The Influence of Political Capital on Academic Library Leadership

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Given the extremely rapid change occurring in academic libraries due to funding cuts, shifts from physical to digital collections, changes in the use of physical spaces, changing information-seeking patterns, the ability of library directors to advance their vision for the library becomes crucial. During many of these shifts and redesigns, library directors use their positional power to make decisions, influence the direction of programs, and design infrastructure.

Problem Statement

Although the literature of library and information science (LIS) has a large body of research on the development and use of social capital, the same cannot be said for political capital. No other data gathering studies have examined the development or use of political capital by a specific sector of the library community. Political capital, as defined by Flora and Flora (2008) is the ability of an individual or group to influence the distribution of resources. The purpose of this study is to fill the void by studying how academic library directors develop and use political capital for advancing agendas, allocating resources, and gaining institutional support.

This study provides additional strategies for library directors when they perceive that they are unable to move their organization forward and accomplish their goals. Having a better understanding of how one develops political capital and the implications of developing their own or associating with others having political capital can be beneficial (Haycock, 2010). Library directors, deans, and department heads all have initiatives that they value and want to advance, yet due to lack of training, they may not understand the power of political capital, how to develop

it, and its effect for getting things done. However, as the decisions made involve more stakeholders such as faculty, students, deans, directors, and department heads in higher education, library directors rely heavily on upper management authorization of and funding for, budgets, programs, building projects, and other complex initiatives. This is not to say that library directors are without decision-making power or the ability to establish vision, set agendas, and implement plans. However, in many cases, the provost, budget director, building and grounds manager, vice presidents, and the president endorse these activities depending upon their level of interest, oversight, and buy-in. As library directors seek support for initiatives, alignment with those having political capital becomes increasingly important.

Coleman (1988) defines several types of capital: (1) physical capital when raw materials are forged into tools for production, (2) human capital when humans learn, add new skills and change, and (3) social capital, though less tangible, is created through relationships thus enabling action. Social capital develops through networks (Putnam, 1995) and is productive (Coleman, 1988); it is also relationship based (Farrell, 2007) and is seen by some researchers as today's currency (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 260). Kouzes and Posner (2008) assert that this new currency supplants intellectual capital and is comprised of the relationships we have with others and the exchange of favors (p. 260). This study does not investigate these types of reciprocities and mutual obligations (Farrell, 2007) at the core of social capital, but rather the type of capital that is developed and utilized through political connections (Nee & Opper, 2010; Smith & Feagin, 1995, p. 309) with the key players having "positional power" (Nee & Opper, 2010).

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu recognized that power might be seen as social, symbolic, and hierarchical (Harrits, 2011), and as a "force that pervades all human relations" (Swartz, 1997, p. 87). From these human interactions and relationships social power, or social capital is developed. Additionally, Bourdieu says symbolic power is "defined in and through the

given relationship between those who exercise power and those who submit to it" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170). His conception of power involves its interplay in relationships and the distribution of power as a resource (Hauggard, 2008). In an academic setting, power is well established at many levels in the administrative hierarchy, and comes into play during resource allocation (Pfeffer, 1982), establishing the direction of an organization, and during times of resource scarcity (Pfeffer & Moore, 1980).

Heim and Ostertag (1991) note that those working in universities, where the main focus is often on research and publication, poorly understand the sources of power. These sources of power may reside in certain individuals or "key influentials," capable of getting things done or stopping things from happening or moving forward (Phillips, 2005). These key individuals have political capital that resides in both their position and reputation.

Literature Review

The elements of influence, reputation, and strategic alliances (Anderson, 2011; Farrell, 2007; Vie, 2012) are all part of the initial processes leading to the development of political capital (Harvey & Novicevic, 2004). Through a series of interviews and observations Vie (2012) shows that activities of care, such as listening and chatting with employees can be a source of influence for managers. Anderson (2011) differentiates external from the library players and their potential for strategic alliances from internal partners comprised of librarians and library faculty. She continues to say that it is important to build the external networks since many library issues are now being dealt with through faculty and administrative channels (p. 181). She asserts that these connections may require a multi-year investment of time and effort but in the end the investment is worth the effort (p. 188). Fenimore (2008) notes that the purposeful currying of favors helps expand influence and forge alliances. Smith and Feagin (1995) find that political capital can develop within a group (intrinsic) or externally (extrinsic). Some argue that

political capital can be amassed in one's reputation (Neustadt, 1990) and can be lost through major policy changes (Hilton & Jacobson, 2012; Nee & Opper, 2010; Schier, 2009).

Smith and Feagin (1995) see political power as coming through political connections (Nee & Opper, 2010; Smith & Feagin, 1995), and it can be wielded to affect discontinuances of academic programs and LIS schools (Haycock, 2010). Political capital is about establishing a base of power (Friedkin, 2011; Loomer, 1976) and calculating political value (Fenimore, 2008). Phillips (2005) describes the outcome of its use as influencing, getting things done (Phillips, 2005) and as social grease with the purpose of removing obstacles (Harvey & Novicevic, 2004). In an information technology (IT) case study, Peled (2000) remarks, "political skills are the secret weapon of winning leaders" (p. 20). He argues that leaders with extensive backgrounds in organizational politics will outperform those with technical skills. Using a case study analysis, he focused on two specific project leaders. The first one, an expert in his field had very little experience or training in organizational politics. He focused solely on creating a state-of-the-art, technological solution regardless of departmental buy-in, without the help from others. He defined his role in the following terms: "My job is to create project-pilots, to produce new technologies, and to see if they are suitable for the Ministry's needs" (p. 26). There was a failure to recruit the necessary external political support for the project, it began to run into increasing difficulties, lost ground, and eventually died altogether.

The second individual in his study was a bureaucrat with minimal technical skills, yet very savvy in organizational politics. This approach bypassed problems instead of facing them head on. The bureaucrat acknowledged that there was a technical side to its implementation, but that the primary objective was "to advance the project from beginning to end through various political minefields" (p. 27). This strategy involved using personal political capital and that of others to "manipulate inter-personal relationships with employees, colleagues, clients, and supervisors to ensure the ultimate success of the project" (p. 27). Peled (2000) asserts that the success of a project is much more likely if the project leader can recruit political backing from

powerful allies, rather from superiority of technical skills. Leaders can assist project leaders in improving their political skills and thus building their political capital through "courses on the political aspects of project management such as influence, negotiation, and cooperation. They can assign politically skilled mentors to tutor novice project leaders. They can also balance the management skills of a project team" (p. 28).

Procedures

Research Design

A study population of academic library directors from the State University of New York was identified to explore the phenomenon of political capital at academic libraries. The SUNY system is comprised of 64 distinct and unique campuses providing educational opportunities to over 460,000 undergraduate, and 420,000 graduate students with an annual budget of over $12 billion. The types of SUNY schools include: University Centers (4), Health Science Centers (4), Colleges of Arts and Sciences (13), Specialized Colleges (4), Statutory Colleges (2), Colleges of Technology / Agriculture (6), and Community Colleges (34). For this pilot study, a purposive sample focusing on SUNY libraries yielded twelve library directors willing to participate.

Methodology

To identify how academic library directors acquire and use political capital to get things done, a series of questions were used to guide the conversation elicit personal stories during the interviews (see appendix C). The questions focus on critical incidents that occurred early in the participant's career as well as more recent events. Narrative research is "up close and personal in that it involves in-depth study of particular individuals in social context and in time" (Josselson, 2003, p. 4) and was chosen as the best tool for getting at the director's stories. Hendry (2010) states, "it could be argued that narrative research is the first and oldest form of inquiry" (p. 72). This form of inquiry involves the researcher asking individuals to share their

stories in relation to a specific topic (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The library directors shared personal reflections on their short-term and long-term use of political capital. Jeong-Hee (2008) remarks, "narrative inquiry, indeed, confronts a range of problems resulting from the difficulty of presenting a complex, layered, and dynamic reality" (p. 253).

This study probed for critical incidents in the participant's career. Using a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, these incidents were identified. Critical incidents usually involve change or challenging experience, tipping points, or defining moments. The researcher explored the areas of career progression, and the development, use and role that political capital played in advancing agendas, allocating resources, and gaining institutional support through narrative inquiry. Through a series of guiding questions, the researcher sought to identify the acquisition and expenditure of political capital early in the library director's career. Following these responses, questions then focused on examples of when the acquisition and expenditure of political capital by the library director had a long-term impact.

In recruiting for and describing the study, the researcher made it clear "that the purpose of the study was to uncover and describe the participants' perspectives on events—that is, the subjective view is what matters" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 102). Since this subjective view and the actual facts from the stories is difficult to verify, Hummell (1991) argues that the validity does not "lie in the facts of the story; rather, they are constituted by its structure" (p. 37). Klenke (2008) refers to this as "structural validity."

A preliminary e-mail message was sent to potential study participants describing the study and requesting the director's participation. A two-week time period was given in order to collect their responses. Respondents who consented to participate were then contacted to schedule their interview. One-week prior to the interview date, three documents were sent by e-mail to each participant: consent form (appendix A), interview instructions (appendix B), and data collection instrument (appendix C). The consent forms were signed and returned electronically to the researcher in advance of the interview. Interviews were conducted via

telephone or face to face. By participating, the individual would be contributing to the body of literature on political capital in general, and could personally gain insight into the processes surrounding the acquisition and expenditure of political capital and its implications for gaining influence as a library director.

Data Quality

Because of narrative research's unique story-telling approach, Webster and Mertova (2007), conclude that it should not be analyzed with traditional quantitative and qualitative methods. The authors indicate that this approach should be measured by the "accuracy and accessibility of the data" (p. 93). One of the questions from participants and heard repeatedly throughout the interviews concerned confidentiality. "How will you ensure that what I tell you cannot be traced back to me?" "Will my identity be protected?" While there was no doubt that the human resources theme would produce the need for an acute sensitivity to propriety and confidentiality; that issues as generic as budgets and building projects being at a similar level of concern was unexpected.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the data collection instrument was pre-tested using doctoral students in the Managerial Leadership in the Information Profession program, Simmons College, to ensure reliability. They provided feedback on the interview process, including examination of the instruction protocol; sequence and types of questions were taken into account to improve the instrument. To accomplish the goals of ensuring accuracy and accessibility of data, a series of steps were taken: digitally recording each interview, contracting an external transcriptionist, reviewing and editing each transcription prior to sending their transcript to the interviewee for comments and further edits. Once these steps were completed, coding was done to identify themes; a rough draft of the final paper was written, then provided to interviewees for review and comments.

This study probed complex issues through unstructured or semi-structured interviews

(Klenke, 2008). Two approaches were used for analysis of the interview data: restorying and thematic analysis. Restorying allows the researcher to transcribe the story and re-write that story in a chronological order (Cresswell, 2008). The data is then coded into categories or themes (Boyatzis, 1998). For this study, thematic analysis coding was done using qualitative software, Dedoose (Dedoose.com). The researcher assigned numbers to the transcripts, uploaded these to the software then selected one interview to begin the process of identifying themes and coding all documents. Working through the initial document, key words and phrases began to emerge. These were highlighted and tagged for future use. Following this thematic analysis, each transcript was coded, and then re-coded once all codes had been established. Both methods, restorying and thematic analysis are common strategies used for narrative analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Four key themes with sub-themes emerged from the study:

- Administrators: turnover, work handled to their satisfaction, make the boss look good

- Political Capital Building: team player, ability to get things done, innovation, specific to one area or general

- Political Capital Used: gone, increased, used for big or little things

- Reputation; sub-themes: communication, credibility, relationships resulting in respect and trust

From the narrative analysis, it became clear that academic library directors in this study had experienced challenges in three primary areas: budget, human resources (HR), and the use of library space.

Administrators

Participants comment that supervisors value contributions from their team members and that this goes all the way up the chain from the secretarial / support staff, through the librarians, to the director and up through the next layer or two of direct reports. When one layer does good work that supports the initiatives of those above in the chain-of command, good things happen.

In all cases, participants identified very strong reasons for working with administrators as well as difficult challenges negotiating these relationships. Sub-themes under the administrator category include: Turnover of Administrators, Work Handled to Their Satisfaction, and Make Boss Look Good. Turnover of administrators was the most common theme of the interviews. The implications of administrator turnover are real and ubiquitous.

Since I've been here some positions have come and gone more than others, like in the business and admissions positions, there's been quite a few changes…we had had maybe three different people in the CIO / ITS position…we're getting a brand provost and our CIO is now gone off to other ventures…everything is up in the air again…our provost announced that he had gotten the position of the president…my CIO is not going to be there anymore

Comments made seem to indicate that strong track records of success and positive interactions yield fruit over time. This fruit might be support for new initiatives, salary/budget lines, sustained or increased budgets or perhaps support during challenging HR scenarios. If a campus has continual turnover in their administrators this model for gaining influence tends to fall apart.

Every time you have a positive interaction with your administrators then they are going to look more favorably on the next interaction or the next request that you have.

Political Capital Building

Although largely invisible and often reported as an unknown commodity, most participants reported that political capital is something acquired. This fairly nebulous commodity cannot be easily nailed down in absolute terms and quantified. In fact, for many, its existence is

only truly known when it is spent. Political capital seems to be a key contributor to one's influence, yet many in the study only identified it from its effects. Sub-themes under the political capital building category include: Team Player, Ability to Get Things Done, Innovative, Specific to One Area or Generally Applicable.

> *Any political capital you gain – usually when I look at it, is money in the bank with fast growing interest.*

Being a team player is a common thread found throughout the interviews. The library director might be invited to head up an assessment committee, be a member of the strategic planning process, and take on initiatives that originate in the President or Provost's office. During any of these campus-wide activities there are plenty of opportunities to rub shoulders with faculty, students and many different levels of administrators. By generating positive outcomes, successful papers, policy analysis or implementation, a general reputation for both teamwork and getting things done begins to grow.

> *I started gathering input and folks together, even a year ago when working with the architects. We had some focus groups and again just getting everybody together. I tried to make sure that we had representation from all the right areas and people. I'm not afraid to ask for help, I'm not afraid to have ask people's advice and take it, I'm not afraid to admit that I'm wrong and take responsibility for that. I think those are all things that add to my long-term political capital.*

Among the interviewees in this project, very few were intentional in their development of political capital. No one reported that they had created a plan, laid out a timeline, and then moved forward with their respective political capital development, however, when reflecting upon their careers and various projects, many of them had done just that without forward thought to their activities. They had done as described in the quote above and as such had great and small successes following their actions.

> *I think political capital is like a stock market play or a bond investment or a mutual fund investment. And if you're successful that political capital grows and if you're not then it's*

been spent and it's spent down and you lose it at that point. But if you've done good things with it, it continues to grow and it will expand for you.

A teaching-learning technology center, digital media zone, learning commons, renovation, repository, and repurposing space are just a few examples of innovative and creative projects library directors and their staff have either wanted, still desire or have completed. Much of the work in these areas has been done through collaborative efforts involving IT services, building and grounds, the chief academic officer or the office of budget. Incumbent upon their project success or future implementation is the political capital and relationships between library leaders and administrators.

I think it applied to multiple areas because like I said I think it set a baseline for trusting and the belief that I know what the hell I'm doing.

One area of interest to the researcher is whether an individual's political capital is specific to the area that it was secured, established, gained, or if it has broader application to problem solving in general. For the very few, their political capital as acquired had limited and fairly specific application. Whereas the majority of the interviewees indicated that their capital was applicable to a broader range of projects and situations.

Political Capital Used

The sentiment of not knowing whether one has a bank full of political capital or political capital at all seems to be common among two or three of the directors. Part of this perception seems to be that they self-identified as not thinking in political terms. They understand the dynamics of political interactions and the importance of connecting to those with power in order to get things done, yet on a day-to-day basis they do not think on these matters. Sub-themes under the political capital used category include: Used = Gone, Used = Increased, and Used for Big or Little Things.

It's always seems that as soon as you spend, is when you find out if you have it because you can't really see it.

Only two participants expressed that their political capital stock was diminished upon use. The more complicated issue here seemed to involve the constant political capital renewal needed because of high administrator turnover.

I mean sometimes you have to build it up again…I think I do have less…I've spent it all at once and then that was it…I feel like my political capital got lessened I guess when that first domino fell…having spent this political capital, it is going to take a while to earn back.

Eight participants expressed belief that even in the midst of near constant administrative turnover in some institutions, their political capital increased with each success. They tended to look at perception as a big piece of the political capital puzzle. They believe that other administrators, librarians, staff and faculty see their successes and attribute various monikers to them: gets things done, gets what they want, has a nose for the money, is able to make things happen.

I used every scrap of political capital that I got from anywhere to get it to happen…I was able to do that out of this process as well and that was an expenditure of political capital in order to get that done and make those staff changes…it was the ability to talk to them into increasing my budget by almost $400,000 for acquisitions. So that was an expenditure of political capital in terms of getting that done.

From stories told during this study, eight participants indicated using political capital for major budget increases, building projects and additional staffing lines. The scope of this project does not include an analysis of how social capital influences one's ability to get things done, and may be of interest to researchers in the future.

Reputation

Reputation sub-themes all well together and create a hierarchy of reputation development where each provides the building block for the next. Sub-themes under the reputation category include: Communication, Credibility, Relationships thus ultimately resulting

in Respect and Trust.

> *I do remember telling him to give me one more week to work behind the scenes or work with everybody, to make sure I had talked to everybody, make sure I've chatted with everybody, got everybody's feelings out there so that when we do make the decision then we'll be more confident that people will go along with it.*

The breadth and depth of communication skills, modalities and targets play a major role in developing one's reputation. Though an individual might be skilled in many areas of the job and is highly gifted in academic areas, without communication both up and down the chain of command, as well as broadly across the college community, they will ultimately be challenged and have difficulties in getting things done.

> *I think part of this was a lot of communication, part of it was a lot of competence, part of it was being extremely open and upfront right away so that the administration didn't get blindsided by what was going on here and keeping them in the loop and keeping negotiations and communications open.*

Because most, if not all the library directors had at one time or another learned the hard lesson of not communicating well, they appeared to have an advanced ability to communicate. Because of their inclusive methods, it appears that surprises are kept to a minimum, when one speaks—others listen, and because of past project successes over time, their credibility, believability and regard is very high.

> *If I talk about getting positions or getting that extra money and somebody helps find the resources to help us, I always mention the name or names of the most influential administrators that made that happen. I even thank mention and thank the ones that would like to think that they helped to make that happen. Again, that's bullshit political but I think they really like it.*

Diverse relationships, established over time with varying constituencies emerged as a common topic. The development of these relationships was accomplished through casual meetings, ad hoc conversations, through service by others on library committees, and by attendance at library events and social activities. It was indicated that in some cases the relationships went only so far and had distinct boundaries and limits per administrative level; in

other instances, these seeming intractable barriers had been broken and true trans-boundary relationships had been established that persisted beyond the campus and into private life.

> *I like the people I work with, I like the people I work for, and I like the people who work for me. I feel respected. I feel like people respect and value the work that I do in my opinion.*

Stemming from communication, the establishment of credibility and relationship building can ultimately cultivate respect. The work of the library director, largely because of their authority over a service that has the potential to impact everyone on a college or university campus, is very visible. When successful, the library elicits an enhanced level of respect from constituents. Although much of what was said by directors in regard to respect was their perception, there seems to be a consensus that librarians and the library in general are respected for their work and place in learning.

> *What I would say is that this is a trust building and relationship building kind of capital rather than a real quid pro quo type of thing.*

Two participants responded that their political capital was pertinent to specific areas and was used for day-to-day, small things; nine participants commented that their acquisition of political capital was more general and applied to bigger, more significant initiatives. The questions of how directors used political capital, and whether it was primarily used with internal or external constituents was mixed. Some directors used their capital for budgetary or human resource issues, while others primarily focused on building projects or enhancement of facilities. The cumulative effect of the various elements that go into the development of political capital and its expenditure, and that are established over a continuum of time, all contribute to the pinnacle of trust. From trust stems those willing to follow, those willing to entrust a college's resources, and those willing to enable a library director to get things done, both the great big things as well as the everyday little things.

Future Research

Although this pilot study identifies many common themes and areas of conflict, the limited size of twelve subjects as well as purposive sampling used is not representative of academic library directors in general. Using a mixed-methods approach of survey and in-depth interviews would have helped focus the interviewees and establish a baseline for their understanding of political capital, critical incidents and narrative inquiry. Because the telephone interviews were conducted only once, the addition of a survey identifying participant's understanding of political capital could have proven useful. Using a survey along with narrative inquiry and interviews with a broader, randomized sample of academic library directors could corroborate these findings.

Discussion

The series of research questions posited in the study were addressed yet leave room for further research. It would be interesting to perform this same study on different types of library directors, public, special, school to compare the findings. How do the directors develop political capital and with whom? Often, the directors in this study were not consciously aware of how their involvement with other administrators and campus wide taskforces and teams had either a direct or indirect impact upon their ability to get things done. Do directors develop political capital in certain areas and is it only used for innovative, groundbreaking initiatives?

Depending on their project needs, capital was brought to bear on internal or external constituents, or both. Can directors bank their political capital to use when needed and if directors use up their political capital, can it be regenerated? A few directors were extremely precise and explicit in describing the acquisition of political capital, its storage and use. These

directors were more comfortable living within the political milieu, were intentional in their actions and alliances and tended to accomplish very big projects or initiatives; they generally believed that once spent, capital was not diminished, but in fact—increased. Other directors described a "spend and regenerate" model of political capital use and acquisition. Some of these directors commented that they used what they had on smaller initiatives and were not particularly good at navigating the political space.

The final set of questions, pertaining to the role political capital plays in advancing agendas and initiating projects, indicate that establishing relationships with high-level administrators, and doing innovative work all inform the development of political capital for an academic library director. Whether this capital is used immediately or banked up for future use, it can be used for accomplishing small or large tasks. The responses from interviewees help us gain an understanding of the role that political capital plays in the work that academic library directors perform.

Conclusion

From the procurement of political capital and through its use, a director's reputation can be positively influenced with their improvement of relationships and increase in political capital winning them success after success. These findings, if further substantiated through a larger randomized sample of library directors from various fields of librarianship could inform strategies that directors might use to gain the influence. These strategies might include building relationships with longstanding faculty, volunteering for high-level committee work, or becoming involved at the regional, state or national levels of library leadership in recognized organizations.

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