

READING WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

A Post-Pandemic Professional Ethos
in Public Libraries

Edited by Vanessa Irvin and Bharat Mehra

ADVANCES IN
LIBRARIANSHIP

VOLUME 55

READING WORKPLACE
DYNAMICS

ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP VOLUME 55

**READING WORKPLACE
DYNAMICS:
A POST-PANDEMIC
PROFESSIONAL ETHOS IN
PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2024

Editorial matter and selection © 2024 Vanessa Irvin and Bharat Mehra.
Individual chapters © 2024 The authors.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83797-071-1 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83797-070-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83797-072-8 (Epub)

ISSN: 0065-2830 (Series)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to take this opportunity and introduce myself as the Series Editor of *Advances in Librarianship* since January 2021. In this capacity, I am extending the series' impact via integrating a critical perspective that spotlights social justice and inclusive praxis from the shadows to become an emerging canon at the very core of who we are and what we value as legit in library and information science (LIS) scholarship and practice. This strategic vision requires destabilizing of entrenched hegemonies within our privileged ranks and external communities to alleviate intersecting political, economic, social, and cultural anxieties and power imbalances we witness today. As we move toward the quarter-century mark, we also need to effectively document such paradigmatic shifts in LIS, serving as a foundation of inspiration upon which, together in our multiple identities and diversities, we can proudly contribute to the building of a meaningful society toward a brighter future for our children to inherit.

New stimulating models reimagining (or extending) the roles for cultural memory institutions (e.g., libraries, museums, archives, schools, etc.) and the field of information are much required to develop symbolic and real infrastructures for moving us forward. We also need to better tell our stories of information activism and community mobilization in the face of overwhelming challenges to human existence, from forces of neoliberal corporatization, political ransacking, media irresponsibility, climate change, environmental degradation, and pandemic dis/misinformation, to name a few. What do the contemporary threats of human extinction and cultural decay mean for LIS professionals, be it scholars, researchers, educators, practitioners, students, and others embedded in a variety of information settings? Not only does it require actions in the “doing” of resistance via information to decenter dysfunctional powerbrokers and their oppressions and entitled privileges. However, disseminating a forward-thinking agenda and narrative beyond our internally focused bastardized institutional bastions is equally important, as we adopt an active stance to promote fairness, justice, equity/equality, change agency, empowerment, community building, and community development.

Advances in Librarianship holds a special place in the hands, hearts, and minds of readers as a key platform to support creative ideas and practices that change and better articulate the vital contributions of libraries and the impact of information on diverse multicultural communities in a global network information society. Moving forward, my aim for the series is to engage our diverse professional communities in critical discourse that enable real transformations to occur. It is important to propel progress in shifting entrenched positionalities in LIS, while making visible content related to the “margins.” Decentering canons and practices toward equity of representation, inclusivity, and progressive change will

naturally occur. Intersecting social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals in recent times demand an urgent response from the LIS professions in this regard.

I am truly honored and privileged to build on the legacy of Paul T. Jaeger, who served as Series Editor of *Advances in Librarianship* since 2013. His research helped to mobilize LIS in addressing concerns surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion more substantially beyond past lip-service, also shaping the focus of the book series. I plan to operationalize new directions for single or multi-authored book-length explorations and edited collections by shifting focus on understudied spaces, invisible populations from the margins, and knowledge domains that have been under-researched or under-published in what we consider as high impactful venues in LIS and beyond. Examples might involve a reflective journey that established, or newly emerging LIS scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students critically reflect, assess, evaluate, and propose solutions or actions to change entrenched practices and systemic imbalanced inequities in different library and information-related settings. It might also involve decolonizing LIS publication industries in their biased Euro/Anglo-centricities with the inclusion of content from geographical diversities around the world.

I am reaching out to our multiple audiences for their support toward these goals in spreading the word for proposals to new volumes in the series. Let us find our “collective voice” in the LIS professions to make us all uncomfortable as we continue to “push the buttons,” thereby, becoming stronger in our quest to further social justice and develop our humanity, human dignity, respect, and potential to the fullest.

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FOREWORD

John M. Budd, PhD

Reading Workplace Dynamics: A Post-Professional Ethos in Public Libraries is very timely, to say the least. All complex organizations, including libraries, are under considerable stress, with pandemic changes (some of which appear to be permanent), wage and price pressures, budgetary constraints, and personnel issues looming large. These matters are putting pressure on organizations to be responsive to changes on many fronts. The essays in this book address a number of pressures and changes in thoughtful and productive ways. This Foreword will not attempt to summarize the chapters but rather will form a kind of prelude, noting three particular challenges: the effects of the pandemic on libraries, managing the libraries – especially public libraries – in complicated times, and ethics for libraries *as* complex organizations. The three issues will be taken in turn and will, I hope, provide an entrée into the rest of the book. The chapters will deal with particulars; this Foreword is intended to approach the matter of the workplace in general terms. For one thing, we all must realize that the times are rife with matters demanding attention. As Howard Gardner and Shulman (2005) put it:

The hallmark of all professions, even beyond the prototypical practices of each, is the ubiquitous condition of uncertainty, novelty, and unpredictability that characterizes professional work. ... This means that professional practice is frequently pursued at or beyond the margins of previously learned performances. (p. 15)

The present work, *Reading Workplace Dynamics: A Post-pandemic Professional Ethos in Public Libraries*, is an effort to address this challenging present and future.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Early in 2020, the world changed. In many ways, the world shut down. When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared officially on March 13, 2020, most public libraries (as well as schools, academic, and special libraries) closed their doors because there could be no risks of spreading the disease by having extended and close contact among people. The closings were intended to protect staff and community members. Employees everywhere, including librarians, began working from home, providing people with as many services as possible. Pandemic restrictions were lifted officially in the United States on May 11, 2023, three years, two months, and two days after lockdown.

The effects of the pandemic were indeed global and severe. The very concept of public library services had to be altered to address the question: when people could not enter library buildings, how could services be continued? In many

instances, there was initiated curbside delivery of books and other materials, with surgically masked librarians handing the materials to people who waited in their cars. E-books enjoyed a spike in purchase and circulation. Kimberly Shotick (2022) reports that some dynamics in public libraries remained the same, including the thinking and actions behind marketing library access and services. Communities had to be alerted as to which services would continue (albeit in a revised form), which would be curtailed, and which would be offered for the first time. Granted, some of the access and services have been ramped up considerably. For example, chat reference services, which had existed pre-pandemic, were enhanced and increased in many settings. Websites were expanded with detailed information to let the public know what they could expect from their libraries. Jon Goddard (2020) tells us that

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries have demonstrated, in many ways, their value to their communities. They have enabled their patrons to not only resume their lives, but to help them learn and grow. Additionally, electronic resources offered to patrons through their library card have allowed people to be educated and entertained. (p. 1)

During what could have been an information services crisis on top of a public health crisis, public library leaders proved themselves to be remarkably agile in responding to a predicament, not of their making. They built upon some existing services, such as the provision of electronic resources that could be accessed from people's homes. They developed new services to meet the needs of the public, such as employing Zoom® to reach people via virtual communications to conduct story times, feature speakers, teach tutorials, and many other services. Kanupriya Singh and Jenny Bossaller (2022) note, "The nature of teamwork also changed as libraries developed new workflows and staff roles to meet the demands of virtual services. Teams developed new methods for communication, creating virtual teams using new collaborative and communication technologies" (p. 513). Singh and Bossaller (2022) conclude that "[w]hether or not we see continued outbreaks that wreak such havoc soon, the pandemic has given us tools that increase agility in libraries. Librarians are now better prepared to instigate rapid changes, including in how teams operate" (p. 531). Many innovations developed during the pandemic persist since patrons have become accustomed to accessing services remotely from the physical library. At the outset of COVID-19,

libraries relied on their online offerings, so more e-books and other online resources were acquired. Staff learned that they could do quite a bit of their work from home. They could still respond to email and phone messages. They could evaluate and order new material. They could deliver online programs like summer reading and story time. They could interact with people on social media. They could put together key resources for patrons and post them on the website. (Ayre, 2020, p. 1)

Ayre (2020) also remarks that areas not served by broadband and digital technologies are "dark spots" when it comes to remote library services. These are decided inequities in the provision of library and other vital information services, especially in rural areas and small towns. However, librarians can and sometimes do, serve on state commissions and national boards, which determine how broadband services might expand to rural communities. By assisting in efforts aimed at

expansion, librarians can help their institutions reach an even greater population. Again, these kinds of services can persist beyond the pandemic.

The number of librarians and staff working (at least some of the time) from home has remained much higher than in pre-pandemic times. WebJunction reports that:

While public libraries and their communities across North America continue to grapple with the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the collective strength of libraries continues to endure and grow. Public libraries have proven during these challenging times that they are essential community assets, and patrons and community members alike continue to hold up libraries as one of the most trusted institutions as they work together to overcome key challenges in the COVID-19 era. (Negron, 2022, para. 1)

Community members did tend to embrace many of the digital access and service mechanisms provided by public libraries, and many continue to turn to these mechanisms in post-pandemic times. It does appear that some of the changes wrought by COVID-19 are permanent alterations to the service imperative of libraries and are not likely to go away in the coming years. Indeed, the management of public libraries has become more complex with the sudden and profound changes the COVID-19 era has spawned.

Managing in Uncertain Times

Managing libraries, which are indeed complex organizations, is more difficult now, post-COVID, and it will only get more difficult in the future. Case in point, at the time of this writing, inflation has been unprecedented in the last few decades in the US and throughout the world. The inflation rate affects the materials and access that libraries seek to provide patrons. Unfortunately, many database providers' pricing information is proprietary, so no figures can be given here. But readers who work in libraries can easily find out how much it costs to provide access to, for instance, EBSCO's *Academic Search Complete*. A larger public library's budget for databases is likely to run into seven figures. Fortunately, though, the price of a recreational book has remained more or less stable for the last number of years. However, the costs of printing a book have risen because of cost increases of paper, personnel, and equipment. Public library budgets have, by and large, not risen lately, so there is considerable pressure on libraries to provide a continuing stable of materials (books, magazines, and databases) to meet community needs. The pricing pressure is not a new phenomenon for libraries; prices have outstripped library budget increases for many years. This applies to all types of libraries and is not limited to public libraries.

Even in those libraries where there may be an adequate budget, societal pressures must be faced. In 2023, in the state of Missouri (USA), the House Budget Committee Chairman proposed cutting the entirety of the \$4.5 million appropriation to public libraries in a dispute over an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit challenging a new law that would ban materials deemed "sexually explicit" from schools and libraries. The state Senate later restored the funding, but only after active lobbying by many individuals, including librarians. Had the cuts been made permanent, the smaller libraries in the state would have felt the pinch much

more than the urban libraries, which have larger tax bases. According to the American Library Association (ALA), the year 2022 saw 1,269 formal book challenges in libraries amongst 2,571 unique titles, indicating that book challenges often involved multiple titles. This surge of challenges doubled the number from 2021 and was the highest number of book challenges since the ALA began keeping data on this phenomenon at the turn of the 21st century (ALA, 2023).

Navigating the political nature of book challenges is an issue where librarians, particularly library directors, might lose their jobs. The current climate is such that almost any title in a library collection could be challenged. Even if a book portrays certain topics, such as sexual issues, in an unfavorable light, the text may be challenged. This is evident in the fact that Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* is among the most frequently challenged titles. Of course, most librarians ascribe to the principles of intellectual freedom; however, citizens may carry other ideals that motivate them to attempt to ban books. For example, in 2022, about 15% of book ban attempts originated from citizen-run library boards or administrations. Another six percent emanated from librarians or political officials, meaning that about one-fifth of the book challenges were more or less internal. Library leaders must, however, reluctantly address the challenges to materials to which they are presented, including addressing their biases to certain topics and issues.

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) further reports that 48% of book challenges occur in public libraries and 41% in school libraries (ALA OIF, 2023). In March of 2023, the Florida state legislature passed a bill that could result in a book being banned because of a single request due to sexual explicitness. "Sexual explicitness" is left vague in the law. These activities strike at the heart of intellectual freedom, which may be the foremost of the profession's core values.

Several years ago, I formulated a set of reform issues intended to assist library leaders (at all levels) in dealing with the pressures under which they come. They are:

- Engage in debate at prominent forums (including Public Library Association and American Library Association Conferences) on the purposes of the library, especially the goal of fostering democracy [with a small d]
- Clear assertion of goals relating to community building through providing the apparatus for democratic participation
- Development of policies that are aimed at achieving the goal of egalitarian access to mainstream and alternative sources of information
- Creation and maintenance of library programming that puts egalitarian democratic policies into action
- Building collections and access mechanisms that include mainstream and alternative sources of information. (Budd, 2007, p. 13)

I noted at the time that these matters might be controversial; they are no less controversial now. The public library may be the epitome of a liberal (with a small l) institution since the people fund it and is open to all residents of a

community. As I wrote, “Liberalism, as it is used here, is *not* what is commonly thought of as part of the liberal-conservative dichotomy. Liberalism, in the classic sense, is a political and economic framework that privileges individuals’ autonomy, freedoms, rights, and self-determination” (2007, p. 4). So, one’s freedom *to* read something trumps someone else’s freedom *to ban* something. The prohibition of reading and access is not considered a freedom when it infringes upon another person’s freedom to access a book or other informational item. The management of the library organizations that seek to provide reading materials and information to all within the community is under pressure to meet the goals of the profession. The ideals just spoken of are at odds with what a minority of populations want to bring about. It is an open question of what the future will bring to library management.

Envisioning a Discursive Grace

With the world still recovering from the pandemic, library management and leadership can respond to the needs of the public by offering the library as the locus of conversations surrounding the most pressing concerns of our time. Public libraries have frequently been a destination where issues can be discussed. For centuries, they have served as community spaces devoted to presentations and debates on various viewpoints and topics.

In the public sphere, when people address one another face-to-face, they tend to be civil and respectful in their discourse. As Simon Blackburn (1984) says, the civility of discursive practices depends on the very nature of speech; “The speaker uses language. With it, he [*sic.*] can put himself into various relations with the world. He can describe it, or ask questions about it, issue commands to change it, put himself under obligation to act in various ways” (p. 3). Speech and language are at the heart of what libraries are; their existence is, in actuality, discursive.

Those who frequent libraries are engaged, in important ways, in speech acts, and in uses of language. In public discourse, citizens value expressiveness and articulateness. Can the same be said of non-library users? Can it be that those citizens who eschew reading are not prepared for conversations that explore viewpoints held by themselves *and* by others? Michael Polyani and Prosch (1975) assert that

[w]e might justifiably claim, therefore, that everything we know is *full* of meaning, is not absurd at all, although we can sometimes fail to grasp these meanings and fall into absurdities. ... [M]eanings can be missed, since the emergence of life opens up the possibility of success but also, of course, the chance of failures. (p. 179)

When considering the library’s agency in communities within a post-COVID world, library managers need to be fully cognizant of the power of speech and discourse within the context of the library itself. In setting the library up as a public space for civil conversation, leaders should be willing to apply certain principles that surround discursive practice. Another thing that should be taken into account is that the conversations that take place within libraries among people

with disparate viewpoints should have rationality as their basis. Jürgen Habermas (1988) emphasizes this point:

Well-grounded assertions and efficient actions are certainly a sign of rationality; we do characterize as rational speaking and acting subjects who, as far as it lies within their power, avoid errors in regard to facts and means-ends relations. (p. 15)

People can disagree, but their minds may also be changed through civil argumentation (in the strict sense of the word). I have maintained that “[t]hese are rigorous strictures that may not always exist in the course of communication among individuals. What they are constitutes the necessity for reasoned outcomes” (Budd, 2007, p. 99). Managers of libraries who are aware of the foregoing strictures are in a position to guide and provide ground rules for conversations that take place within library walls. They can take to heart another condition that Habermas speaks of:

Thus, the question “What should I do?” takes on a pragmatic, an ethical, or a moral meaning depending on how the problem is conceived. In each case, it is a matter of justifying choices among alternative available courses of action. But pragmatic tasks call for a different *kind of action*, and the corresponding question, a different *kind of answer*, from ethical and moral ones. (p. 8)

Managers realize that people are agents in the world who have the capacity to ask the above question and formulate pragmatic responses in a social milieu. Stephen White (1994) expands upon Habermas’s idea, saying,

Habermas’s conception of communicative action... implies a structure of *intersubjectivity* from which one can derive a mutual “speech-act-immanent *obligation to provide justification*” for the different sorts of claims which are continually raised in understanding-oriented action. This obligation is one which every actor has “implicitly recognized” simply by virtue of having engaged in communicative action. (p. 51)

The foregoing makes demands on library leaders and managers, but the potential outcomes are worth the effort to ensure that the discursive practices in which libraries are engaged result in some mutual understanding, perhaps, and agreement.

Meaningful consideration of changes in public discourse in libraries, as an outcome of COVID-19, allows me to reiterate something I said in the above-cited paper, “An ethical stance toward communities demands action on the part of professionals. The kind of action that can make a difference should be part of the consciousness of public library professionals and education for the profession” (2007, p. 2). That action should entail democratic deliberation by all involved in public libraries now that we are beyond the isolationist days of COVID.

Ethics for the Library Workplace

I have reserved what I believe to be the most important and essential issue when considering new workplace dynamics in public libraries post-COVID, for last: developing and maintaining an ethos for libraries, librarians, and service within the organization. Elsewhere I have written, “in this article, I address the practical (the ways we live as professionals in relation to our communities) and the normative (what standards for action we can agree upon and why)” (Budd, 2006,

pp. 251–252). The same strictures apply here. The practical is provided, in part, through documents and policies put forth by the American Library Association. For the normative, we must turn to other writings and thoughts, sometimes articulated by philosophers.

For example, Shelly Kagan (1998) says that normative ethics “involves substantive proposals concerning how to act, how to live, or what kind of person to be. In particular, it attempts to state and defend the most basic principles governing these matters” (p. 2). Kagan’s view offers some guidance for exploring ethics in the library workplace; it presents a way to think about how the library as an organization, and how the people in it *should* behave and carry out the work of the library. I do want to emphasize the normative aspect here; there is a way in which the people in the organization ought to live and work. In turn, that normative element affects the communities where libraries live and how those communities “live” with the library. Standards of behavior provide both an ontological (in the sense of being and life) and an epistemological (in the sense of how we think about our existence) foundation for the people in libraries.

Kagan (1998) further states, “I think the best factor to consider first is this: the goodness of outcomes. This is a factor that I think virtually everyone recognizes as morally relevant” (p. 26). I agree with Kagan and aver that the missions and goals of public libraries stand as testaments to that principle. Furthermore, though, the strategies for achieving the missions and goals of libraries are extremely important. These factors recognize that outcomes depend upon collective action on the parts of librarians and staff. Thus, it is essential that librarians pay very close attention to the development and articulation of a mission and a set of goals and strategies. Mission statements are generally quite broad and encompassing. One example comes from the St. Louis County Library of the state of Missouri: “The mission of the St. Louis County Library District is to provide the resources and services to enrich individual minds, enhance lives, and expand perspectives” (St. Louis County Library, “About Us – Mission,” 2023). More specifically, the St. Louis County Library has formed a strategic plan, the elements of which are:

Promote Literacy and Support Lifelong Learning: We serve the community’s literacy needs from infancy to adulthood. We are the best resource for supporting lifelong learning and individual growth.

Foster a sense of Community, Inclusion, and Belonging: We seek to understand the needs of our community and provide opportunities to connect and enrich the lives of our patrons.

Increase Access, Impact, and Awareness: We strive to increase access to and awareness of the library’s resources and services (St. Louis County Library, “2023–2026 Strategic Plan,” 2023)

Beneath each strategy are specific tactics to be employed to achieve the strategies. The mission, strategies, and tactics form a set of outcomes to be accomplished.

A library’s mission, vision, and strategic plan act to form a connective engagement with the community, serving as a kind of integral contract with the constituency (individually and collectively). The strength of this bond is dependent upon a cooperative ethos between librarians and community members, a cooperation that is defined especially well by John Rawls (2001):

The central organizing idea of social cooperation has at least three essential features:

- (a) Social cooperation is distinct from merely socially coordinated activity.... Rather, social cooperation is guided by publicly recognized rules and procedures that those cooperating accept as appropriate to regulate their conduct,
- (b) The idea of cooperation includes the idea of fair terms of cooperation: these are terms each participant may reasonably accept, and should accept, provided that everyone else likewise accepts them,
- (c) The idea of cooperation also includes the idea of each participant's rational advantage or good. The idea of rational advantage specifies what it is that those engaged in cooperation are seeking to advance from the standpoint of their own good. (p. 6)

There can be an expansion of Rawls's conception of cooperation and the notion of good, as expressed by Kagan (1998). Kagan says that "each of us should not only count everyone but should count everyone *equally*" (p. 42). From a conventional point of view, this understanding should apply to everyone *within* the library and with respect to the community members. Additionally, Kagan (1998) charges us with a question that should be asked by everyone in librarianship: "Is the morally relevant factor not only how good the outcome is *for me*, or is the morally relevant factor how good the outcome is *overall*, taking *everyone's* well-being into account?" (p. 42). The answer to that question should be evident, particularly during these post-COVID times when humankind is recovering from a collective crisis.

Considering our profession's ethos from a practice-based lens, the pertinent concern is *how* librarians and library staff ensure good outcomes for everyone within and without the library. It is here that professional statements come to the fore. For example, the profession's core values should be considered and taken to heart in all aspects of the workplace. The values adopted by the Council of the American Library Association in 2019 are:

- Access
- Confidentiality/Privacy
- Democracy
- Diversity
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Intellectual Freedom
- The Public Good
- Preservation
- Professionalism
- Service
- Social Responsibility
- Sustainability.

(ALA "Core Values of Librarianship," 2019)

About 20 years ago, Thomas Weissinger (2003) assessed the practical efficacy of the values and concluded,

Do core values make a difference between orthodox and modified models of librarianship? The answer to this question is a qualified yes. With regards to reformed librarianship into an even more socially conscious profession, they make a difference. The profession is either more liberal or conservative depending upon whether its values are defined qualitatively or operationally.

Qualitatively, there is a full range of possible values that can and perhaps should be linked to the profession.... When values are defined operationally, the profession's range of possible values is severely limited by whatever counts as the core set. (p. 37)

It is unfortunate that some of these values are being called into question today and that, in some political circles, they are being refuted. A newly passed and signed law in the state of Florida would revise:

the duties of the Board of Governors relating to the mission of each state university; requiring the Board of Governors Accountability Plan to annually report certain research expenditures of a specified amount; prohibiting specified educational institutions from expending funds for certain purposes; revising how general education core courses are established; specifying a one-time limit on the requirement to change accrediting agencies, etc. (Florida Senate Bill 266, 2023)

A principle of the ALA Library Code of Ethics (2021) is the antithesis of the Florida law:

We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.

It is up to all of us in librarianship to answer Kagan's question in the affirmative and guard against all efforts opposed to the profession's values and ethics. As I've posited and reiterate here to emphasize the timelessness of the point:

The derivation of a formal, consistent, agreed-upon practical and normative ethics is no mean feat. In actuality, librarianship has, in many ways over many years, aimed at this goal. The LBR, codes of ethics, expressions of core values, and other statements are tangible products of the effort. (Budd, 2006, p. 266)

CONCLUSION

The preceding hints at what is in store for the reader of the essays in this volume. Theoretical and practical issues will be discussed; matters of principle and fact will be addressed. Some of the foregoing will be elaborated upon, and the breadth and depth of the coverage of workplace topics will enlighten all readers. The authors are exceedingly well-qualified to delve into their respective chapters. This volume will greatly interest professional librarians and can be used in educational settings as readings in coursework for master's programs. What has gone before in this Foreword is only a taste of what will come.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our profound gratitude to the reviewers of *Reading Workplace Dynamics* for their invaluable contributions to this work. These stellar scholars and practitioners of public librarianship generously offered their time, expertise, and insightful feedback, significantly improving the book's quality and depth.

We conducted the review process with a unique approach, allowing reviewers to choose whether they wished to remain anonymous. This coming-from-behind-the-curtains act of agency reflects our commitment to fostering open discourse and collective identity within public librarianship.

We are particularly grateful to the reviewers who chose to be named for their contributions:

- Dr Renate Chancellor, Syracuse University
- Dr Mónica Colón-Aguirre, University of South Carolina
- Dr Anne Goulding, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
- Dr Africa Hands, University of Buffalo, New York
- Dr Kafi Kumasi, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
- Dr Brady Lund, University of North Texas
- Dr Ajit Pyati, University of Western Ontario, Canada
- Dr Rita Soulen, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

We also extend our heartfelt appreciation to the reviewers who chose to remain anonymous. Your unwavering support and willingness to share your expertise played a vital role in bringing this book to fruition. We respect your agency and deeply value your contributions.

We express our sincere gratitude to all of our reviewers for your time, dedication, and insightful feedback. Your invaluable contributions have helped to make *Reading Workplace Dynamics* a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners of public librarianship alike.

We'd also like to express our gratitude to the editors at Emerald Publishing, who were incredibly patient, graceful, and understanding during the entire publication process for this book.

And, finally, to our amazing, individually unique, and collectively powerful voices of contributors who have made this collection such a meaningful and valuable body of work. We truly appreciate the passion, spirit, and dedication of our authors and their faith in the impact of public libraries, especially during times

of crisis. Only because of your vision and belief in the power of good that public agencies (like public libraries) can generate were we as editors provided with a golden opportunity and privilege to bring you all together and serve as editors of your scholarship, thereby leading to the creation of this timely and important volume.