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A Tale of Three Layoffs

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I awoke to the unfamiliar sound of honking traffic in my downtown Philadelphia hotel room. Lying in bed, I contemplated the first conference day of ACRL 2011. My colleague and I had submitted a presentation proposal that hadn't been accepted. At the time I had been disappointed, but now I couldn't help but be pleased. No anxiety, just happy anticipation to learn new things and connect with other librarians.

After the keynote address, there was lunch and the inevitable raffle. "I never win anything," I thought to myself, as I walked up to collect an iPod. During my first session of the conference, I happened to be looking at my phone (who doesn't stare at a smart phone at least once during a session?) and saw that my boss back at Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC) had called and left a message. I had an ominous feeling after listening to the serious tone of the message asking me to call back as soon as possible. My colleague Anna, who was also attending the conference, got the same message.

We found a quiet corner in the cavernous convention center and called back. We were informed that all three full-time librarians (the two of us along with our other colleague Julia, who was out of the country at the time) were all being laid off effective June 30, 2011. I was tenured, had worked at MHCC for eleven years at that point, and had faculty status. In fact, all three full-time librarians had tenure and all had faculty status.

Burned in my memory forever is the sad picture of crying in the corner with Anna at a national conference. Needless to say, my conference was over before it really began. Drained of enthusiasm, I spent the rest of my time doing morose things like visiting the Mütter Museum and wandering around seedy parts of downtown Philadelphia, my mind constantly stumbling in disbelief at this turn of events in my life.

Mt. Hood Community College is a medium-sized community college serving the east side of the Portland metropolitan area. Founded in 1966, MHCC never seems to have enough money or adequate community support. It's a scrappy place to work with serious turf wars over a limited and ever-diminishing pot of resources. Until 2006, the school had employed only two full-time librarians, but the library was finally successful in adding a third position.

Librarians at MHCC are members of the Faculty Association union. The Faculty Association is part of the larger Oregon Education Association, which, in turn, is part of the National Education Association. We pay a boatload in union dues but in return have significant union muscle to back us up. At the time of our layoffs, the Faculty Association at MHCC had been engaged in a seriously bitter round of contract negotiations for the past year and a half. The pervasively stressful work environment was like nothing I'd ever experienced. You had to prepare yourself for work each day as if you were going into mental combat.

As members of the union, the three of us filed a grievance that slowly wended its way through the informal and formal processes. Grievances filed against an institution for violations of contract follow a specific timeline outlined in that contract. After a series of truly horrific meetings that will stay with me forever, the college categorically denied that any contract violations had been committed and stated that all three full-time librarians would be gone at the end of the term to be replaced by two new nebulous positions with the title of Learning Commons Specialists. These positions would be staff, not faculty, and the compensation rate was greatly reduced. An MLS was not a requirement for filling the positions. This was the central argument for doing away with us: the library was turning into a Learning Commons and was morphing into a different entity. No librarians needed, thank you very much.



Meanwhile, back at the war table of contract negotiations, the situation had devolved to the point that the Faculty Association was in full swing planning the impending strike. The Oregon Education Association bigwigs were on campus frequently, not only assigning us all tasks, but also teaching us how to talk to the press, walk a picket line, and trying to calm us down as a heightened sense of anxiety spread.

Just like in a predictable movie, the strike was averted at the eleventh hour. I can't overstate the tremendous work and advocacy on the part of the Bargaining Team and Faculty Association leadership that went into avoiding a strike. And though I have learned that union bargaining is an art unto itself, I don't have to like it.

At MHCC, each side knew its own group's pain point, but it took over a year to slowly inch along at immense costs to the institution measured out in negative publicity, loss of tuition dollars as students left, huge rifts between administration and employees, and enormous amounts of stress shared by the college community. The deep wounds at MHCC will take a long time to heal.

June 30th arrived and I left MHCC. The grievance we'd filed reached its endgame, which is filing for arbitration. Arbitration occurs when neither side can come to an agreement over a labor dispute and the matter is taken up by the state's Employee Relations Board for a hearing. A state arbiter listens to both sides and makes a binding decision that both sides must accept, similar to a judge's ruling in a trial. As with all union matters, negotiations commence when choosing an arbiter. Based on past decisions, some arbiters are seen to favor the employee while others favor the employer. It took until August for both sides to settle on an arbiter and schedule our arbitration hearing, which wouldn't be held until the beginning of December, 2011. That meant that we were out of work for the entire fall term, while the library operated with part-time librarians and the new "learning specialists."

Though our grievance was taking the better part of a year to resolve, during this time there was, amazingly, a lot to inspire us. The advocacy of others to our cause carried us through this difficult time. People believed in us as necessary professionals integral to the institution and were vocal about expressing their support.

Ever since I entered the field of librarianship, there has been much discussion in the professional literature and at conferences about the status of the profession, especially in academic libraries. Should we be faculty or support staff? Should we be tenure-track? How do we protect our professional status? ACRL's Joint Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians asserts that librarians in academic institutions should have faculty status, thus ensuring the "same rights and responsibilities as for other members of the faculty" (2007).

For the purposes of this article, I will set aside the tenure issue and focus on the rights afforded to academic librarians who have faculty status. Being faculty allowed the three librarians at MHCC to engage in important committee work that was beneficial to furthering the library's mission and goals within the campus community. The work for the committees that the three of us served on included approving new and revised curricula, developing college strategic-planning initiatives, engaging in educational assessment oversight, and making college budgeting decisions. Perhaps most importantly, we had a seat at the table for the powerhouse weekly Faculty Senate meeting. Senate is where a great deal of decisions are made at MHCC. Everyone knew the three librarians because we took our faculty status very seriously and provided a tremendous amount of service to the college.

All three of us were also very involved in collaborating with instructional faculty on helping to develop curricula across a wide range of subjects. Instructional faculty relied



on us greatly for research and information literacy needs. Because of our good work and our faculty status, we were looked at by a great many of the instructional faculty as trusted peers. We became indispensable to them. This is part of advocacy: when you become a necessary peer to those in your institution who have a voice, you gain their support.

When news spread that the three librarians were to be laid off at the end of the academic year, instructors, both full- and part-time, were very upset, and not just because of the union mentality of protecting each other at all costs. Many of them had come to rely on us so much that they were at a loss as to who would teach the information literacy curriculum in their classes and help with research needs. There were several highly charged board meetings during the spring of 2011 where the librarian layoffs were brought up. Pro-library chants were shouted outside the board room for those who couldn't get in (the room being a limited-occupancy space with the board refusing to move to a bigger venue), students making eloquent speeches arguing against the decision to lay us off, and people holding up signs pleading to save the librarians. I cried a lot during these board meetings.

Also tremendous in their show of support were my library colleagues, both locally and nationally. This is a second aspect of successful advocacy for the profession: be involved. All three of the librarians at MHCC have been involved in organizations locally and regionally. A handful of the offices held by the three of us included treasurer of the Oregon Library Association, vice president of ACRL-OR, and Steering Team member at Orbis Cascade Alliance's Electronic Resources Committee. Because we were active within our professional community, it was that much easier to rally our colleagues to our cause.

The e-mails and phone calls started rolling in to MHCC administrators. The outpouring of support was overwhelming. ACRL-OR leadership wrote a letter to MHCC in support of reinstating us. Local librarian bloggers wrote columns about us. Librarians from Texas, California, and Arizona wrote letters of support. We contacted *Library Journal*, and two articles about us were written for their online publication.

This is a third aspect of successful advocacy: make sure to get the word out. I am a rather private person, and to have something so personally difficult broadcast to so many people was hard on me. Nevertheless, I absolutely wanted the spotlight focused directly on this awful decision. I wanted our story to be all over the internet. I wanted all that outrage leveled at MHCC leadership. The three of us contacted as many colleagues as we could. We also enlisted the help of others to contact people so it wasn't coming just from the three of us.

Ultimately, this story has a bittersweet ending. With the start of the new school year in September, 2011, MHCC underwent, as a result of the tremendous upheaval of the previous year, a substantial change in upper-level management. The incoming leadership inherited a traumatized institution and a mess of unresolved problems including the librarian layoffs. They also inherited all that outrage from internal and external sources over the decision to replace librarians with non-librarians and reclassify them to a support staff position. In late October, 2011, the Faculty Association, representing our interests, worked with the new administrators at MHCC to hammer out a settlement, because neither side wanted to go to arbitration. We signed off on the settlement in November, 2011.

The settlement stated that Julia and I could choose to return to faculty librarian positions within the library starting January, 2012. Should we decide not to return, the college would have to replace us with faculty-status, full-time librarians. We were "made whole," which means we received our back pay for all the time we'd missed and no break in service in terms of retirement benefits. Anna had already jumped (the sinking) ship earlier. She had enough



additional graduate credits to qualify to teach in the Business Technology and Computer Information Systems departments at MHCC, so she took advantage of the reassignment provision in the faculty contract and was working full-time teaching classes. She elected not to return to the library. After much reflection, both Julia and I returned to work, but our time there was short. Our positions had been changed so significantly that this, along with other life circumstances, helped precipitate our early departures. Julia retired, though she continues to work in a limited part-time capacity for MHCC doing collection development. In April, 2012, I sold my house and relocated to southern Arizona with my husband.

This spring, the MHCC Library is finishing up the hiring process to replace Julia and me. The third position was lost to the library when Anna moved to another department, so the library is now back to only two full-time faculty librarians. It's bittersweet because though we "won" our grievance settlement, the library lost over 25 years of collective experience. All the hard work over the years of building relationships and making inroads in spreading information literacy across the curriculum has taken a large step backwards. It will be built again of course, but that will take time.

The advocacy of our library colleagues and our college community was instrumental in turning the tide in our favor and I thank each and every one of you from the bottom of my heart for your support. In order to get this kind of support you must position yourselves to be integral to your institution. Be involved in your library community; getting to know your regional colleagues makes a difference during hard times. Finally, don't be afraid to ask for help and broadcast your plight in as many venues as possible. I have personally experienced the power of successful advocacy and its ability to make positive change a reality. 🌿

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