
In Praise of Acting and Permanent Library Directors and Their Symbiosis: A Dialogue

JOANNE R. EUSTER AND ERIC SOLOMON

ABSTRACT

A LIBRARY DIRECTOR AND A university professor of English, who has also served as acting director of the library, engage in a dialogue about the role of the interim or acting director. While they bring quite different perspectives to the discussion, they agree on the fundamental role and responsibilities of the interim director.

INTRODUCTION

Hello, I must be going!
—*Groucho Marx*

While library directors come and go, and often acting or interim directors hold the position momentarily, it is unusual when the paths of an acting director and a director crisscross as has been the case of the authors. Eric Solomon was acting director of the J. Paul Leonard Library at San Francisco State University (SFSU) when Joanne Euster arrived as director; six years later, Euster moved on to Rutgers, returning the directorship (again acting) to Solomon. Euster, on the other hand, has been followed (and been succeeded) by acting directors at several institutions. Thus, we seem to share a double (might one say even schizoid?) perspective on the question of what can/should an acting administrator do for an incoming director—and vice versa. The following dialogue will be anecdotal by its very nature, but it is hoped that some general perceptions will emerge as to the responsibilities involved in temporary, as opposed to long-term,

stewardship; in how one turns over leadership of an institution; ultimately, in making the best of awkward leadership situations and transitions.

THE DIALOGUE

Euster: I came to SFSU with experience as a library director at two smaller institutions. Although I had some twelve years of experience as a professional librarian, six of those as a director, SFSU was a significantly larger and more complex institution. My M.B.A. training had provided me with a pretty good grounding in management theories and techniques, and I felt it had served me and my institutions well. At the same time, I was going from a small library to one with nearly three times the staff and budget, and I was concerned about getting oriented as quickly as possible.

Solomon: I am not a librarian, have no M.L.S., have never cataloged a book, never taught a student how to use LEXIS/NEXIS, and never unearthed a government publication. Yet as a veteran professor of English literature, I have spent much of my working life in libraries; as a reluctant administrator, I have held a great many posts from assistant to the president to provost—and am now in my third incarnation as interim university librarian. I first took the job while serving half-time as presidential assistant. There was no lead time; the long-time library director left for new pastures on one week's notice. Many librarians asked me to make sure the president did not appoint an incumbent administrator, and, in the course of our dialogue, I assured him that there were many faculty who loved books and libraries and could administer one temporarily—that, indeed, I could do so, and that, remarkably, I wanted the job. In those simpler days, President Romberg replied: "Then you shall have it, son." Thus, unprepared, untrained, and certainly bemused, I took over the acting directorship for a year while two searches took place.

Euster: What help did you get from your predecessor?

Solomon: None. Well, he did spend an hour with me, mostly snarling at the work records of the venal, disloyal, incompetent administrators, librarians, and staff assembled in the building. And we had a three-minute meeting in the parking lot when he handed over to me eight promotion recommendations, all but one of which he turned down. I never saw or heard from him again. You got much more help during your transition.

Euster: I certainly did. You spent a fair amount of time, both during the recruitment process and after I arrived, telling me what you perceived to be the issues and problem areas. I don't remember your

dwelling on negatives so much as just explaining what was on the immediate agenda and where I would probably need to take action fairly soon. The library was just at the beginning of implementing its first automated system, and there were some residual morale problems with staff. It seemed to me that your main concern was to give me a conceptual framework rather than to lay out in detail all the resolved and unresolved matters you had inherited and would be passing on to me.

Solomon: Ah, how good of me. I defined the acting university librarian job in three stages, all preparing for your arrival. Following Franklin Roosevelt's model about the first hundred days (I thought big), I tried to accomplish as much as possible before the actual search heated up to the interview stage. I worked on structures a bit, on personnel a great deal, talking to people, suggesting how the university could help their career plans (yes, I reversed most promotions recommendations), listened to my assistant directors, decided whose advice I should take, defused some inappropriate actions by administrators, started a Friends of the Library group, and generally tried to inculcate a somewhat more democratic humane administrative style (I also tried to move the map cases; that change only occurred after you left six years later). Once the search starts, people in the library seem to decompensate and get testy about small grievances—change does not come without its threats—and the acting director must perform as a steady calming influence who is also quasi-parental. When the interviews started, all attention went to the future and, as acting director, I mainly existed, signed medical visit permissions, and stared bemusedly at leaks in the roof. The third stage, after you were chosen, led me to a largely secretarial role; I think I called you and asked for your decision on a host of minor issues.

Euster: As I recall, the office staff liked to say that you spent your days with your feet on the desk, smoking those pungent cigars and reading. As director, there were no worries about my successor until I realized I really was going to be leaving. I wrote out some general descriptive notes that I left in the top desk drawer (the old "prepare three envelopes" joke!). I doubt that you ever saw them, and they really weren't meant for you so much as for someone coming in totally new. In spite of the fact that you were very circumspect and careful not to be too much of a presence in the library, I was pretty sure you knew quite a bit about what was going on. We had evolved into a much more participative style of management, and the organizational memory for what we were trying to do didn't reside just in my head; you'd have a lot of help from many quarters. I'm

curious about why you chose the particular actions you did during the acting period.

Solomon: Actually, I did make a few personnel changes. I finished the hiring process for a head of technical services. I don't think an acting director should hire permanent administrators, but this action was a great boon to me since he was, in a way, my appointee as far as personal loyalty and trust were concerned. And I made a few shifts in assignments that were meant to be permanent and to be a help to the library and to the as-yet-unchosen successor—such as moving an extremely able but un-M.L.S.ed staff person into a position previously held by a professional librarian as head of interlibrary loan. And I tried to mediate turf wars and some really festering staff-supervisor problems. But I didn't want to make any major changes in personnel or policy as an acting director.

Euster: Indeed. One of the things I have always hoped for (maybe fantasized about is a better word here) from an acting director is to have made some of the really unpopular decisions, thus protecting my honeymoon period a little. I suppose, however, that this is a pretty unrealistic pipe dream, because it hasn't happened much yet. I remember you telling me that you considered it important to be a calming influence, and I've been told that by other acting directors as well—that the principal role was to reassure staff and generally keep the library humming along. One thing I think is especially important on the part of the acting director is to be very clear on why you take action and have a definite outcome in mind that can be communicated to the permanent director. I've had situations where changes were made, task forces appointed, and so forth, but there wasn't a clear plan for the outcome, so I was left to try to figure out not only what was intended, but how to redirect forward motion to fit my framework. Those experiences led me to think that the best model is in fact to do relatively little organizationally and programmatically unless there is a clear and compelling reason to act. My style involves a lot of organizational fine tuning and often some pretty radical change, and that would be difficult if it comes on the heels of a lot of change. Of course, you signed off on the entire automation system for circulation, which was a big change at the time.

Solomon: Remember, I was only supposed to stay six months after the first search failed—the president and provost were insisting on a Ph.D. requirement—I had to make the final decisions, but we had a very good internal assistant director and committee to help sift through the choices.

Euster: There always seems to be a certain amount of jockeying for position, if not outright turf wars, at the end of a director's tenure and during the acting period. One of the greatest services the acting director can do for the permanent director is to convey some sense of the organizational culture to the new person. I am thinking of things like sharing a pretty good grasp of where the organizational and administrative strengths and weaknesses are, how personalities are affecting organizational effectiveness; this isn't just gossip: the new director isn't going to be able to look everywhere simultaneously and needs to have a good sense of what people to trust and which departments can run on their own for awhile.

Solomon: I did, by the way, do a huge favor for my successor. I led a march on the provost of all the assistant directors to insist on dropping the Ph.D. necessity. Come to think of it, I had remained (and this was unique) as an assistant to the president that year, so he ultimately overruled the provost at my whining plea for help.

Euster: That decision held until the day I arrived, or I wouldn't have been there; that all came later. As you know, the staff had made a great point during the recruitment and interview process of regaling me with all their real and imagined grievances and slights, so I felt a strong staff mandate to change some things, although in my judgment the library functioned effectively and provided top quality service. By the way, I have learned since that it isn't uncommon for candidates to be treated to a full display of dirty laundry. You know, Eric, you really were in a unique position as acting director. I rather doubt there is another acting director in the country who was simultaneously assistant to the president and head of the library, or for that matter, one who has been acting provost.

Solomon: Your arrival. Now, this concept seems to me crucial. I recall giving you as much information about the library as I could, going through the personnel roster with approbation or criticism, and trying to describe the players and rules of the university where I had been active for many years. And then I disappeared. Literally. I swore not to set foot in the library for a year and I did not. I had my office mate check out books for me. Extreme? Yes, but necessary. Once in the building, the ex-chief can become a target for complaints, false compliments ("You never would have done this"), and requests for help. Solomon's rule: the acting/interim directors must exile themselves and let new university librarians be free—even to make mistakes.

Euster: That's not quite the way I remember it, although I think it's close to what you actually did. On more than one occasion I

found myself wishing for your perspective and advice, and I did call you now and then, because you were wonderfully positioned to have leverage with the president and to represent the library on occasion. There was at least one instance where we collaborated on a large and important project to bring it to successful closure. I'm referring to bringing the California State Library's historic and unique Sutro Library to the campus. That couldn't have happened without either of us, I am convinced. There were far too many political considerations involved, and leverage from the highest level—the president and trustees—was crucial.

Solomon: Other than helping with the president, who carried the Trustees, I was mainly a yea-sayer in what I saw as a tradition-bound institution where administrative time-servers kept insisting, "We can't do this." I was the little engine that mumbled consistently, "It can be done." And I was able to use my old connection to get Vartan Gregorian to come and speak at the opening.

Euster: Did you ever break your absolute rule about staying away from the library?

Solomon: Absolutely. "I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself"—Whitman. The second time I stopped being acting director I segued right into the position of acting provost, and, since the new director reported to me, we met every other week for two years. A big mistake, I think, and the rule is still a good one.

Euster: But you did call me in New Jersey....

Solomon: I was trying to understand your matrix system. And your hiring a building consultant. And automating the catalog.

Euster: Some of those, such as the matrix organization in public services or adding the public access catalog to the automated system, were really specific to the assistant directors' domains by that time. Of course, there was published literature on both. Other projects were much easier for an academic to comprehend and pick up on—for example, the ongoing work with the Sutro Collection and the establishment of the Bay Area Labor Archives. Even before my arrival you had been the chief architect in establishment of the Friends of the Library. Earlier you made reference to the fact that you had no training for librarianship. I expect that many of my colleagues winced at least a little as they read the words "always loved books and libraries and could administer one temporarily." As a matter of fact, I happen to think you did a darned good job, but I also think it is hubris to assume that longstanding use of a library and love of books and literature in itself qualifies one to manage a library. There is such a great difference between the way an academic department—even

from the vantage point of a dean—functions, and the operation of what is even at its most democratic a professionalized bureaucracy. The contrast is pointed up by the amazement and sometimes difficulties experienced by library directors with long experience in academe who take on deanships of library schools. In fact, one of the issues academic libraries continue to struggle with is institutionalizing a thorough understanding of how faculty do scholarship, teach, and make decisions in their departments and schools; in short, knowing the customer. For instance, the hiring of a library building consultant is a pretty routine, although not always necessary, thing to do when considering a new or renovated building, and we do the same whenever we need more specialized expertise or a more experienced outside view than the library has internally. It seems to me, on the other hand, that faculty often believe that they are the outside expertise, and I think those contrasting views point up some of the differences in the cultures.

Solomon: By now, having been in this role three times, for a total of nearly four years, I have a broader perspective than I did in 1979. I know more about how the faculty and administration believe they love the library—"The heart of the University"—while at the same time are reluctant to share budgetary resources. And I understand more about tensions between library faculty and staff, between all librarians and university faculty. Mostly, I gained a grasp of the paradoxes involved in a hierarchical tradition and a collegial concept.

Euster: I've headed libraries with staffs varying in size all the way from 10 to 350, and I see in them certain underlying organizational themes and principles that apply regardless of size; I think a great deal of the trick to being the acting director, whether you are a librarian or not, is to be able to perceive what is general to organizations and make use of that understanding, rather than being solely focused on the idiosyncracies of the particular library. If the acting director can do that, it should make little difference whether there is an M.L.S. in the background or not. Of course, over the last couple of decades, management in general and academic libraries in particular have become progressively more participatory, collegial, consultative, democratic—choose your term—the point being that I think the librarians, if not the support staff, are better able to bridge the gap between the library as a hierarchy and the collegiality of the academic department.

Euster: Let's sum up. As a director, I think that during the acting period, the acting director has to tread a very fine line. Almost inevitably, there will be some jockeying for position and power to be managed and time-sensitive decisions to be made. I tend not to

make many drastic changes in the first six to twelve months; since most acting directors serve somewhere in that time frame, I'd expect them to make few permanent systemic changes. At the same time, the acting director job isn't just a caretaker. Try a rule of three: pick out three areas where your actions and decisions will help and lay the groundwork for the future (for example, in your case, establishing the Friends of the Library, hiring a head of technical services, beginning the implementation of the automated circulation system), and concentrate your efforts on that controlled number. Even if the library was relatively peaceful, the loss of its leader tends to call for a period of reassurance, which the acting director can provide.

Solomon: In sum, I think success as an acting director calls for someone who is a quick study, knows the larger institution very well indeed, has good judgment in deciding whom to trust, listens well, and is not afraid—on occasion—to take an action even though one's authority is merely temporary. My rule of three: be a soothing steadying influence, take advantage of broad institutional knowledge and friendships, know where the money is hidden. It helps to have a relatively short attention span, to be one who knows one is temperamentally unable to function as a long-term administrator who must put up with delay, repetition, frustration, and postponement, for an acting director or interim university librarian should not really take the long view, since that might lead to putting oneself forward for the permanent slot. "Nevermore," quoth the soon-again-to-be-former-interim university librarian, raven-like. My last rule: an acting director should never be a candidate for the permanent position, for then no action taken during the acting director's period of administration can be distinguished from an electioneering gambit.