculty and administrators. Their lack of formal preparation for the teaching role led to infrequent and informal assessment and evaluation practices. Pre-service education for the teaching role could be strengthened to provide librarians with the skill set and confidence to provide more effective instruction. Instructional quality is critical as the importance of IL is increasingly recognized as key to academic, workplace, and personal success.

Keywords

community colleges; information literacy; librarians; teaching methods; US

1. Introduction

Teaching is a core aspect of librarianship in academic libraries, both in universities and in community colleges. In 1999, Newton and Dixon argued that teaching was a core professional competency for librarians, a reality that has not changed. Sproles and Detmering (2015) found that from 1973 to 2013 there was a nearly fifteen-fold increase in the number of job advertisements that included a teaching component. However, even by 2013, the job advertisements actually requiring instructional education amounted to only a third of the pool, whereas teaching experience was required in nearly 90% of job ads. More recently, Valenti and Lund (2021) analysed course titles and descriptions for instruction-related courses at North American master's level programmes that prepare librarians and found that:

Only 3 of 98 courses (at 3 of 58 institutions) reviewed are required; the remaining 95 are optional. Instruction is likely not yet seen as a required educational competency for

future librarians within most LIS schools, which may be a reflection of the absence of this competency as a requirement for accreditation of MLS programmes by the American Library Association (p. 539).

Despite this apparent gap between professional realities and professional education, Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2015) conducted a systematic review of literature on librarians' roles and identified key factors affecting librarians' instructional effectiveness: challenges in faculty/librarian relationships, limited time for preparation, and librarians' limited pedagogical understanding. These issues have repeatedly been raised in studies surveying or interviewing practicing librarians.

Teaching in librarianship, as defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2017), includes seven key roles: advocate, coordinator, instructional designer, lifelong learner, leader, teacher, and teaching partner. These roles are varied and are demanding; not surprisingly, burnout among librarians is exacerbated by role stress, including role ambiguity, overload, and conflict (Shupe & Pung, 2011). Ennis (2005) argues that public-facing librarians, such as those who provide IL instruction, are susceptible to burnout. The toll of emotional labour in librarians' teaching roles was further discussed by Julien and Genuis (2009), and the influence of campus structures and power relations on instructional librarians' experiences of the teaching role have been documented (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009). Lundstrom et al. (2021) report that most librarians who responded to a survey about anxiety in the teaching role indicated that they experience both physical and psychological symptoms of anxiety. This anxiety was not significantly alleviated by teaching experience but was ameliorated by preparation for the teaching role. Respondents in that study dealt with their teaching anxiety by preparing thoroughly for their teaching, and by discussing their concerns with colleagues and friends, among other tactics. Respondents offered several options for addressing their teaching anxiety, including training on teaching anxiety, peer observations, feedback on their teaching, and structured discussion groups with peers. Baer (2021a) reports that librarians often experience 'a growing sense of confidence and agency over time, and increased comfort with and interest in approaching teaching and learning as a collaborative effort of librarians, students, and other educators' (p. 50).

Lewitzky (2020) notes the largely informal ways in which librarians are prepared for the teaching role, a finding echoed throughout the literature for decades, and summarized by Lund et al. (2021). Lewitzky contends that one approach to developing early-career librarians' skill sets would be to establish mentorship programmes. Wang et al. (2021) interviewed instructional librarians, library administrators, and library school faculty in the United States and Canada to examine longitudinal changes in the instructional context. They found that new instructional librarians have less previous teaching experience than was once the case, but that library schools prepare librarians for instructional work more thoroughly than was the case in the past. Respondents noted, however, that master's programmes in the field could enhance the curriculum in this respect. The limitations of existing courses in programmes preparing librarians for teaching were also identified by Julien (2005). Bryan (2016) and Wang et al. (2021) found that the primary method of skills development was on-the-job experience and training.

It is clear, then, that although teaching is a core professional responsibility, particularly in academic libraries, preparation for that role is inadequate and the role brings significant stress to many librarians tasked with IL instruction. Issues arising from these circumstances became apparent in a recent interview study with instructional librarians, conducted to explore instructional practices and experiences with the Association of Research and College Libraries (ACRL) Framework for information literacy for higher education (2015).

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is informed by sociological role theory, which has been used in previous discussions of librarians' teaching roles (Zai III, 2015). Biddle (1986) posits that people are socialised into roles in order to create and maintain social order. Roles may be created by patterned behaviours related to a particular context, and they are associated with particular social positions and identities, such as librarian. People expect specific behaviours from others who are positioned as playing a role. Roles are somewhat stable as they are rooted in social systems, and there is debate about the part played by personal motivation in role theory. Significantly for the librarian teacher role, role conflict can arise externally between people in different roles, making the interactions between people of interest, or internally, when one individual filling different roles finds that these roles conflict (Miles, 2012). Biddle (1986) outlines a range of approaches for considering role theory. He argues that role expectations can be considered as norms (therefore prescriptive), as beliefs, or as preferences. Key concepts of role theory include consensus (about expectations for a role), conformity (the degree to which people adhere to role expectations), role conflict (when expectations are not agreed upon), and role taking (how people learn new roles). Librarians who teach encounter all the 'themes of role theory (e.g., consensus or conformity, role conflict, role taking, role strain, and role overload)' (Zai III, 2015, p. 13). Examining the data presented in this paper made evident that role theory was a fruitful theoretical lens for understanding the complexities of community college librarians' experiences of the teaching role.

3. Methods

The data presented here come from a three-phase study that first surveyed community college librarians with instructional responsibilities in two large and diverse U.S. states with state-wide community college systems, New York and Florida (Julien et al., 2020), then interviewed students in community colleges in these same states (Latham et al., 2022), and finally interviewed thirty instructional librarians in community colleges in these states (Gross et al., 2022). The study received ethics approval from Florida State University. Community colleges in the United States prepare students for a very diverse range of career options, typically those that do not require a university degree, as well as preparing transfer students who wish to earn a university degree. We focused on community college libraries because they are understudied. relative to university libraries, and because they differ from universities in several respects. The missions of community colleges in the United States tend to be focused on social justice and student access, and their students are demographically diverse, are often balancing employment and family with their student role, are often in need of remedial education, and are frequently economically challenged (Dougherty et al., 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2016). In addition, the faculty complement is largely part-time. As is the case for university students, however, IL is also important to the success of community college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017).

This paper focuses on the third study phase, librarian interviews. Thirty online semi-structured interviews lasting fifteen to seventy-four minutes with instructional librarians were conducted by two of the authors. Interview participants had between three and forty years of experience as a librarian and were recruited via direct email to all librarians with instructional responsibilities in both states. The first thirty respondents to these emails who could be scheduled were interviewed; this sample included a gender balance that reflects the profession, and balanced representation from each state. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, which included examination of a priori variables of interest (e.g., instructional practices and responses to the ACRL Framework (2015)) and unanticipated themes evident in the participants' discourse. Inductive qualitative thematic coding of transcripts was conducted by two of the authors using NVivo software. As interview participants were discussing their IL instruction

practices, their comments touched upon their experience of the teaching role. Participants' responses revealed insights into their preparation for teaching and their relationships with students, faculty and library administrators, in their role as teachers. Because of a longstanding interest in these topics, as evidenced by the literature reviewed above, these perspectives are valuable to share, particularly as they so closely reflect earlier research, most of which has been conducted in the university context. Therefore, the analyses presented here were guided by the research question: how do community college librarians experience the teaching role? All participants were given pseudonyms.

This study is limited geographically, as the interview participants all work in two U.S. states. It is also limited as participants all work in community college libraries. The study is further limited in the same ways as all interview studies, as participants were all willing to be interviewed, leaving open the possibility of bias due to self-selection.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Preparation for the teaching role

Austin and Bhandol (2013) suggest that teaching identity can be embraced with enthusiasm, but also with reluctance and uncertainty. Shifting from an understanding of the professional librarian role to a role that emphasises teaching can be complicated by a lack of preparation. Teaching librarians have historically been mostly informally prepared for teaching-related responsibilities. Unlike preparation for other typical librarianship roles, such as cataloguer or reference service librarian (tasks for which library staff are expected to have some level of training), students in pre-service programmes are unlikely to take a specific course, whether required or elective, in the basic skillset required for successful teaching (e.g., instructional design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment, among other skills). It is not uncommon for librarian instructors to be given those responsibilities without any training or formal preparation. As a result, most librarians who take on teaching roles rely on informal training, such as peer observation or short workshops. This was certainly the case for this set of community college librarians. Stella noted:

In library school, you don't learn how to take something like this and develop it into curriculum and then ... use it in the classroom. The Framework is not designed to be a teaching tool, but if you're a librarian who has never taught, you don't know the next step, you don't know where else to go. So I think that's just a ... shortcoming of a lot of master's programs.

Lily told us:

I have colleagues who... do not have a lot of confidence in themselves as teachers...and therefore don't feel comfortable doing new things. And I have colleagues who find ... the Framework ... difficult to comprehend because it's a little bit abstract.

Peter said, "most of us we teach ... how we were taught. ... Thinking about things differently is a real challenge".

A few of our participants had significant educational preparation for teaching. Chuck noted,

I use as many things as I possibly can. And I think that comes from my background in special education, understanding that students learn differently and I want to be able to reach all of those students. And if it means differentiating my instruction... I will do that.

One result of informal preparation is that assessment of learning outcomes and evaluation of instruction is not typically incorporated in effective ways. This can be a result of informal preparation for the teaching role, as well as lack of time, the nature of one-shot instructional

approaches, and the fact that most students typically do not earn credit for IL instruction. When asked about assessment, most of our interview participants demurred, offering vague suggestions that they 'should' be engaging in assessment. As Audrey said, "we don't do such a great job at assessment". Chuck stated, "It's so informal...one of the things that I look for, and I know this is really informal, but how sophisticated the [students'] questions are". Inez notes:

I feel like my huge weakness is assessment and that's what a lot of people are basing their decisions on - budget, on opening positions on... showcasing ... the value of libraries - are just based on a lot of the time ... on statistics, right? How many people are coming in, how many people are asking for help, ... do you test them, do they test well?

Matthew shared that in his library:

We used to have... a little quiz that they would do, and we wouldn't really grade it. ... now we get ... an email feedback. So we have ... three questions basically. ... What did you learn today? What did you enjoy about today? ...What are questions that you still have after this presentation? ... We have about a semester and a half worth of... those emails. So those have been very helpful to go back through and really... figure out what we're doing well and what we're not doing [well].

Penny said:

It's informal, but I do a Kahoot quiz that covers what was just presented. And we have used those statistics as part of our ... ongoing assessment of the general learning outcomes ... but it is informal. ... We've talked about having a short pre-test and then having ... [a] post-test but there's just not enough time. And ... it just was not practical to do it. I think in one class I passed out slips for them to answer a couple of quick questions and it was not a ... useful exercise.

This lack of systematic attention to assessment is a significant gap in pedagogy and limits the opportunity to advocate for the value of instruction since there is little direct evidence for its impact. In an exception to this general finding, Carol reports significant investment in assessment, both formative and summative, at her library:

We're looking for data that supports our instruction growth as well as ... gathering data for our administration to use. And what the administration is looking for is very different from what we're looking for. We want stuff that informs our instruction to help us better improve, to better shape our instruction. Whereas the administration, you know, they need to tie it to success. They need to tie it to retention.

It is widely accepted that assessment is fundamental to teaching. However, informal approaches to preparation for the teaching role can lead to skill gaps. The literature shows some exceptions to the findings from our interviews. For example, Bewick and Corrall (2010), found that many UK librarians felt confident and knowledgeable about teaching, even though their preparation had been largely informal. However, those respondents expressed strong agreement that preparation for the instructional role should occur in pre-service educational programmes. Inskip (2015) found that students at one UK programme would prefer that preservice education include a stand-alone course focused on instruction, rather than instruction being spread unevenly throughout the curriculum. Interestingly, fewer than a third of their respondents conducted assessment of their instruction, mirroring this finding in our interviews. Ducas et al. (2020), in a Canadian survey, also found that instructional librarians generally felt confident, but had prepared for the teaching role informally.

4.2 Relationships and the teaching role

The librarians we interviewed spoke specifically about their professional relationships with three groups of people: students, disciplinary faculty (academic teaching staff), and library administrators. The community college campus environment creates relationships between these three roles, which are constructed by expectations for role-specific behaviours in that context, including relative social position and professional identity. Thus, students, disciplinary faculty, and library administrators have particular expectations for librarians, who are positioned in their expected roles. These expectations can lead to role strain and stress.

The participants in this study were reportedly very student-focused, in the sense that they expressed sincere empathy for students (particularly during the pandemic) and tried to focus their instruction on the learning outcomes that they perceive as most important for students. Several participants commented that relationships with students had become more personal during the pandemic, when only online interactions were possible. As Amy stated, "I'm not a cold, distant academic". Most of our participants had very clear but wide-ranging ideas about their role in the community college context. Amy said, "we're lifting students up, hopefully ... we're really giving them skills to be successful". Other participants had different goals. Allan stated, "I want students to identify the difference between what is ... real news, fake news and satire". He also said, "We want to make them good learners ... It's always with the objective that our students end up being better thinkers and more capable [so] that when they learn something, they learn it well". On the other hand, Barbara admitted that "I don't think that we have a really solid structure in terms of teaching this stuff. And I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done". Chuck told us:

We really need to ... look at ways to improve library instruction, library pedagogy, to ensure student success, to ensure academic success. We want to help improve graduation rates, passing rates. We want to prepare them for the world of work or continued education. And the library ... has a seat at the table when it comes to that.

He also noted that "I try in all my power to try to get them to fall in love with reading again, to understand ... that reading is a critical thinking process and that writing what you've written or what you've read ... is a critical thinking process."

As has been reported elsewhere, librarian relationships with disciplinary faculty are often challenging, with unfortunate consequences for students. Eleanor told us about faculty members refusing to collaborate on assignment construction. She noted:

It's almost like they're setting their students up for failure because they're trying to do it in a silo. And if they had done it as a partnership with the librarians, we could have worked out some language and talked about some strategies that would have made the assignment more successful. So then their students get frustrated and ... often end up scrapping the assignment.

Eleanor did, however, report on a college-wide quality framework that held promise for improved relationships with disciplinary faculty:

Getting the librarians more involved directly in the classroom and, and with ... curriculum development and things like that. So I'm really excited to see where that QEP is going to take us as a library ... I think it's going to be a great opportunity for us to be able to demonstrate some of our other value besides just showing ... "this is how you filter a search in this database" and things like that, that the faculty normally think of us as being helpful for ... but the value that we can really add in curriculum development, I'm really excited about that.

Alfred revealed that "some [disciplinary faculty] can be a little territorial ... the kind of vibe that I get is kind of like, it's almost stepping on their toes somewhat ... they don't like their class time being taken". Chuck expressed his frustration:

I see multiple ... assignments and syllab[i]. There's a strong research component and there's no mention of the library within the syllabus, but you're asking them to write research papers. I just don't understand that they're still, they're creating their syllabus without even thinking of the library ... so I'm on a mission to change that.

Inez told us, "Information literacy... is one of the college learning outcomes, which is super important, but [faculty] don't really see us all the time as the partner to bring in to, to help with that". Jane notes that relationships with faculty vary:

One of the reasons we have such a good relationship with the English professors is that they... like to be able to hand off the research to us and they ... recognize a curriculum. They recognize the [ACRL] Framework as similar to their ... teaching curriculums. So, I think they feel ... comforted that we have ... a guide, that we're not just kind of ... helping the students click around the website ... I think some of the other professors that we've worked with less ... there's ... a gap in what they think we should be doing and what we are doing. And ... what they ... think the responsibility of a librarian is and what ... our responsibility is.

Jade said:

We meet ... once a week ... to talk about our experiences teaching and ... sharing ideas about ... how can we improve our outreach? How can we get professors on board? ... Because it's a touchy subject, you don't want the professor to feel patronized ... and so we have to be careful when we approach them how to talk to them ... about ... "this might be a better way of doing this assignment, and we're not superseding your authority. We're just suggesting this because so many of our students are coming to the reference desk complaining they can't do it".

Rhiannon makes her relationship with faculty very clear by stating:

I very much defer to what the instructor wants when it comes to [IL] ... we're still very much reliant on the instructors to allow the librarians into their course. And they don't always want to, some ... English instructors have said, "I know how to use the library".

Sara puts it bluntly, "We cannot invite ourselves into classes". This deference echoes previous work that described the unequal power structures on campus that affect librarians' relationships with disciplinary faculty (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009). Jasmine talked about trying to encourage faculty to incorporate the *Framework* (2005) into assignments, but:

They may say, "no … I don't need these goals for my students. I just want them to answer. I just want you to just help me find that information online and that's it", you know? … I've had professors who were really not very good teachers to be quite honest … and it was a challenge trying to get them to … challenge the students more using the Framework … the professors were resistant to it. They were saying … "that's not part of the syllabus and we don't have time for that".

Naomi also expressed her frustration:

I've had faculty tell me that ... it's okay for the students ... to use the New York Times [for] their paper as long as it comes from the database. But if it comes from the website

from the New York Times, it's different. And then after I've banged my head against the wall a few times ... I'm like, okay, well, we'll go with it. You know? Cause it's, it's really hard if you alienate them, they're never going to come to you. Right. So, you know, so we just agree to disagree, you know?

Lily, on the other hand, spoke about a positive experience when working with faculty on the ACRL *Framework* (2015):

When we sent those infographics out, we got a lot of enthusiastic response from certain corners of the college faculty and that was particularly... encouraging. ... I think that we have discovered ... through that outreach, that there is more interest maybe than we assumed there would be. So ... that is very encouraging. I would say that that outreach was definitely a success.

This small victory reflects advice in the literature. For example, Given and Julien (2005) and Zanin-Yost (2018) argue that librarians should take a proactive approach to initiating collaborations with disciplinary faculty.

Carol is another exception to the general theme reflected by our participants; she states:

I know I collaborate with faculty. I've done research studies with faculty... and those professors 100% know what we do, but they also learn more. "Oh, I didn't realize, wow. You know ... you do this. Okay, great." And, but there's still a lot of professors and faculty that need our ...expertise and ... still see us as different.

Further, she notes:

We still run across a handful that aren't as aware of us, we're still on the periphery. You know, they welcome us ... they consider us ... experts in our field. They don't deny that in any way, but ... they're not necessarily inviting us into ... their classroom.

Cathy spoke about how working with the ACRL *Framework* (2015) is shifting relationships with disciplinary faculty. She says:

The robustness of just the frames as a concept... gives us as librarians room to breathe and grow in our profession and ... to kind of look at colleagues who are not librarians and say, we're valid academics. We do all this work. We're thinkers, we're educators beyond even what you know.

Collaboration between librarians and disciplinary faculty is a challenge world-wide. Øvern et al. (2014), writing from a Norwegian perspective, present a case study of team teaching between disciplinary faculty and librarians and indicate that the experiment led to greater respect on the part of disciplinary faculty for the contributions that librarians can make to student learning. Perez-Stable et al. (2020) report findings of a survey of disciplinary faculty at two US universities on the topic of collaboration with librarians. However, their respondents largely defined collaboration as inviting librarians to provide one-shot instructional opportunities and to create resource lists for students, revealing a relatively limited understanding of collaboration.

Participants' comments about their relationships with disciplinary faculty are consistent with Biddle's (1986) notion that roles can reflect taken-for-granted norms within a particular situation. Many disciplinary faculty assume that since they typically hold doctorates and have primary responsibility for teaching students, their roles differ from librarians'. In Biddle's (1986) words, there is not consensus between these professional groups about the roles that librarians can fulfil with respect to teaching students. Despite the frustrations expressed by our participants,

the norms inherent in the power relationship between librarians and disciplinary faculty are difficult to challenge, even as librarians seek to expand their conventional roles ('role taking'). Role conflict arises when the librarians' expectations do not match those of disciplinary faculty.

In addition to difficult relationships with disciplinary faculty on campus, relationships with library administrators can be equally concerning to these librarians. Audrey told us:

I wish that we got more support from administrators above, above my director Our associate vice president and our provost don't seem to understand what librarians do, but specifically like how ... we can support learning ... so as a result, we don't really have the advocacy that I think is really helpful if you want to build a program.

Chuck noted "we have our allies who understand, but there are many others that need to understand [what we do]". He goes on to say:

There's so many of our non-library colleagues ... [who] still think of the library is just the place to borrow books ... many of them don't even know you need a master's to be a librarian because you have so many people working as librarians [who] aren't librarians. You know, if they can't recruit a librarian with an MLS, they're going to pull someone from the English department or social studies in K-12 ... to run the library, you know? ... The key is getting stakeholders on board. We need the provost, we need the curriculum committee. We need the important people who are able to make decisions, important decisions on campus to be on board with the library and understand what it is that we do.

These quotes echo concerns raised by participants in an earlier interview study (Walter, 2008), who note that administrative support is key to instructional success. Administrator support has also been cited by survey respondents as a key challenge in IL instruction (Julien et al., 2018; Polkinghorne and Julien, 2019). Baer (2021b) shares this insight:

As librarians recognize, their teaching is influenced not only by individual experiences and perspectives, but also by professional and institutional structures and cultures and by interpersonal relationships and partnerships. These structures, cultures, and relational dynamics often become so embedded in everyday experiences that they are rendered invisible. That invisibility tends to reinforce the status quo, in which librarians have often been on the sidelines of long-term curricular planning and instructional initiatives. (p. 65)

In fact, Delaney and Bates (2015) argue for the value of embedding librarians across the academic institution to maintain and expand their relevance. Whether that change would ameliorate the range of factors challenging librarians' place in the community college context would require further study.

5. Conclusion

The participants in this study revealed much about their understandings of the teaching role. As Biddle (1986) suggests, there is typically consensus about expectations for a role. That consensus is obviously challenged for many of our participants. They do not necessarily agree about the parameters of the teaching role, and other campus actors do not necessarily agree with librarians' expectations for that role. Role conflict was experienced by our participants, in their challenges working with disciplinary faculty and with administrators who do not recognise the teaching expertise that librarians wish to assert. These data also demonstrated challenges to conformity, or the degree to which people adhere to role expectations. Participants conformed to traditional teaching roles to varying degrees, revealing that, for librarians,

expectations for the teaching role cannot necessarily be considered as norms. Rather, the parameters of the teaching role are still being negotiated within librarianship. The concept of role taking was also apparent in the interviews, as the largely informal ways in which these librarians learned to be teachers led to insufficient preparation. These librarians certainly reflected the contention by Zai III (2015, p. 13), who argued that librarians teaching IL experience all the "themes of role theory (e.g., consensus or conformity, role conflict, role taking, role strain, and role overload)."

The experiences that participants in this interview study shared demonstrate that many of the issues and challenges associated with instructional work, which have been shown in previous research, continue to be experienced. In addition, the conclusions of previous work conducted in university contexts apply equally in community colleges. This is an important finding, since the value of the ACRL Framework (2015) for community colleges has been debated (Julien et al., 2020). Indeed, the challenges of implementing the Framework in the community college context, where librarians face particular challenges working with part-time faculty and underprepared students, suggest that these professionals face additional role stress. Thus, there is ample opportunity to improve preparation for the teaching role in pre-service education, including theoretically informed pedagogical principles and practices, as well as developing an understanding of the challenges that might be expected in these roles. Corrall (2017) argues for the value of reflective practices to improve IL instruction; that advice would apply equally to students of librarianship and to experienced professionals. While pedagogical experience and confidence may grow with time, we argue that appropriate professional preparation for teaching would include learning outcomes such as curriculum and instructional design, pedagogical theory, and the role of assessment in demonstrating instructional outcomes and in advocacy for librarianship. Only when the teaching role is recognized as a central, valuable, and complex role, for which serious preparation is required, can there be any expectation that relationships with disciplinary faculty and administrators will be more mutually respectful, and that positive learning outcomes for students will be assured.

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