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Diversity Dialogues: Dealing with Stress

Raquel Gabriel

CUNY School of Law

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Dealing with Stress*

Raquel J. Gabriel**

Ms. Gabriel discusses the advantages of relying upon support networks of diverse individuals during times of stress. When diversity exists within an organization, employees benefit by being able to draw upon a variety of backgrounds to assist with stress management.

¶1 The stereotypical librarian, someone with glasses and a pinched expression, quietly sitting at a desk buried in a book, while simultaneously ready to pounce on patrons with a “shhh” at any small sound, seems awfully appealing to me on some days. For example, we’re a bit short-staffed for a few hours, and I’ve agreed to sit in as a judge for oral arguments in a first-year class later in the day. On top of this, I need to prepare to discuss the reference schedule during a legal research course meeting tomorrow, where I also need to make sure I provide updated information about training sessions we are doing this summer.

¶2 Looking at my never-ending list of tasks, I squint just a little bit as I recall I have to confirm whether a phone meeting I have midweek conflicts with a meeting I have in the building, make several follow-up calls for committees, write up a teaching observation, and adjust the grading rubric for my students’ final papers. I rifle through my tote bag to find the bench brief I’ll need to read before the sessions with the students this afternoon, and I notice the brightly colored Post-it reminding me again that I’ve got to make sure I follow up with the IT department about those training sessions as well. And I know that this whole tightly packed schedule might be completely thrown off if a student or faculty member suddenly shows up at my door and asks for assistance.

¶3 But even when the days are the busiest, before I feel completely overwhelmed, I know that I can step back, take a slow breath, and ask my colleagues for assistance. The diverse backgrounds of the staff provide a deep well of experience and knowledge to draw from to help solve a problem or tackle difficult issues. Having this knowledge immediately eases any tension.

* © Raquel J. Gabriel, 2012. Special thanks to Douglas Cox, Yasmin Sokkar Harker, and Sarah Shik Lamdan for their thoughts on this column. Comments or thoughts on this column, or on any other topics regarding diversity and law libraries, can be sent to gabriel@mail.law.cuny.edu. Any comments used within a column will be kept anonymous.

** Law Library Professor and Assistant Director for Reference and Research Services, CUNY School of Law, Queens, New York.

¶4 In many ways, my job duties today are very different from what I imagined they would be when I began my career. Many of the changes in my responsibilities have to do with my growing experience in the profession, along with the changes in technology, staffing, and the economic realities that have affected legal education as well as the legal and library professions.¹

¶5 As I move into management activities and become a more senior member of the law school community, I find myself taking on more duties. And while I welcome the new responsibilities and challenges, believing that I have grown as a professional librarian as the scope of my work has increased, there are inevitable moments when I experience burnout. There are times during the semester when my brain seems suddenly to want to shut down, go home, and stare at the goldfish in my aquarium for a month while I eat a lot of ice cream.

¶6 Of course, I can't really disengage for a month, and usually my personal ways of dealing with stress are enough. But I will admit that there are days when everything seems to be moving faster and faster. The number of times I look up at the end of a day and wonder where all that time *went* increases slightly each year, and the stress levels creep up accordingly.

¶7 I think most academic librarians experience the same type of pattern: The beginning of an academic year brings much enthusiasm and energy. There is a bit of a dip right around October and Columbus Day. You gather your strength and get through the madness of the end of the year to enjoy a slight lull during the break between semesters when family and holiday obligations usually happily intrude. Then the cycle seems to start all over again too soon in January. By spring break, you wish you could join the lucky students going to St. Lucia. And in April, you're ready to climb the walls when both students and staff are stressed about upcoming exams, end-of-the-year obligations, and summer internships being right around the corner. Finally, when graduation rolls around, you have perhaps one week of thinking things might slow down—until you realize all of the library projects that you put off during the school year must now be tackled in the summer.

¶8 Law firm, court, and public law library cycles are different, but the ups and downs of work exist everywhere. The librarian stereotype described at the beginning of this piece omits the enormous amount of stress that can be associated with our profession, though it has been written about in the library literature.²

1. Articles appear in all areas of librarianship addressing how the profession can redefine itself to acclimate to the Internet age. See, e.g., Kay Cahill, *An Opportunity, Not a Crisis: How Google Is Changing the Individual and the Information Profession*, 47 J. LIBR. ADMIN. 67 (2008) (exploring the impact of Google and Web 2.0 on the library profession); Doug Johnson, *Are Libraries (and Librarians) Heading Towards Extinction?*, 31 TEACHER LIBR., no. 2, 2003, at 27 (reassuring school librarians that they can provide things that the Internet cannot); S. Michael Malinconico, *What Librarians Need to Survive in the Age of Technology*, 33 J. EDUC. LIBR. & INFO. SCI. 226 (1992) (discussing the new ways in which libraries must think about the organization of electronic information); Peter W. Martin, *The Future of Law Librarians in Changing Institutions, or the Hazards and Opportunities of New Information Technology*, 83 LAW LIBR. J. 419 (1991) (warning of the inevitable change that will accompany technology and its impact on law libraries).

2. See, e.g., Kevin Harwell, *Burnout Strategies for Librarians*, 13 J. BUS. & FIN. LIBRARIANSHIP 379 (2008) (discussing the effects of chronic stress in the workplace, the author's own experiences, and his strategies for coping); Jean M. Holcomb, *Battling Burnout*, 99 LAW LIBR. J. 669, 2007 LAW LIBR. J. 39

¶9 Much of the reason I am able to deal with the stress is the assistance and support I have received from those who have acted as mentors and colleagues to me, both within my institution and beyond its walls. Those individuals are not only librarians, but also faculty members, committee members and colleagues I have met through AALL, and professional support networks of my law school and library school.

¶10 These support networks sustain me as I move forward with more responsibility in my career, and in my personal life, as I try to manage them both in a way that is meaningful and respectful of my goals in each. For example, I know that my colleagues within the library are ready to assist each other when needed, and that we will work together to ensure that the library and our legal research program run smoothly. I know I can discuss with the director of the law library, other librarians, or faculty members ideas I have for scholarship or a new classroom technique. I am confident that our library staff is committed to working on many things as a team, not only to preserve our individual sanity in a stressful environment, but because we have come to realize we often do some of our best work when we do it together.

¶11 I know I can rely on these people because over time my colleagues and I have worked to recognize the strengths and weaknesses we each bring to the library as a whole. The convergence of budget cuts, technology, and additional duties have driven us to work with each other out of necessity, and in doing so, we have found out much more about our working styles and our backgrounds than we might have otherwise. I believe that part of the strength in our library comes from the fact that we are a mix of experiences and backgrounds, which gives us a greater diversity of qualities to draw from in our work.

¶12 Some of us have practiced law, some have worked in law firm libraries, and others have worked for other universities or types of libraries. Some are better at writing first drafts of course materials, others at editing, and still others excel at preparing the class exercises we may need for a course. There are those who can keep the group focused on the overall goal of a project, while others are happily drilling down to the details. Rather than cause conflict, the diversity of our skills helps us achieve our goals, and the current staff works hard to respect each other as individuals and as professionals.

¶13 Our different backgrounds mean we have a variety of expertise that can be leveraged when a difficult reference problem arises. When we prepare legal research classes, our distinct viewpoints, experiences, and respect for one another as teachers allow us to have robust discussions about what we are doing, or to reach out to each other for an opinion when we have a question about how to handle something related to a class. Our diversity has also meant that each individual has been able to educate the others about matters outside of the others' experience, which has helped create an atmosphere that is both professional and collegial.

(warning of the dangers of burnout for law librarians); Veneese C. Nelson, *Burnout: A Reality for Law Librarians?*, 79 *LAW LIBR. J.* 267 (1987) (discussing surveys assessing librarian burnout, including her own survey of law librarians); Deborah F. Sheesley, *Burnout and the Academic Teaching Librarian: An Examination of the Problem and Suggested Solutions*, 27 *J. ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP* 447 (2001) (reviewing the causes of burnout and comparing librarianship to other service professions).

¶14 Like other libraries, we have been dealing with budget cuts and staff shortages while trying to provide additional services that we believe are needed in our community. We keep up with the technological changes that seem to happen almost weekly in legal research, and stay abreast of new methods or ideas that will impact what and how we teach. We do all this while still trying to get through a “normal day” during which there are a thousand or more distractions waiting to knock us off the productive track the minute we arrive at the office.

¶15 Someone once gave me a wry piece of wisdom: “If you’re incompetent, they won’t give you much, and won’t expect much. However, if you turn out to be *competent* . . . they’ll give—and expect—everything from you.” I remember thinking that of course I had to be competent at my job, or else I wouldn’t have one. Yet over the years, I have come to understand more fully that particular nugget of advice and why it has stayed with me for so long. I am fully aware that the ability to draw upon the support of my colleagues and mentors plays an enormous role in helping me appear “competent” within the profession, as well as assisting me with managing work-related stress.

¶16 Reflecting on the most pressing times, when a coworker genially agrees to help out when I find myself overwhelmed, or when I reach out to help someone who is struggling, I wonder what is happening in other libraries, and how they deal with the constant pressure. I often try to imagine what a new librarian must feel like when thrown into the mix, trying to acclimate herself and boggling at the amount of work the job entails. Finally, I wonder how new librarians from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds manage the stress, especially if they enter a work environment where they may be the only individual with that particular background.

¶17 I have had experience working someplace where I didn’t feel like I could reach out to anyone for advice or assistance. Diversity of opinion wasn’t necessarily valued or expected—even if it had a positive impact on one’s own job efficiency or competency. There were days I dreaded going to work, knowing that the workplace culture did not welcome individuals’ stepping out of rigidly defined roles that I found personally and professionally stifling.

¶18 Some workplaces are stuck doing things a certain way simply because they’ve *always* been done that way. There may be resistance to a change in the status quo by staff members fearful of what such change may bring. Looking back at the job where I felt uneasy, I wish I had had the courage to seek out someone I was comfortable with to discuss my frustrations. I wish I could have consulted someone who at the very least *looked* like me, or an individual I might have had *something* in common with, so that there was a chance that if I voiced a fear I might hear: “I get you. I understand, that happened to me too,” and that would give me reassurance or guidance on how to handle the situation.

¶19 Luckily, in my present position, I have met individuals who not only share a background similar to my own, but who seem to have some of the same approaches toward librarianship as well. Having colleagues with common interests, backgrounds, or professional values has been an enormous benefit and valuable asset to my growth as a professional librarian. Reaching out to individuals who I felt would instinctively understand at least part of my background and culture set

me somewhat at ease and led me to believe that they would be interested in seeing me succeed.

¶20 The limited number of minority librarians in law librarianship is likely to continue for some time, despite the best efforts of recruitment initiatives by professional organizations and individuals.³ Understanding that limitation makes it incumbent upon those of us who have a bit more experience in the profession, minority or not, to reach out to those who may not necessarily see their own culture reflected in their workplace. An awareness by more experienced colleagues of the possible additional stresses one might face as a minority librarian may help ease any potential sources of misunderstanding between individuals as well.

¶21 I believe there is strength that allows one to grow in one's professional life in having someone to discuss work experiences with on a regular basis. Ideally, such a person will be someone working in the same office, but in any case, the ability to reach out and find an individual, or group of individuals, to connect with is critical.

¶22 While it would be optimal for new librarians to have someone from the same background to talk to, I don't think it's a requirement. In fact, it might be more helpful for the new librarian to connect with colleagues of many different backgrounds, taking into account such practical matters as comfort level, availability of other librarian mentors or colleagues, and the individual's potential career path. As new staff members have joined the library, I have found myself eager to identify what we have in common, rather than focusing unnecessarily on where we might clash, as I did in previous jobs.

¶23 This approach isn't limited to those new to the profession, and in fact, I find myself more able to connect and find colleagues and mentors with diverse backgrounds in AALL and among other librarians and in other fields as I gain more experience and move through my career. And while it's laudable for AALL and other library organizations to create and foster mentor/mentee programs, in the end I think it's the more personal relationships built in less obvious ways over time—sitting down next to someone in a program, working on a committee assignment with someone, or working with someone to answer a reference question—that build stronger connections that can help us deal with the stresses that come with the profession. The more people I come to know in the profession, with our wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and strengths, the more I find individuals who find the same joys and frustrations as I in the work that we do.

3. For an excellent discussion of the presence (or absence) of minorities in law librarianship, see Alyssa Thurston's article in this issue of *Law Library Journal*. Alyssa Thurston, *Addressing the "Emerging Majority": Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Law Librarianship in the Twenty-First Century*, 104 *LAW LIBR. J.* 359, 2012 *LAW LIBR. J.* 27.