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CUNY Librarians and Reassignment Leave: What is it? How do I get it?

By John A. Drobnicki

This paper, a version of which was delivered at LACUNY's 4th annual Grace-Ellen McCrann Memorial Lecture on Nov. 12, 2013, will address how – and why – the Professional Reassignment Leave came to be part of the PSC-CUNY contract, who is eligible to take it, and how to apply for it.

Although librarians in CUNY had achieved Faculty Status by 1946 and Faculty Rank in 1965, they were still never put on the Faculty Calendar with the Summer (or its equivalent) off. The Library Association passed a resolution calling for a 30-hour work week for librarians as early as 1945; and in 1972, the PSC-CUNY Librarians Committee put forth a detailed proposal, endorsed by LACUNY, calling for library faculty to have academic year appointments (i.e., the same calendar as the rest of the faculty), and a work week of 30 hours. During contract negotiations in 1972, the PSC formally proposed a 30-hour work week with three months of annual leave for librarians, counselors, and CLTs, which was promptly rejected as "outlandish" by the Board of Higher Education.

In 1975, Belle Zeller, who was then the President of the PSC, had this to say at a New York State Department of Education Conference on the Academic Librarian, regarding the need to close the gap between librarians and classroom faculty:

The annual leave and workload of faculty are paramount among those goals, and not because it would be "nice" for librarians to have the summer "off." But how in the world can the librarian be expected to do the scholarly writing and research required of other academics while he is working 35 hours a week for 46 or 48 weeks a year? ... If research is required for the retention and promotion of librarians, we must give them the time to do the research. If that time is required, we must re-define the workload of librarians, perhaps as a ratio of classroom contact hours or in some other way, and we must certainly grant them the faculty's annual leave. We must also give them the support staff required to relieve them of the non-professional duties that many of them are burdened with.

Unfortunately Belle Zeller retired a year later as PSC President. However, the effort to increase research time available to library faculty through collective bargaining continued, and the first step was reached in the 1978 contract, which created the Professional Reassignment leave, which began as a 2-week leave that librarians could apply for. The PSC President at that time, Irwin Polishook, described it as "a movement toward a solution of the annual leave problem."

The Professional Reassignment leave was increased to 3 weeks in 1982, 4 weeks in 1987, and finally up to 5 weeks in 2006. It is described in Article 25.4 of the contract. The "Rules and Procedures" as well as the application form are both on the OLS website (<http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/OLS/aboutleaves.html>), which can also be reached by a tinyurl (<http://tinyurl.com/ReassignmentLeave>).

If you want to take a Professional Reassignment during the Fall semester (which includes January), the deadline for OLS to receive the approved paperwork is the preceding June 1st. If you want to take a Professional Reassignment in the Spring (which includes the Summer), the deadline for OLS to receive the approved paperwork is the preceding December 1st. Thus, you should submit your application early enough, since there is an approval procedure that it must go through.

If you are unfamiliar with the procedure – one must have a specific research project, receive the approval of the Department P&B, and then also the approval of the College P&B. And unlike the newer mandatory release time that all untenured junior faculty now receive, the 5-week Professional Reassignment leaves are available to *all* librarians, including Instructors and Lecturers. The leave does *not* have to be taken in consecutive days – for example, you could take two days a week off for most of the semester, if that's what is best for your research project. Taking it as non-consecutive days is sometimes better for your Library Department, since it's often easier to cover individual days rather than a block of 25 days.

The contract specifies that the maximum number of Professional Reassignment leaves granted during a one year period is fifty, but it would be surprising if all of those fifty leaves were ever used in a given year.

After the leave is completed, you must submit a report of your activities to your college – usually to the President and the Chief Librarian, although procedures may vary on different campuses – as well as a copy to the University Dean for Libraries.

Not everyone was enthusiastic about the newly created Professional Reassignment leave, however. In an article he wrote for *The Bookmark* in 1982, Tom Jennings of Hunter pointed out:

This provision is regarded by most CUNY librarians as a mixed bag – it is seen as a move, though inadequate, toward reducing the inequity between their annual leave and that of their classroom colleagues; yet, it has also served to introduce into the contract another distinction between librarians and the other faculty, a tactic generally considered to be politically unwise and better avoided.

Many library faculty don't like to see their group singled out in the contract or the Bylaws – that's the way it was before 1985, when there were separate ranks like Associate Librarian, Assistant Librarian, Assistant to Librarian, and Junior Library Assistant. Some would say that it's better to just be included with the rest of the faculty and try to achieve parity with them.

Another group that hasn't always been enthusiastic about the Professional Reassignment leave is the Council of Chief Librarians, because the leaves are *not* funded, i.e., there is no provision in the contract to replace a library faculty member who receives the leave – and it explicitly makes that clear in the "Rules and Procedures for Professional Reassignments in the Libraries" on the OLS website: "It shall be understood that the reassignment will not require an additional expenditure of funds for replacement or other costs." Thus, when you take a Reassignment Leave, either your work piles up waiting for you when you return, or your Library Department colleagues cover for you and do more with less – or probably a combination of both of those. In Feb. 1990, the Council of Chief Librarians wrote to CUNY's then-Vice Chancellor for Faculty and Staff Relations, proposing that in the next contract negotiations the Professional Reassignment leaves be eliminated unless they were fully funded by CUNY. The CCL proposed that CUNY fund a pool of adjunct money to cover the reassignments. They also suggested that the 50 leaves be changed to 200 weeks of leave, which they felt would open it up to wider competition. Well, the Professional Reassignment was not eliminated, but rather it was expanded from 4 weeks to 5 weeks.

Even though one might be asking for the full five weeks of reassignment leave, there have been instances in the past where the leave that was granted was *less* than what was asked for. There was also a very important arbitration decision in 2007, which the PSC won, in the case where Prof. Wambui Mbugua of the BMCC Library was turned down for Professional Reassignment in the Library by BMCC's President, even though both the Department and College P&B Committees had approved it. The arbitrator ruled that because of the way the language in the contract was written, one only needed the approval of the two P&B Committees, and therefore the President could *not* deny a Professional Reassignment leave that those committees had approved. Professor Mbugua was duly granted the leave she requested, and the application form for Professional Reassignment in the Libraries was revised to remove the section that required the approval of the college President.

Unfortunately, just as the Professional Reassignment Leave was increased to 4 weeks in 1987, the annual leave for new librarians was cut from 6 weeks to 4 weeks for those hired after 1988. The present writer has taken three Professional Reassignment leaves, for a total of 14 weeks – which is less time than a classroom faculty member receives in one year, if one counts the Summer, January, Spring Break, etc. After submitting my first application, the Chief Librarian came back to me and said that the Provost wanted to know where in the contract this was discussed – so you may have to educate your administration, especially if no one in your library has taken the leave for a while.

For years, library faculty have rightly complained that we must meet the same requirements for reappointment, tenure, and promotion as the classroom faculty, but we don't receive nearly the same amount of annual leave. However, we undermine our own case by *not* taking the small, limited – and sometimes maligned – Professional Reassignment leave that has been around since the 1978 contract. It's like when a Chief Librarian leaves money in his or her budget at the end of the fiscal year – it usually means that next year's budget will be cut by that amount; you obviously didn't need it since you didn't spend it. We don't want CUNY to get the impression that we don't need *more* research leave, so let's take all 50 leaves every year.

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