Responding to and Reimagining Resilience in Academic Libraries

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Abstract: This article briefly introduces library staff to the concept of resilience, beginning with its origins and how it came to academic libraries. The authors posit that the resilience narrative obscures structural issues, particularly those relating to socioeconomic status, and shifts responsibility to library workers who must then overcome barriers to success. The authors challenge the concept of resilience as used in library workplaces, offer potential responses to it from library workers and supervisors, and conclude that applying resilience in and to libraries causes more harm than good.

Keywords: *resilience; library workers; change management*

Introduction

To have a library that is "up and running" is one thing, but what happens when a crucial

element that contributes to a system's function is stretched to its limit? How do we continue to provide

the same resources when our budgets are flat or cut? How do we conduct outreach and organize

programs when vacant positions are left unfilled? The unsatisfactory answer may come in different

names—"resilience," "grit," or "doing more with less"—but the effect is often the same. Resilience is

easy to ask of others, but acts as a band-aid for systemic issues. Demanding resilience in libraries and

other contexts helps to conceal larger problems by transferring blame to the individual, resulting in a

vicious cycle of the workers in the most precarious positions doing the most work to keep services and

collections functioning. What does resilience really mean in libraries, and how does it give the

appearance of change and innovation while actively undermining them?

Recognizing Resilience

Resilience is a term used in many fields, from ecology to psychology, and its popularity has

skyrocketed along with the increasing ecological and financial crises the world's population

experiences. Originally describing an important concept regarding the adaptability of ecosystems,

within the last decade a number of professions have adopted resilience, including non-profit

management and libraries.

Resilience is repackaged trauma for organizations in a state of perpetual recovery. Promoting a

resilient mindset means workers must revisit wounds and then overcome them, often at the expense of

healing or reflection. As funding levels fluctuate, libraries adapt but do not necessarily return to the

same levels of service. Resilience as it is currently framed in higher education must come from

organizations, not from individuals. Specifically, this means the adequate institutional funding of

services and appropriate staffing levels.

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As one example among many of how resilience is used in libraries and higher education, the

University of the West of England at Bristol recently advertised for an Emotional Resilience Graduate

Intern to help students respond to the "normal, everyday" of university life (wigglymittens, 2017). But

countless cases tell us the "everyday" of higher education involves exploitation, inequality, and

harassment. The narrative of resilience encourages adaptation to these conditions instead of

resistance.

Resilience and Library Management

Employees may have to organize to resist resilience when it comes from managers—see

Kendrick's (2017) discussion of how low morale in academic libraries can result from managerial

incompetence, and Ithaka's report on talent management suggesting leadership genuinely believes

the "polite lies" offered to dysfunctional libraries during exit interviews (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017).

Resilience tells us to manage up, to ignore systemic inequalities, to return to a status quo which too

often upholds silence over difficult change, and reinforces fictions of neutrality. Resilience must be

resisted collectively to effectively oppose its individualizing effects.

Resilience often becomes performative for everyone, including managers, who may embrace

the concept in a well-intentioned but detrimental move to improve employee or organizational well-

being. Library management is fraught, with supervisors caught between employees and boards, deans,

or provosts and other executives, but asking library staff to be resilient damages both library workers

and institutions. Asking employees to perform resilience and demonstrate their adaptability can only

result in eventually reaching a breaking point, leading to dissatisfaction and burnout.

Library staff in supervisory positions are, however, uniquely placed in organizational structures

to not only reimagine resilience, but to protect staff from its most damaging effects. Supervisors can

help create environments that encourage employee risk-taking while creating space to learn from failures. With that in mind, we offer some ideas for rethinking how resilience is used in libraries.

Reimagining Resilience

When appropriately applied, it is possible to reimagine how resilience might be helpful to the individual and organization.

- Resilience might allow libraries to plan for disasters and climate change events.

- Libraries could recognize the ways their staff are already resilient, especially people of color in a profession dominated by whiteness.

- Resilience could be applied in response to productive conversations about what services are maintained in the name of tradition and not because they address community needs.

- Libraries could reimagine resilience as taking on changes in responsibilities and duties that aren't masking untenable workloads for employees.

- Resilience could help us let go of unnecessary tasks, or embrace discomfort during re-skilling efforts. Resilience could help us accept "done" rather than perfection.

- Resilience could help distinguish between critiques of process and personal attacks, because we wouldn't derive our identities exclusively from work.

Conclusion

Ultimately, resilience is an ideal that damages rather than helps. John Patrick Leary (2015) rightly observes that resilience "presumes catastrophe and crisis to be baseline conditions of everyday existence without questioning why this is, or whether it should be." Instead of seeking ways to bounce back from continual crises, it is imperative to instead resist resilience whenever possible. There comes a point when we simply are not able to do more with the meager amount we have. Let's recognize

what the resilience narrative leads to—an expectation of constant crisis as "the way things are"—and

work to replace that narrative with meaningful support to do our work and respond to change.

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