

Viewpoints

Librarians left in curious limbo

Trust ranks among the most important links between an employee and an employer. Trust is beneficial, perhaps essential, to the successful operation of a business or public institution.

That is one reason why I fret about the almost eight years of bad faith by Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's administration toward a significant part of its educational workforce: namely, its professional librarians.

In short, the Texas A&M University System made all non-faculty employees "at will" and subject to dismissal "with or without cause." Not recognizing its librarians' unique employment status, the A&M-CC administration failed to honor its commitment to those librarians who had earned a vested right to their jobs, and instead made them subject to summary dismissal. Moreover, the administration did not tell them about this policy change for three years and has yet to resolve this nagging predicament. I know this as one of the librarians who had a ringside seat in these shenanigans.

To understand this situation, a brief lesson in university policies is necessary. From 1990 until 2007, the A&M-CC librarians served under a written policy commonly referred to as "academic status." This status closely paralleled faculty tenure. A freshly hired librarian worked on probation for five years. During the fifth year, the librarian underwent an intense review and, if merited, earned a vested right to her/

his job. The librarian, of course, could thereafter be dismissed, but only for "good cause" based on valid reasons ranging from moral turpitude to poor performance.

In 2007, the larger A&M System officially declared non-faculty personnel to be "at will" and placed this revision into system policy for its branch universities. This rule effectively repealed the A&M-CC librarians' policy.

Incredibly, and contrary to standard practice, the A&M-CC administration did not tell its librarians that such a major change had taken place. It required its librarians to adhere to their university policy with its rigorous five year off-probation process. The administration kept this policy in the A&M-CC faculty and staff handbook, thus further leading the librarians to believe, falsely, that it was still in effect.

Not until 2010, did the university administration brusquely inform its librarians that they were "at will" and could be dismissed without cause. When questioned, the A&M-CC administration said that the librarians' former policy was null and void.

There would be no "grandfathering" of those who had earned off-probation stature.

Once officially regarded as "a distinct group of academic employees," the A&M-CC librarians now served on the same basis as lower-level administrative personnel, regardless of the fact that they were required to have graduate degrees.

To add insult to injury, the librarians themselves

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had to discover through their own research that their policy had been abolished three years earlier.

Thus, they had been denied for three years the incentive to seek secure employment and more reliable employers. Their trust in the administration had been misplaced.

Before long, serious turnover of A&M-CC librarians took place.

Six left, most with a bad taste in their mouths about the situation.

Since 2010, the librarians have struggled to formulate a new policy amid confusion, delay and frustration. Their most recent attempt seems to be a form of nontenure faculty status — little more than pap. Though I retired in 2012, several of them remain my friends who deserve better treatment.

Try as I might through the Texas Public Information Act, A&M-CC says it cannot provide documents explaining why it waited until 2010 to tell the librarians of their employment status.

Several lessons are certain.

This episode represents a breach of trust by A&M-CC. It sends a bad message to students as they chart their lives. It cautions other employees at the university, especially faculty, to monitor the reliability of their top leadership.

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