

Fire the Librarians First!

Electric utilities have a load sharing system that allows them to cut off subscribers when the system demand exceeds the resources available. It is commonly known as a “rolling blackout.” That way not everyone is in the dark at once, only selected areas. This system works pretty well in that everyone shares more or less equally the pain of being without electricity. Of course those without power are unhappy, but at least they know the power will come back on when it is their turn.

Librarians are being offered a similar administrative load sharing system, only this time it is the librarians that remain in the dark forever. In school libraries, professional librarians are being treated as “extras” and not considered part of the regular teaching staff. Often libraries are phased out, or closed for most of the school day. Sometimes non-librarian staff are used to manage and run school libraries. For example in Duval County, Florida, a school media specialist staff of 39 in middle and high schools was reduced in 2015 to two librarians. Similar reductions took place in elementary school libraries. A similar situation is occurring with academic librarians, where most new contracts now are for one year, with an “option” of possible additional annual renewals. Gone are the lifetime tenure contracts. If a budget crisis were to occur these librarians on annual contract would be easy marks for non-renewal. It’s like the utility load sharing system only this time only the academic librarians are affected. Curriculum instructors in say English, Computer Science, Accounting are pretty much likely to remain free from “load sharing,” unless a specific program is being eliminated. Librarians in all types of libraries are seeing this type of change. Academic librarians are seen less as teaching staff and more of working in an administrative support role. These new academic librarian contracts have moved from the protections of a tenure based system, to one that offers less security, length, and respect. Public librarians are observing staff reductions, shifting of professional duties to support staff, and reductions in operating hours. Public libraries, which were once

the domain of life-long learners of all classes, are now being shuttered and closed, because as we all know “everything is on the Internet.”

One of the main problems with an annual (or multi-year) contract system is that it is not a merit-based system. You will instead lay off those librarians who simply by the luck of the draw came up for renewal during a period when budgets were tight. This is not a formula for creating a high quality staff. The tenure system, regardless of what you think of it, at least in theory was based on merit. Those who excelled were awarded tenure, while those who were good, but perhaps not deserving of life-time contracts, ended up with terminal year contracts. I’m not sure that the idea of working for the same institution means the same thing that it did thirty years ago. Librarians move around more now and take positions of increasing responsibility. One possible administrative theory is that if you let librarians go randomly, you will replace them with other staff that are similarly talented. Institutional memory and talent are no longer needed because again: “everything is on the Internet.”

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