

Activism as Leadership: Lessons From Occupy Library Workers

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Abstract

Activism as Leadership focused on leadership for social change, rooted in activism, advocacy, and the need for action. The individuals who maintained tent libraries constructed during the Occupy Movement present a unique case study of leadership outside of traditional library spaces. Using research data gathered from questionnaires sent to Occupy Library workers, common themes of library activist values were identified and discussed within the framework of social justice leadership. Gregory and Higgins argued that activism is an essential leadership skill needed to bring about social justice changes in the library world and to the communities we serve.

Introduction

Gregory and Higgins began by sharing a variety of definitions of leadership, activism and social justice (Foner, 2003; Schmidt, 2001). Scholarly literature on leadership (Hoffman, 2009; Lankes, 2011) and the social justice implications of librarianship (Jacobs & Berg, 2011; Lankes, 2011; Samek, 2001; Samek, 2007) were reviewed, providing a solid theoretical foundation for attendees. Historical and present examples of activism and advocacy in librarianship (Bundy & Stielow, 1987) were presented in order to illuminate the interconnections between social justice leadership, activism and librarianship. Examples included the work of E. J. Josey, the founding of American Library Association's (ALA) Social Responsibilities Round Table (Samek, 2001), Radical Reference (Morrone & Friedman, 2011) and the usefulness of the American Library Association's Core Values (ALA, 2004) in focusing endeavors of activist leader librarians.

Literature Review

Activism in librarianship is not a new development, but rather can be traced throughout the history of the profession. Bundy and Stielow's (1987) *Activism in American Librarianship, 1962-1973*, documents librarian led responses to the Civil Rights Movement, and includes examples such as librarian E. J. Josey's work on desegregating library associations in the south and Eric Moon, editor of *Library Journal* (1959-1968), who used his position to lobby against the Vietnam War and segregation in the profession. *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974* (Samek, 2001) highlights alternative press, intellectual freedom and the formation of the Social Responsibilities Roundtable of the American Library

Association. Samek discusses the division during the Civil Rights Movement between librarians acting as agents of change and librarians adopting a professional stance of “neutrality.” Most recently, Melissa Morrone’s (2014) *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond* addresses activist librarians working to create positive social change.

What is the connection between activism and leadership? R. David Lankes (2011) argues that librarians have an obligation to lead, and that “improving society requires leadership” (p. 134). He connects leadership with activism by stating that librarians can only “improve society through action” (p. 118). Action makes librarians activists, or individuals who are “simply dedicated to real change through doing” (p. 118). In addition, Jacobs and Berg (2011) urge librarians to revisit landmark documents, such as the ALA’s Code of Ethics or Core Values of Librarianship documents to “reengage with the possibilities and potentials within information literacy to meet larger social goals” (p. 385). Both Lankes and Jacobs and Berg draw connections between leadership and activism. Lankes sees the connection between an obligation to lead, and the necessity to create change through action, while Jacobs and Berg see librarians leading and making positive social changes through information literacy.

Methods

Gregory and Higgins designed an eighteen question survey to garner open-ended responses. Open-ended responses were preferred in order to gather rich data for this descriptive qualitative study. After the project was approved by the Institutional Review Board, a form letter documenting the purpose of the study and voluntary participation was sent to contact information listed on Occupy websites as well as to organizations that had a documented interest in the Occupy Movement. Eight responses were received, for which data was qualitatively analyzed and coded for recurring themes. Gregory and Higgins mapped the coded themes to the ALA Core Values of Librarianship, after recognizing a correlation.

Results

Occupy survey respondents were asked questions about their work in Occupy libraries. Occupy Librarians were primarily responsible for managing collections (sorting, processing and organizing donations) and creating an intellectual community space in which to attend lectures and spark conversations. For many of the respondents, working with the Occupy Movement was their entryway into activism, meaning that it was their first experience working with a protest movement. 75% of Occupy Librarians had a positive work experience and considered the Occupy Movement to be a social justice movement.

The primary themes that emerged in the work of Occupy Librarians have connections to the ALA’s Core Values. Gregory and Higgins saw again and again in survey responses the themes of access (providing information to their specific communities), democracy (by fostering space for intellectual conversations and the sharing of ideas) and social responsibility (by supporting and advancing the concept of economic justice).

Research into Practice

As a “Research into Practice” session, Gregory and Higgins encouraged the session participants to reflect on their work and to brainstorm what their daily practice might look like given the time to apply some of the ideas discussed in the session. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine how their work might change if given the time to focus solely on the ALA’s Core Values document in their day-to-day work. Participants were broken up into smaller groups and given one core value to work with (access, intellectual freedom, diversity, etc.). Groups developed ideas for several projects and initiatives that would support and advance their assigned core value.

Conclusions

Activism is a form of leadership that brings about positive social change through action. Librarians who managed Occupy Libraries for the Occupy Movement represent a form of activist leadership outside of traditional library spaces. However, activist librarians are not a new phenomenon, and their accomplishments can be traced in the history of the profession. The presenters and attendees left the session with a call to action, to understand their role as activist librarians who can lead the charge by supporting and advancing core values such as democracy, intellectual freedom, social responsibility and diversity within their libraries and communities.

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