

Editor's Message

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Welcome to LL&M's first special issue dedicated to middle management. If you are reading this, chances are you are either a middle manager yourself or work closely with one—an unsurprising likelihood, given that middle managers make up nearly 30 percent of library employees (DOE, 2024). What qualifies as a “middle management” position in libraries varies widely across organizational type and size, but most often includes branch, unit, or department heads; staff supervisors; team leads; associate or assistant directors; and associate or assistant university librarians or deans.

Library middle managers occupy a uniquely liminal position, bridging the gap between frontline staff and senior administration. They embody the dual roles inherent in both formal and informal leadership, shifting fluidly between leading and following, as well as decision-making and decision-enacting. While central to the operation of libraries, middle managers often face the challenge of significant responsibility without full authority over their domains.

The five articles featured in this issue examine the complexities of middle management roles in libraries—roles frequently characterized by ambiguity, competing demands, and structural inequities. Together, they highlight not only the challenges middle managers encounter but also the opportunities these challenges create for innovation, cultural transformation, and resilience.

In “Managing without Tenure,” Rachel Gammons explores the challenges that six women in academic libraries faced when they assumed mid-level management positions before achieving tenure. Through interviews and document analysis, this collective case study reveals tensions between faculty responsibilities (research, publishing, service) and managerial duties (supervision, budgeting, operations). The middle managers interviewed reported struggling with unclear evaluation criteria, the undervaluing of teaching and mentorship, and gendered expectations around emotional labor. Gammons' study draws on a neoliberalism framework, situating the tensions middle managers in libraries face within broader institutional trends that prioritize market efficiency and measurable outcomes at the cost of recognizing relational and

service-oriented labor. Findings show that faculty status for librarian middle managers often provides symbolic recognition without material equity, leaving them excluded from decision-making and oftentimes unsupported in tenure processes. Gammons advocates for clearer promotion guidelines, codified mentorship opportunities, and better representation of library managers on tenure committees to ensure more equitable recognition of their dual roles of supervisor and faculty member.

In “Leading in Ambiguity,” Danya Leebaw and Erinn Aspinall examine the inherently ambiguous role of middle managers in academic libraries, arguing that the uncertainty is both a challenge and a resource for leadership. Drawing from management and library literature, the authors situate middle managers as “liminal actors” tasked with balancing contradictory demands, navigating incomplete information, and shifting between roles of authority and subordination. Ambiguity, while often associated with feelings of stress, insecurity, and burnout, is reframed as an opportunity for empowerment and creative leadership. Through two scenarios—managing hybrid work environments and leading after a reorganization—the article demonstrates practical tools (polarity management and boundary-spanning leadership) that can help managers approach ambiguity constructively. They argue that library middle managers can transform ambiguity into a productive resource, developing “liminal competencies” that support adaptation, trust-building, and organizational resilience.

Karen Stoll Farrell applies adrienne maree brown’s Emergent Strategy framework to the context of library middle management in the article “Emergent Strategy to Build Transformative Library Teams.” brown’s six elements—fractal, intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, nonlinear and iterative practice, resilience and transformative justice, and creating more possibilities—are presented as a means to help transform library teams. Emergent strategy may not be familiar to LL&M readers, however, its emphasis on adaptability, collective visioning, and relational trust within a social justice framework is a natural fit for library work environments. Stoll Farrell asserts that libraries, often subject to constant change and external institutional pressures, can benefit from this model to shift from reactive to intentional responses. In the framework, middle managers, acting as facilitators rather than top-down leaders, are positioned as key agents who can build trust, co-create shared vision, and support sustainable team dynamics. Entrenched hierarchical structures and inequities among staff can present challenges to enacting emergent strategy, but the framework prioritizes process over outcomes, highlighting that success lies in ongoing collaboration and collective transformation.

The article “Managing Multiple Campus Libraries” explores the emerging practice at Penn State University Libraries (PSUL) of appointing one head librarian to manage multiple campus libraries. Matthew Wayman, Amy Deuink, Jennie Knies, and Bonnie Imler, all middle managers at PSUL, describe how the dual-management model was necessitated by budget constraints and staffing shortages. This case study draws on the authors’ direct experiences navigating the benefits and challenges of the arrangement. Benefits of the more consolidated approach include cost savings, continuity through interim appointments, opportunities for professional growth, and enhanced collaboration across campuses. Additionally, managers in these positions can bring fresh perspectives, foster cross-campus resource sharing, and enhance communication channels. However, the significant drawbacks include increased workload, reduced visibility, travel demands, and potential strain on work–life balance as organizational capacity is limited when there are fewer managers. Despite writing the article prior to PSU’s May 2025 announcement of plans to close seven of its commonwealth campuses, the authors note that trends toward consolidation and resource sharing are likely to persist as institutions continue to face financial and structural pressures. The PSUL case study demonstrates that multi-campus management is a viable model if guided by careful planning and a commitment to equity; however, there is a need for further research into staff perspectives to better assess the long-term effects on morale and organizational culture.

Michelle Armstrong’s article “Collaborative Success: Aligning Personal and Organizational Objectives in the Workplace” examines the approach to “managing up” by utilizing a set of proactive strategies to strengthen relationships with supervisors and align personal goals with organizational priorities. Middle managers, who often face competing pressures from above and below, are particularly well positioned to benefit from strategies such as building trust through open communication and proactive problem-solving, prioritizing personal work using organizational benchmarks, managing one’s own communication style and performance, and practicing strategic self-advocacy. Armstrong details research on psychological capital, feedback-seeking, and strategic alignment to demonstrate how these behaviors enhance motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational resilience. Although limitations such as unsupportive supervisors, poor communication, or limited access to organizational information can stymie middle managers’ efforts, Armstrong contends that managing up fosters healthier workplace dynamics, mitigates dysfunction, and contributes to long-term success. Noting a lack of preparation for many middle managers, Armstrong also calls for more explicit training in

management skills and developing competencies, including cultivating trust, learning adaptability, and fostering collaborative workplace cultures.

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