LIBRARY LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Managing Without Tenure: A Collective Case Study Examining the Experiences of Mid-Level Academic Librarian Managers Promoted to Management Before Tenure

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Abstract

This qualitative collective case study explores the experiences of six women middle managers in academic libraries who were promoted to leadership roles before achieving tenure. It examines how they balance faculty and managerial responsibilities, navigate gendered workplace dynamics, and respond to broader institutional pressures. Findings reveal significant tensions between faculty expectations and administrative duties, particularly for those leading teaching-focused units, where mentorship and student-centered work are devalued compared to research enterprise. The study also highlights the emotional labor of managing teams while pursuing tenure and the lack of clear evaluation criteria for managerial responsibilities in the promotion process. Implications include the need for clearer evaluation guidelines, greater representation of library managers on tenure committees, and stronger mentorship for untenured middle managers. This research contributes to understanding the intersection of faculty status, gender, and management in academic librarianship.

Introduction

Academic libraries have a distinct set of cultural and organizational conditions that create opportunities for junior faculty to step into mid-level management roles before securing tenure. Unlike professors in traditional academic departments, who typically achieve tenure before assuming leadership responsibilities, librarians may take on administrative roles early in their careers, often without the security or institutional recognition that tenure provides (Radniecki

and Boss 2024). A recent survey found that nearly one-quarter of academic librarian managers assumed their roles with fewer than six years of experience, well below the typical threshold for associate professor rank (Thomas, Trucks, and Kouns 2019). This trajectory creates a complex professional environment in which tenure-track middle managers must balance faculty obligations with managerial responsibilities while navigating institutions that may not fully recognize their dual roles.

The challenges of tenure-track middle management are further shaped by gendered inequities that devalue women's labor. Although academic librarians often hold faculty status, their work—particularly in teaching, mentorship, and service—has historically been undervalued compared to research-intensive faculty roles. This devaluation is rooted in systemic biases that frame service-oriented and relational labor as less intellectually rigorous, reinforcing the perception that librarians primarily support institutional research rather than contribute original scholarship (Arellano Douglas and Gadsby 2017; Mirza and Seale 2017; Wilder 2018). Acker (1990) argues that organizations are not neutral but are structured in ways that reinforce gendered hierarchies; within academic libraries, faculty governance structures and administrative systems interact in ways that obscure or fail to accommodate the challenges created at their intersection. As a result, women librarians in middle management—particularly those who have not yet achieved tenure or promotion—may navigate invisible obstacles that emerge from these compounding structures. Without institutional recognition of these dynamics, women in these roles may be left without the support, policies, or protections necessary to navigate their dual responsibilities effectively.

This study examines the experiences of six women middle managers in academic research libraries who were promoted to leadership roles before achieving tenure. It explores how they balance faculty obligations with managerial responsibilities, the gendered expectations and perceptions that shape their roles, and the broader institutional pressures that influence their professional trajectories. Their experiences reveal how the intersection of faculty status, gender, and managerialism creates persistent tensions that affect career progression, professional identity, and workplace equity. By illuminating these complexities, this research underscores the need for academic libraries to rethink how they support tenure-track middle managers, ensuring they are equipped to navigate both faculty and administrative roles without compromising professional growth or well-being.

Theoretical Framework: Neoliberalism

This study draws on the theoretical framework of neoliberalism, a political and economic ideology advocating for government deregulation, free-market capitalism, marketplace competition, and economic rationality (Harvey 2007; Olssen and Peters 2005). In the United States, neoliberalism has profoundly influenced both economic policy and public education, moving the focus from education as a public good to one centered on market forces and efficiency (Apple 2012; Lakes and Carter 2011). In higher education, this influence is marked by increased privatization, corporate partnerships, and a heightened emphasis on accountability and financial scrutiny (Baltodano 2012; Klees 2020; Saunders 2014). Universities are increasingly adopting capitalist values by replacing traditional academic governance models that distribute power between faculty and administrators with hierarchical management structures that consolidate authority (Giroux 2002). In research universities, these conditions have given rise to a new class of "manager-academics," who hold faculty appointments while also performing mid-line managerial responsibilities, such as directing a department or managing a research center (Deem and Brehony 2005; Vican, Friedman, and Andreasen 2020; Winter 2009). These manager-academics operate at the intersection of academic and administrative responsibilities, illustrating how neoliberalism shapes the governance and operations of research universities.

Academic libraries are deeply embedded in the neoliberal transformation of higher education, where market-driven principles are increasingly dictating institutional priorities. As universities emphasize efficiency, productivity, and return on investment, libraries are compelled to justify their value by demonstrating measurable impact in ways that align with market-oriented goals (Nicholson 2015; Seale 2013; Beilin 2016). This shift toward market ideology privileges roles that directly contribute to institutional efficiency and revenue generation, reinforcing existing labor hierarchies within academic libraries. Technical and administrative positions—more frequently held by white men—are elevated in status, often commanding higher salaries and greater institutional prestige. In contrast, service-oriented roles such as teaching and reference, which are disproportionately performed by women and people of color, are increasingly marginalized (Mirza and Seale 2017). As a result, the profession's racial and gender disparities are not just maintained but further entrenched, reinforcing a system where intellectual and relational labor are systematically deprioritized in favor of work that aligns with corporate metrics of success.

For middle managers in academic libraries, particularly those leading teaching-focused units, neoliberal pressures add another layer of complexity to their roles. They are expected to justify their department's contributions using institutional metrics that prioritize efficiency and measurable outcomes, yet much of their work—mentorship, instructional leadership, and faculty and staff development—is difficult to quantify (Arellano Douglas and Gadsby 2019). At the same time, they are responsible for implementing administrative initiatives that may not always align with their professional or personal values, forcing them to navigate competing expectations (Do and Nuth 2020). As a result, middle manager librarians in teaching-focused units must continually balance institutional demands with advocacy for student-centered work—work that is critical to the university's mission yet often overlooked in decision-making and resource allocation.

Literature Review

The role of academic libraries has evolved significantly over the past few decades. The following literature review explores three areas that are shaping the contemporary academic librarian experience: gendered labor, faculty status, and leadership structures within academic libraries. First, it discusses the gendered nature of academic librarianship, which encompasses both how women librarians are perceived and how their work is valued. Second, it explores the unique challenges associated with faculty status for academic librarians, including disparities in the standards and expectations of tenured and tenure-track library faculty compared to traditional academic faculty. Third, it examines the leadership structure of large academic libraries, particularly the middle management positions that often serve as the bridge between senior leadership and library staff.

Librarianship, Gender, and Organizational Power

Librarianship is a feminized profession. In 2023, 82.5% of librarians were women (Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO 2023). Among academic librarians, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) found that 61% of library staff in ARL institutions were women (Schonfeld and Sweeney 2017). These gender ratios remained consistent across management levels, suggesting that women are well-represented throughout academic library leadership structures (Schonfeld and Sweeney 2017). However, large-scale gender studies among academic libraries are now several years old, highlighting the need for updated research on gender representation.

Like other pink-collar fields—including nursing, social work, and education—librarianship is shaped by gendered labor conditions, including lower pay, workforce feminization, and the

persistent perception that its work relies more on soft skills than intellectual expertise (Arellano Douglas and Gadsby 2017; Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden 2016; Mirza and Seale 2017; Neigel 2015; Seale and Mirza 2019; Stauffer 2016). These perceptions reinforce librarianship's status as "women's work," positioning librarians as institutionally subordinate to academic faculty within the power structures of higher education (Delong 2013; Hannigan 1994; Hannigan and Crew 1993; Hildenbrand 2000).

The rise of neoliberalism has further entrenched these class hierarchies. Neoliberal policies in higher education emphasize efficiency, accountability, and market-driven outcomes, fostering institutional cultures that prioritize quantifiable productivity over labor-intensive intellectual or emotional engagement (Seale 2013). Within academic libraries, this shift has devalued teaching, mentorship, and reference services—all of which are forms of relational and service-oriented labor long central to librarianship (Julien and Given 2013). Because these activities are traditionally associated with feminized labor, they are further marginalized in neoliberal systems that equate worth with financial impact rather than intellectual or educational contributions (Seale and Mirza 2019).

This devaluation is reinforced by internalized professional misogyny, which diminishes women's labor both within and beyond the library. The increasing dominance of technology in academic libraries has created an internal stratification between digital and non-digital work, with technical roles receiving greater institutional prestige, while traditional services, such as instruction and reference, are sidelined as distractions (Joseph 2020). This divide has significant equity implications: positions associated with digital initiatives—more frequently held by men—are linked to higher pay, career advancement, and greater institutional power, while instruction and student support—roles more often filled by women—remain undervalued (Howard, Habashi, and Reed 2020; Mirza and Seale 2017; Neigel 2015). As a result, gendered labor disparities within academic libraries not only mirror broader societal structures but are also perpetuated by internal hierarchies that reinforce the devaluation of women's contributions, further entrenching inequities in status, compensation, and influence.

Academic Librarianship and Faculty Status

Gender not only shapes how librarians experience faculty status but also influences the extent to which they are fully integrated into the faculty system. Walters (2016) found that more than three-quarters of public research universities grant librarians nominal faculty status; however, this designation does not ensure parity with academic faculty, as librarians are often excluded from governance, tenure benefits, and institutional decision-making (Fleming-May and

Douglass 2014; Wiser 2024). Even among institutions that grant faculty status, the expectations for academic librarians often differ from those of traditional faculty, creating inconsistencies in tenure-track policies and promotion criteria (Bailey and Becher 2022; Beyer et al. 2023). Librarians are frequently excluded from key discussions on workload, research expectations, and institutional policymaking (Galbraith, Garrison, and Hales 2016; Phelps and Campbell 2012; Silva, Galbraith, and Groesbeck 2017). Although librarians are often required to meet similar research and publication expectations, their 12-month contracts and 40-hour workweeks significantly constrain their ability to conduct scholarship or pursue external research funding on the same level as traditional faculty (Coker, vanDuinkerken, and Bales 2010; Fleming-May and Douglass 2014). Additionally, librarians face restricted access to traditional faculty privileges, including sabbaticals, research funding, and grievance procedures (Bolin 2008; Fleming-May and Douglass 2014; Walters 2016). While they hold faculty titles, they are often denied the full benefits and protections afforded to their academic peers (Beyer et al. 2023). As a result, faculty librarians remain professionally segregated, what Bolin (2008) and others describe as being "bred apart" from the professoriate (Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton 2004; Coker, vanDuinkerken, and Bales 2010; Fleming-May and Douglass 2014).

Neoliberal pressures entrench these disparities by quantifying productivity and framing librarianship as a support service rather than an integral part of institutional research and revenue generation (Seale 2013; Seale and Mirza 2019). As institutions prioritize measurable outputs and economic efficiency, the work of librarians—especially in instruction, outreach, and student support—is increasingly undervalued, reinforcing their marginalized position within academia and distancing them from their faculty colleagues. Within this framework, the emphasis on market-driven success not only devalues the intellectual and scholarly contributions of librarians but also contributes to ongoing disparities in professional status, career advancement, and institutional recognition.

Academic Library Leadership and Middle Management

Academic libraries are typically housed within the division of academic affairs or its equivalent (Curzon and Quinonez-Skinner 2017). However, the internal structures and labor divisions of an academic library often resemble those of student affairs, with a workforce that includes hourly student workers, graduate assistants, non-exempt and exempt staff, and faculty librarians (Schonfeld 2016; Peper 2022). At research universities, libraries are usually led by a director, who holds the title of dean, vice or associate provost, or university librarian (Schonfeld 2016). While many librarians hold faculty status, the boundaries between faculty and non-faculty roles

in libraries are more fluid than in academic departments (Beyer et al. 2023), leading to more varied career trajectories and advancement pathways for library faculty compared to their academic peers (Bailey and Becher 2022).

Middle managers in academic libraries play a critical role as intermediaries in the organizational hierarchy, providing operational leadership and day-to-day administration while also facilitating communication among senior leadership, staff, and faculty (Do and Nuth 2020). They often oversee departments such as reference, instruction, and interlibrary loan, ensuring that strategic goals are translated into actionable programs (Cawthorne 2010; Do and Nuth 2020; Peper 2022; Schonfeld 2016). Unlike academic departments, where faculty supervision follows a clear hierarchy based on academic rank, libraries frequently have direct reporting lines between faculty, with one librarian supervising another. This structure differs from the traditional faculty model, where leadership roles, such as department chairs, are temporary and rotational, typically held by tenured faculty who return to full-time research and teaching after their term (Berdrow 2010; Pascale, Kulp, and Wolf-Wendel 2024).

By contrast, library administrators typically hold permanent managerial positions, requiring them to balance long-term administrative responsibilities with faculty obligations (Gonaim 2016). Additionally, while senior library leadership roles, such as associate dean or associate university librarian, often require qualifications equivalent to an associate professor with tenure, mid-level library leadership positions may be filled by junior faculty (Radniecki and Boss 2024). According to a recent survey, one in four academic librarian managers assumed leadership roles with fewer than six years of professional experience, significantly less than what is usually expected for promotion to associate professor (Thomas, Trucks, and Kouns 2019).

For middle managers in academic libraries, the dual responsibility of administration and faculty work creates persistent tensions (Radniecki and Boss 2024). They are expected to oversee operations, implement strategic goals, and support their teams while also maintaining a research agenda and meeting faculty expectations. For those without tenure, this balancing act is even more precarious, as they may find themselves evaluating or supervising senior colleagues, individuals who, in turn, may have influence over their tenure decisions (Irwin and deVries 2019; Jones and McAlister 2025; Rooney 2010; Rutledge 2020).

These contradictions, in which librarians are granted faculty status but remain embedded in managerial hierarchies that pull time and attention away from faculty work, are intensified by gendered expectations surrounding leadership and service. Middle managers are often responsible for enforcing institutional policies while advocating for faculty and staff on their teams, a dual role that requires them to balance positional authority with diplomacy (Do and

Nuth 2020; Schonfeld 2016). This tension is compounded by the historical feminization of librarianship, which reinforces expectations that women managers will perform emotional labor, prioritize collaboration over authority, and absorb institutional pressures without resistance (Neigel 2015; Rutledge 2020). Yet, without clear policies, models, or institutional support, middle managers must navigate a structurally ambiguous position. They hold significant operational responsibility but often lack the decision-making power and protections afforded to their academic faculty peers.

Research Gaps

While significant research has examined the experiences, career pathways, and gendered and racial disparities among senior administrators (e.g., Ashiq et al. 2021; Bladek 2019; Fagan 2012), far less attention has been given to middle managers, particularly those below the associate dean level (Bugg 2016; Do and Nuth 2020; Wong 2017). Although studies have explored how gender identity influences senior leadership, few have examined how these dynamics shape the experiences of middle managers, despite the fact that women are disproportionately represented in these roles compared to senior leadership positions (Rutledge 2020; Wilder 2018).

Similarly, research on faculty status among academic librarian managers remains limited. Little is known about how this status influences professional identity, career advancement, or leadership responsibilities—particularly at the middle management level (Galbraith, Garrison, and Hales 2016; Walters 2016). While faculty status differentiates academic librarians from their non-faculty counterparts, its effect on managerial authority, workload, and expectations remains underexplored (Radniecki and Boss 2024).

A recent study by Radniecki and Boss (2024) offers a valuable quantitative analysis of tenure-track library managers' experiences, identifying time constraints and competing expectations as key challenges. However, this research does not examine how gender influences managerial expectations or the emotional labor that women managers may be disproportionately expected to perform. Additionally, while their findings provide broad trends, they do not capture the nuanced ways in which women library faculty navigate these tensions. This study builds on their work by incorporating a qualitative perspective, exploring how gendered expectations and faculty status intersect in the experiences of library managers.

Existing research on mid-level academic library leaders also remains methodologically limited. Most studies rely on survey-based analyses (e.g., Cawthorne 2010; Hodge Spoor and Sheehan 2021; Radniecki and Boss 2024; Rooney 2010; Rutledge 2020) or anecdotal accounts

(e.g., Chang and Bright 2012; Leebaw and Tomlinson 2023; Mosley 2009; Sullivan 1992), leaving a gap in qualitative, in-depth investigations of these roles. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the experiences of tenure-track women academic teaching librarians in middle management. By examining the intersection of faculty status and managerial responsibilities, this research provides a deeper understanding of an often-overlooked aspect of academic librarianship and offers recommendations for policy and practice.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative, inductive, collective case study methodology to analyze similarities and differences across participants within a bounded system (Adams et al. 2022; Merriam 2009; Stake 2006; Yin 2009). I identified eligible participants through a criterion-based selection process, defining the research sample using pre-established attributes (Merriam 2009). Eligible case sites included ARL institutions at public universities that met three criteria: a student population of at least 10,000 undergraduates, a dedicated teaching and learning unit, and a system that granted librarians nominal faculty status or a structured rank and promotion process.

Each participant represents a case, and each case serves as a unit of analysis, which is the primary focus of investigation and interpretation (Patton 2002). A unit of analysis is the "smallest piece of information that can stand by itself," meaning the data remain interpretable even without additional contextual information (Guba and Lincoln 1981, 345). The study participants were women academic librarians who met the following criteria: they held nominal faculty status or advanced through a ranked promotional system, occupied leadership roles in teaching and learning units, supervised at least one library staff or faculty member, and reported to a manager below the dean or university librarian (e.g., an associate dean or director). I contacted 61 institutions, and 21 respondents completed the eligibility screening survey. From this pool, I selected nine for in-depth case studies (Gammons 2024).

This article focuses on a subset of six cases from the original nine, including all participants who were promoted to management before achieving tenure. While the broader study examines factors influencing participant experiences—including racial identity, career pathways, unionization, and epistemological relationships to learning analytics—this subset specifically explores how participants' proximity to and progress within a tenured faculty system shaped their experiences.

Participant Profile

All six participants were women librarians serving as mid-level managers in public ARL libraries and utilized she/her pronouns. Each supervised at least one full-time staff or faculty member. Participants had varying levels of experience: two were early to mid-career (5–10 years), while four were mid-career (10–30 years). Institutional representation was diverse, with four participants employed at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and two at minority-serving institutions (MSIs). All participants were promoted to management roles before advancing from assistant to associate professor or an equivalent rank.

The group included five white participants and one participant who held a minoritized racial identity. Racial identity shapes not only individual experiences but also institutional structures, influencing how hierarchies are formed, resources are distributed, and legitimacy is conferred. Organizations are not race-neutral; they reflect and reinforce racialized power dynamics, often privileging whiteness as a form of institutional capital (Ray 2019). Because the sample size for this study was small, disclosing specific racial identities could compromise participant anonymity. In consultation with the participant(s) involved, I use the descriptor "minoritized racial identity" not to generalize or obscure their experiences but to acknowledge the complexities of race while respecting participant privacy. Although racial identity did not emerge as a central theme in this subset of the research, it is included in the participant profile in recognition that organizations are inherently racialized and that race shapes faculty systems, even when it is not explicitly acknowledged.

Data Collection

Case study research relies on multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of a research phenomenon (Creswell and Poth 2018; Eisenhardt 1989). This study used two primary data sources: document analysis and 90-minute, semi-structured interviews. Documents included position descriptions outlining participants' duties and responsibilities, as well as personal statements from their promotion and/or tenure applications when available. If these were not accessible, a surrogate document, such as a cover letter, was used instead. These materials provided valuable insights into institutional culture and individual experiences, which were further enriched by the interviews.

Sample interview questions included the following:

- What drew you to a career in librarianship and, in particular, research librarianship?
- Would you describe yourself as a middle manager? Can you tell me more about your pathway into management?

- How do you balance being a faculty member and a manager? Do these roles ever conflict with each other?

Positionality

My professional background as a middle manager in an academic library has directly shaped my approach to this research. For several years, I led a teaching unit as an untenured middle manager, navigating the tensions of leadership without the security of tenure. I was expected to make decisions that shaped both the organization and my team while simultaneously working to meet the expectations for my tenure portfolio, which included developing a service profile through institutional and national engagement while also producing original scholarship. Although I had institutional support—such as access to professional development funding and the opportunity to pursue a PhD—balancing these demands remained difficult. At times, I questioned whether these obstacles stemmed from broader structural issues or were simply the growing pains of a new professional: symptoms of inexperience, self-doubt, or the steep learning curve of middle management. However, through my dissertation research, I recognized that my situation was not unique but rather reflective of systemic patterns within academic libraries. These institutions have distinct environmental, organizational, and managerial conditions that create a relatively uncommon trajectory in higher education—one where junior faculty can advance into management positions before securing tenure and promotion. My firsthand perspective allows me to approach this study with both empathy and critical insight, using my own background as a lens to illuminate the realities faced by others.

As a white woman, my perspective is also shaped by my racial identity and the ways in which whiteness intersects with power and privilege in academic librarianship. While my own challenges provide insight into the issues faced by tenure-track middle managers, I acknowledge that my experiences are not universal. Throughout this research, I have remained reflexive, engaging in ongoing self-examination and critical analysis of my own positionality. I have also employed member-checking to ensure that my findings align with the participants' perspectives and accurately reflect their experiences. While my personal and professional background inevitably influences my understanding, I view this subjectivity as a strength, enriching the research, adding depth to the analysis, and reinforcing the importance of institutional change.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, coding involves systematically categorizing and labeling data to identify patterns, themes, and insights within the collected information (Saldaña 2012). In this study,

coding was conducted in two stages: within-case analysis, where each case was analyzed independently, and cross-case analysis, which identified thematic connections across the cases (Merriam 2009; Stake 2006).

Within-Case Analysis

For within-case analysis, I compiled raw data into structured case records using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. Each case record included interview transcripts, documents such as position descriptions and personal statements, and demographic information. Initial open coding was applied to identify key themes around leadership, gender identity, and faculty status, drawing on participants' own words and broader patterns. From these case records, individual case reports were created, summarizing each participant's experiences. These reports synthesized the data from interviews and documents, providing a comprehensive view of each participant's context and the themes that emerged from their case.

Cross-Case Analysis

Cross-case analysis was conducted using the individual case reports as the primary data source (Stake 2006). Open coding was applied across the case reports to identify common themes, such as "competing expectations," "emotional labor," and "demonstrating impact." These codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, including "gender identity and leadership," "faculty status," and "professional identity." To determine the most significant themes, a data matrix was used to map the frequency and intensity of themes across cases. Themes that appeared in at least two-thirds of the cases were retained, with recurring patterns such as "navigating faculty status" and "self-concept as scholar-practitioner" emerging as central to participants' experiences. This systematic approach uncovered shared challenges and insights among the middle managers who were studied.

Data Ethics and Data Validation

To ensure ethical rigor, all participants signed a consent to participate form, acknowledging their voluntary involvement in the study and their rights as research subjects. The study was also reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Maryland, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards. To strengthen internal validity, preliminary findings were shared with participants through a member-checking process. Four of the six participants engaged in this process, affirming the findings and drawing parallels to their own experiences. Throughout the research, an ethic of care was applied, centering empathy and respect in participant interactions and maintaining reflexivity through analytic memo-writing and peer examination. All personally identifiable information was anonymized, and sensitive details were omitted to protect confidentiality. Research data were securely stored in a cloud-based

storage environment compliant with the university's IT-2 classification standard for high-risk data. While generalizability was not the focus of this research, credibility and transferability were ensured through triangulation, cross-referencing multiple data sources and methods of analysis.

Findings

This study explores the experiences of six women middle manager librarians who were promoted into leadership roles before achieving tenure. These participants navigated the challenges of balancing faculty status with the demands of leading their teaching-focused units. Throughout their careers, participants reflected on how their professional identities, faculty status, and gendered labor shaped their daily experiences in the library. Their reflections revealed common challenges in balancing scholarly output with administrative duties, navigating power dynamics within their institutions, and advocating for the value of their work within a profession that is often marginalized in the broader academic community. The following findings examine these experiences, highlighting five key themes that emerged from the data.

Faculty Status and Professional Identity

Although all participants held faculty status, their experiences varied widely. Half were fully integrated into the academic faculty system at their institutions, while the others navigated a parallel, library-specific promotion process. Most held a rank equivalent to associate professor (n = 5), but one was in the process of applying for promotion from assistant to associate professor. Two of the six had been appointed to lower ranks upon joining their current institutions, despite holding the higher rank in their previous institutions.

While participants valued their faculty status, they were often more concerned with parity in the relationship between academic faculty and librarian faculty than whether librarians "held status." They viewed collaboration with academic faculty on curriculum development, research projects, and shared governance as markers of recognition and legitimacy in the organization. However, participants noted how the faculty equivalency of librarians could be weaponized to minimize their contributions in the organization. As one participant observed, "We're not an academic unit, so we're seen as less important. I feel it in the way faculty view us, as if we're 'service sisters' instead of equals."

Despite their formal faculty designation, participants reported receiving fewer faculty benefits than their academic colleagues. Many felt excluded from institutional faculty affairs policies and decision-making. As one participant explained, "There was a [campus] policy about remote work for faculty, but librarians weren't even mentioned. Sometimes, it feels like we don't even exist."

For many, faculty status served as a symbol of recognition, but it did not necessarily translate into equity. “Proxy is not synonymous with parity,” one participant explained, highlighting the disconnect between librarians’ formal classification as faculty and the institutional recognition of their contributions.

Balancing Faculty Expectations with Managerial Responsibilities

Participants consistently described the challenges they faced in reconciling their faculty status with the heavy demands of their managerial work. Many expressed a sense of liminality, feeling caught in an “in-between” space—both librarians and managers, yet fully belonging to neither. While tasked with strategic planning, budgeting, supervision, and hiring, they were also expected to continue fulfilling traditional librarian duties, such as teaching and providing reference services. These competing demands consumed their time and left little room for research and scholarship, forcing them to, as one participant described, “cut back on the parts [they] cared about to make space for the things that need to get done.”

The tension between faculty expectations and managerial duties was particularly evident in the promotion process. One participant articulated, “Supervision is a big part of my job, but how do I present that in my promotion dossier? I can’t exactly write, ‘I worked through a major performance issue with someone on my team’ [in a personal statement].” Others noted that library managers were rarely represented on their libraries’ tenure and promotion committees, leaving them without guidance on how to articulate their administrative work in a way that would be valued by non-managers. “If the promotion and tenure committee can’t answer my questions or understand my work, how are they going to evaluate it?” one participant asked.

In addition to navigating their own tenure pathways, some participants found themselves mentoring junior colleagues through the process, despite not having completed it themselves. “There’s this major tension,” one participant observed, “because department heads are responsible for coaching people through the promotion process, but we haven’t gone through it ourselves.” Another shared, “I’m two years ahead of someone I’m supervising.… How am I supposed to advise them on building a tenure portfolio when I’m still new to it myself?” This tension was further compounded for those supervising tenured faculty, as their own promotion and tenure cases were often reviewed by the same senior colleagues they managed.

Gendered Labor and the Devaluation of Teaching Librarianship

Participants highlighted the gendered nature of their roles as librarians and middle managers of teaching units. While they valued care, relationship building, collaboration, and student-centeredness, their managerial responsibilities often required a “deeply unfeminist” focus on

productivity, impact, and efficiency, which sat uneasily alongside their personal and professional ethics. Although they were rarely granted full transparency or participation in institutional decision-making, as managers, they felt responsible for "being the face" of administrative decisions to their direct reports. This placed them in the difficult position of defending policies they neither shaped nor always supported.

A recurring frustration among participants was the lack of recognition for the time-intensive, emotional labor of mentorship, supervision, and care. "There are no penalties for being a bad manager," one participant remarked, "but there's also no reward for being a good one. You're expected to care, but that care work is never really acknowledged." Another reflected on how this labor remained invisible in formal evaluations: "Where do I put in my promotion dossier that I cared? All the hours I spent listening, mentoring, and reading people's conference proposals and articles, building their careers, often at the expense of my own."

This devaluation of gendered labor extended beyond mentorship and supervision—it fundamentally shaped how teaching itself was perceived within the library and across the university. Despite being central to their professional identities, many participants felt that library administrators and faculty colleagues prioritized the university's research mission, relegating teaching and student-support services as secondary concerns. One participant explained, "Research and grants get the priority, while teaching is seen as something extra that we do. It's frustrating to constantly have to defend the value of teaching, especially when it's so critical to what we do as librarians."

Participants described how this devaluation was not only external but deeply embedded within the library itself, where a persistent class divide separated librarians who supported faculty research from those who worked directly with students. One participant reflected on this divide: "There's an attitude of 'We deal with the serious researchers and graduate students, and you deal with undergrads, isn't that cute?'" This internal hierarchy reinforced the perception that instruction was less important, making it even more difficult for teaching librarians to gain recognition for their contributions. As a result, participants felt compelled to constantly advocate for the legitimacy of their teaching programs, both within the university and within their own libraries. Many found themselves working to ensure that their instructional contributions were taken seriously in promotion and tenure evaluations, despite the broader institutional belief that the library's primary mission was to provide research and teaching support.

For some, these challenges were further compounded by institutional decisions that actively disadvantaged their career progression. Two participants had previously held a rank equivalent to associate professor with tenure at a prior university but were appointed to a lower rank

without tenure upon being hired into their current management positions. Both identified gender and the devaluation of their teaching as factors in this decision, noting that the lowered rank delayed their ability to apply for full professor, placing them in a precarious position with both their teams and the institution. This delay further entrenched the perception that teaching librarians are less accomplished and that teaching itself is less important. One participant reflected on the unrealistic expectations now placed upon her, explaining: “I have to work so much harder now because many of my big achievements were pre-tenure.… I have to meet this completely unrealistic bar because, at the beginning of it all, they did not value my work or worth.” This encapsulated the structural barriers that all participants faced—a system in which teaching, supervision, and mentorship were expected but not rewarded.

Navigating Power and Influence

As middle managers, participants navigated a complex power dynamic, balancing authority over their teams with the vulnerability they faced within the broader institutional structure. Many described the tension of advocating for their staff while remaining accountable to senior leadership. One participant reflected on a moment when she considered challenging a leadership decision but ultimately hesitated. Without tenure, she explained, pushing back felt risky. Speaking up was an option, but “speaking out against institutional power was a different matter entirely.” The risk of alienating herself from senior leadership or jeopardizing her own career made it difficult to fully advocate for her team, even when she strongly disagreed with administrative directives.

As untenured faculty members and managers, participants understood themselves to be both agents and targets of organizational power. They held formal power over direct reports but often lacked the influence to shape or direct policy within their organizations. Many described their leadership as “soft power”—the ability to support, guide, and legitimize decisions rather than directly control outcomes (Bell and Kennan 2022). While they were often responsible for carrying out administrative directives, they had little say in shaping them, leaving them to navigate policies that sometimes conflicted with their professional values.

As a result, participants became adept at “choosing their battles,” carefully assessing when to push back and when to step back. The weight of this balancing act was constant, as they managed the needs of their teams while staying within the bounds of institutional expectations. One participant captured this dilemma with striking clarity: “[As a middle manager,] I have just enough power to let people down on both sides. I’m just influential enough that I could make change and impact for my team, but I also have just enough power to let them down, which is

hard." This sentiment encapsulated the paradox many participants faced; their influence as leaders was significant but never absolute, and every decision carried the potential to disappoint someone, even if it was just disappointing themselves. Even when they made the best choice available, it often came at a cost. As untenured faculty, participants had to carefully weigh whether these decisions, while necessary in the short term, might ultimately impact their long-term promotion and tenure prospects, adding another layer of complexity to an already difficult balancing act.

The Struggle to Maintain Scholarly Identities and the Sacrifice of Self

Participants emphasized the importance of care, compassion, and community building in their leadership approaches, viewing these values as integral to their work. Yet embodying these ideals often came at a personal and professional cost. Many found themselves sacrificing research, professional development, and scholarship to prioritize the needs of their teams. As one participant shared, "Research and writing are important to me, but the administrative demands of my role don't leave me with enough time or mental energy to do that."

The overwhelming weight of managerial responsibilities compounded the stress of meeting tenure expectations, making it difficult for participants to maintain a scholarly agenda. Many felt disconnected not just from writing but from the broader intellectual conversations that sustained their research. As one participant explained, "My job doesn't leave time for the important work of thinking.… I do not have time to read, which would inform things I would write about." Another added, "I want to write, I want to read, I want to research, but there are literally just not enough hours in a day."

For many, working on scholarship felt self-serving, pulling them away from the immediate work of managing and supporting their teams. One participant admitted, "It feels selfish to focus on my research when I know my staff needs me. The important work is in managing and being there for them." The persistent tension between their scholarly identity and managerial responsibilities left participants feeling fractured. Although they found deep fulfillment in their work as educators and managers, many struggled with the lingering sense that they were neglecting an essential part of their professional identity by forgoing scholarship. This internal conflict fueled a cycle of guilt and anxiety: they longed to engage in research and writing but felt indulgent for doing so. That guilt, in turn, led them to overcommit to administrative work, further eroding the time and mental space needed for research and scholarship.

This tension was further compounded by anxieties about tenure and promotion. Many participants noted that the expectations for tenure were the same for managers and non-

managers, despite the fact that the demands of leadership significantly reduced their time for research. With no adjustments made for their administrative responsibilities, participants felt as though they were being held to an impossible standard, expected to meet the same scholarly benchmarks as their peers while balancing additional managerial burdens. Over time, this imbalance led many to feel that their scholarly identity was relegated to an afterthought—something they could only pursue in the margins, if at all.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the distinct challenges faced by women middle managers in academic libraries who are promoted to leadership roles before securing tenure. One of the most significant themes was the tension participants experienced in balancing their faculty and managerial responsibilities. Participants described feeling caught in a state of liminality, navigating the dual demands of producing scholarly work while also managing teams, supervising colleagues, and implementing administrative directives. This dual role created ongoing stress, as participants struggled to balance the demands of research, leadership, and institutional service.

A key aspect of this struggle was the emotional labor and care participants invested in their roles. Much of their time was spent mentoring, building relationships, and supporting their teams—work that was essential to their leadership but often went unrecognized by their institutions and overlooked in the promotion and tenure process. This lack of recognition created a cycle of guilt and anxiety, as participants felt torn between their commitment to their teams and the pressure to prioritize scholarship for promotion. In response, many sacrificed personal time, dedicating their nights and weekends to research and writing in order to continue offering the care-centered supervision and management that aligned with their values

This study also revealed how the gendered nature of academic librarianship shaped participants' experiences as middle managers. Many participants described how their roles as educators and mentors were devalued compared to the university's focus on research enterprise. Teaching and student-centered work were often seen as secondary to the institution's research mission, which marginalized the contributions of teaching librarians and reinforced the perception that their work was less valuable than that of academic faculty.

Faculty status played a pivotal role in shaping participants' professional experiences, particularly in the tenure and promotion process. Many struggled to articulate the impact and complexities of their managerial work in their dossiers, as promotion guidelines provided little

direction on how to evaluate or articulate these responsibilities. Several participants described feeling isolated throughout the tenure process, with little institutional support or clear guidance. Compounding this was the awkward position they found themselves in: as middle managers, they were tasked with supervising and mentoring colleagues, some of whom would later play a role in their promotion and tenure decisions (Jones and McAlister 2025). This situation was more complex than what is typically seen in academic departments, where academic rank and seniority provide clearer distinctions. In libraries, the absence of tenure for participants meant that their positional authority often felt tenuous, and their leadership role was not fully recognized within the broader academic structure. Participants had to navigate this ambiguity, sometimes supervising colleagues who were on the same career trajectory or mentoring junior faculty members through a tenure and promotion process they had not yet successfully navigated themselves. With little guidance or institutional support on how to balance these competing roles, participants frequently described the process as one they were "inventing" as they went along—a situation that added considerable stress and uncertainty to an already demanding role.

Implications

The findings from this study highlight several key implications for academic libraries and higher education institutions. First, clearer guidelines are needed for evaluating the managerial work of library middle managers in the tenure and promotion process. This would help address the lack of direction many participants faced in articulating their leadership roles and the complexities of their work. Increasing the representation of library managers on tenure committees and offering mentorship for untenured middle managers could also provide much-needed support and guidance during this challenging period. This aligns with findings by Radniecki and Boss (2024), who noted mentorship for tenure-track middle managers as an area for future inquiry. Furthermore, reconsidering the leadership structure within libraries—such as offering rotating leadership roles or providing additional support for untenured managers—could help alleviate the long-term pressures middle managers face and provide more equitable career progression opportunities.

While this study primarily focuses on the challenges faced by women middle managers who are promoted before securing tenure, the participants' roles as managers of teaching-focused units add an important dimension to their experiences. The emphasis on teaching, mentorship, and student-centered work in these units—areas that are often undervalued—further complicates participants' professional identities. For these middle managers, balancing faculty

status with managerial responsibilities means navigating the added complexity of leading units whose core mission may not align with broader institutional priorities that emphasize research productivity and revenue generation. Addressing these challenges requires not only clearer evaluation processes for managerial work but also a broader institutional recognition of the value of teaching and mentorship, particularly within teaching-focused units.

Furthermore, many participants expressed feeling isolated and shared that they felt alone in navigating the complexities that emerge from being in a management position before tenure. Professional organizations such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and ARL could play a critical role in recognizing and addressing this as a shared challenge within the academic library community. These organizations could provide spaces for networking and support, connecting untenured middle managers who are navigating similar complexities. Although tenure systems vary across institutions, the challenges these managers face are often strikingly similar, and connecting them through community-focused initiatives could help foster solidarity and provide invaluable peer support.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of women middle managers in public ARL libraries, it is not without limitations. The small sample size of six participants, while appropriate for a qualitative case study, limits the generalizability of the findings. This study aimed not to produce broadly generalizable results but to explore in-depth, lived experiences within a specific group of librarians. However, the experiences of these participants may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives among middle managers in academic libraries, particularly those in different institutional contexts.

Additionally, all participants managed teaching-focused units, which may have shaped their experiences in ways that differ from those leading research, administrative, or technical departments. The challenges associated with mentorship and student-centered work may be distinct from those faced by managers of technology-focused units, where institutional priorities may be more closely aligned with their responsibilities. Future research could explore how the type of unit a middle manager oversees influences their experience, particularly how institutional structures and tenure systems impact career progression for those without tenure.

This study also focused solely on women librarians to explore the gendered dynamics of middle management, but it does not capture the experiences of men, nonbinary, or gender-diverse individuals who may also face unique challenges in these roles. Further, while this study examines gender as a key factor, it does not fully account for other intersecting identities, such

as race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background, which may compound or alter participants' experiences. Crenshaw (1991) argues that systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing and compounding. Future research should adopt an intersectional approach to examine how multiple overlapping systems of privilege and oppression shape tenure-track middle managers' professional trajectories, particularly among librarians of color, first-generation professionals, and those working within different institutional models.

Finally, as the primary researcher, my own positionality as a woman-identified middle manager in an academic library may have influenced the data collection and analysis processes. While efforts were made to remain reflexive and use member-checking to validate the findings, my own experiences may have shaped how I interpreted participants' narratives. Future research should examine the emotional and psychological impacts of balancing managerial and scholarly duties, as understanding these effects could inform how institutions better support middle managers' well-being and work-life balance. The role of professional organizations, such as ACRL and ARL, also warrants further exploration, particularly in fostering a community among untenured middle managers who face similar challenges. Addressing these gaps will deepen our understanding of gender, managerial responsibilities, and tenure in academic libraries, leading to more equitable and effective support structures for middle managers.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal how persistent tensions between faculty status and managerial responsibilities in academic research libraries are compounded by gendered expectations and the devaluation of service-oriented roles in neoliberal higher education institutions. These structural contradictions create barriers to professional advancement and contribute to emotional labor for women-identified middle managers. Navigating these dual expectations is difficult and can lead to burnout, isolation, and a diminished sense of professional identity.

To address these challenges, academic libraries must establish clearer evaluation criteria for managerial work in the promotion and tenure process. Increasing the representation of library managers on tenure committees and developing mentorship programs tailored to untenured middle managers would provide essential support during a critical period. Furthermore, institutions must prioritize recognizing the value of teaching, mentorship, and student-centered work, ensuring that librarians' contributions are equitably acknowledged.

Professional organizations, such as ACRL and ARL, can also play a crucial role by fostering community and networking opportunities among untenured library managers, offering the peer support and solidarity that participants in this study found lacking.

Ultimately, my hope is that this research serves as a catalyst for a much-needed conversation within the field. The unique challenges faced by untenured middle managers in academic libraries are often overlooked in broader discussions about management and academia. Unlike academic faculty, who generally follow a more structured path to tenure and promotion, middle managers in libraries must navigate a more complex and ambiguous system. By sharing these experiences, I hope to highlight the need for tailored solutions that reflect the distinct nature of library leadership.

Structural change begins with acknowledging these challenges within our professional community. This work is not just about recognizing inequities but about committing to change, ensuring that the contributions of middle manager librarians are valued, institutional policies are refined, and intentional spaces for mentorship and support are created. The future of academic librarianship depends on how well we support those who lead within it.

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