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On the Academic Librarian Pay Disparity

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On the Academic Librarian Pay Disparity

Posted on [March 9, 2022](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)

Last month, [I posted to this blog](#) the results of my study comparing the salaries of tenure-track law professors and law librarians who teach required, credit-bearing classes. The reaction was overwhelming; clearly, the proof that law librarians were underpaid – something many librarians had assumed for many years – hit a chord within the profession. Librarians across the country contacted me publicly and privately to express their shock (or lack thereof), their frustration, their personal anecdotes about being underpaid and struggling to make ends meet. Eventually, this culminated in an event hosted by the AALL Research Crits Caucus on Monday, February 28, to discuss the study and the pay disparity facing our profession. The event was held on Zoom and was not recorded. Below is a summary of high points in the discussion along with some of my thoughts in the week since.

Data Discussion

One of the central points of discussion was the data I'd collected, its implications, and suggestions for further research. For example, comparing faculty and librarian salaries isn't necessarily comparing apples to apples because faculty are typically paid for nine months of work whereas librarians are year-round employees. Another point of comparison could be to law school administrators who don't teach, like those in career or student services roles. It is not unlikely that, to some extent, law school faculty and staff salaries are linked to the elements of the U.S. News ranking scheme; those who work in bar prep might see higher salaries because the outcome of their work is tightly connected to the school's bar pass rates, which in turn impact the school's U.S. News rank.

Another suggestion was to consider the cost of living and specifically the average student loan debt of those in the study. Law schools are often in cities with higher costs of living, but law librarian salaries across the country are relatively equal. And academic law librarianship has a high cost of entry: an entire Master's degree. Law librarians thus likely have higher-than-average amounts of student loan debt, making it even more difficult for them to survive on lower salaries and widening the gap between the law faculty and librarian salaries even more. Our profession seems to be in a minor hiring crisis, struggling to find librarians to fill open positions across the country (and struggling still to attract students and practicing attorneys to librarianship in the first place). Raising librarian salaries to at least make the career path comfortable for graduates with high debt burdens might be a worthwhile solution to consider.

There was much discussion around the role of gender in the salary disparities. [Law librarianship is a "pink ghetto,"](#) where mostly (white) female librarians are paid less and have less status than other members of the academy. One cannot help but wonder about the impact of a mostly-female workforce on salary decisions at institutions of higher learning. There is of course a racial factor, likely mirroring the United States workforce as a whole [where women of color earn less than white women and men of all races](#).

Lastly, there was some discussion around the usefulness of the AALL Biennial Salary Survey, which collects and reports salary information for academic, firm, and government law library jobs. Importantly, the Survey is sent to library directors to fill out on behalf of their institution – not individual librarians. In the 2021 Survey, 60.7% of academic law libraries responded to the survey. Some felt that it would be better if the Survey was sent to individual *librarians* to decide whether they would like to reply. There was a suggestion that I create my own survey of individual librarians to collect the data reported through the AALL Survey and the data points discussed above (like student loan debt burden).

Vocational Awe & The Magical Google Fairy

Several attendees asked for advice on advocating for themselves in the face of an administration unwilling to provide a pay raise. This led to a discussion on [vocational awe, the idea that librarianship is a sacred profession, that librarians are “priests and saviors.”](#) In academia, law librarians are often regarded by tenured and tenure-track faculty as helpers. Research assistants. “Magical Google Fairies,” as I sarcastically put it. When faculty and institutions approach librarians with this mindset, they do not see the librarians as equal colleagues worthy of equal pay. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to get a needed pay raise.

Some tips that were offered for those struggling with getting a raise: lean on a deep network of friends and mentors, who can help you practice self-advocating and advocate on your behalf; share your salary with colleagues and peers to increase transparency; and [say “no”](#) to tasks that fall outside of your job duties if you are not paid enough to spend the time or energy on those tasks. (Of course, without job security, saying “no” to a supervisor can be a risk some are understandably unwilling to take. It should go without saying that a job in which someone feels they cannot say *no* is a toxic, coercive environment that we must eradicate).

Solutions

A final thread throughout the discussion was: now that we have identified the problem, what do we do about it? In addition to a desperately needed pay raise, it is clear that librarians are in need of academic freedom. Some spoke about tenure as a solution and others, unions. But not everybody wants tenure, and the job protections that tenure affords take years to kick in. Unionization offers faster job protection but comes with its own problems, including for those who supervise others as supervisors are often ineligible for union membership. One attendee offered up non-tenure academic appointments as a possible solution.

A final, small yet impactful change suggested and echoed by many to increase pay transparency? Require that salary ranges and meaningful descriptions of benefits be included in all job postings on the AALL Career Center. The [Legal Writing Institute](#) requires salary ranges for posting on their website.

This small change will increase pay transparency and perhaps alleviate the hiring issue so many libraries are facing today. In addition, [pay transparency on the job board will help fight gender pay gaps.](#)

Next Steps

Since the discussion, I have thought a lot about my next steps. It seems evident that additional data collection is necessary, but precisely what data I am not yet sure. I hope to publish some study that my colleagues across the country can use as part of their self-advocacy toolkit.

3 Responses to *On the Academic Librarian Pay Disparity*



Ashley Arrington says:

March 10, 2022 at 4:03 pm

Olivia, thank you for your work on this! Reaching appropriate and implementable solutions to effectively advocate for *all* library workers is a complex task indeed, but I hope that our community will continue to contemplate, discuss, share experiences and ideas, test and evaluate potential solutions, etc., as everyone deserves a living wage and secure future; and our profession will not attract talent, advance DEI, or succeed without change. Following suit with LWI / requiring salary ranges and meaningful descriptions of benefits seems like a good place to start, but it is only the first step. Many thanks again for opening the door to an important discussion. I look forward to seeing more and continuing the conversation!

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