

Decentering Policies  
Presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries  
2020 Conference  
June 4-5, 2020  
Virtual Conference

Shana Higgins, Associate Director for Public Services, Armacost Library, University of  
Redlands

**Abstract**

In this session the presenter explored some of the ways the epistemologies that operate in academic libraries can be obstacles to defining and enacting equitable policies. Presenter used the development of Community Agreements at their institution as a case study in decentering the status quo in public services policies.

**Library Policies: Public and Hidden Transcripts**

Policies for library use often appear to be a list of “don’ts”, of actions and behaviors that we don’t want to happen. A list of specific don’ts: no food or uncovered drinks, don’t re-shelve the books, no smoking or vaping, etc. This kind of policy communication is necessary, as a kind of legal protection, but also off-putting, with the risk of being ignored.

As we began conversations at our library about policies and communicating policies, and expectations for behaviors and actions, it became clear that we have some tensions and contradictions in who we think the library belongs to. Here I draw on Scott’s concept of public and hidden transcripts. The public transcript is the official story, the institutional stance. The hidden transcript, in simple terms, is actual practice, and in Scott’s conceptualization, the practice and stories of subordinates, those who don’t make decisions.

- Mission statements are part of the public transcript. Most college and university libraries include language in their mission statements regarding supporting or encouraging or stimulating learning and academic success. It may also include language about being user- or student-centered and about equitable access. The library’s role is to support its users—students, researchers.
- Professional standards and guidelines, best practices documents are also public transcripts. The *Core Values of Librarianship* is a public transcript, communicating to ourselves and others the guiding principles of our work.
- In a 2018 article published in *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*, Fobazi Ettarh addresses these public transcripts in relation to the ways many of us internalize them in such a way that we consider ourselves irreproachable. Ettarh defines this as “vocational awe”. To quote: vocational awe is “the set of ideas, values, and

assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.” In our initial conversations as a group, in All Staff meetings, it became clear that we had difficulty examining ourselves, we had difficulty analyzing whether our policies could have differential effects on different groups of students and faculty and staff. So, part of the project became finding ways to dismantle our vocational awe and to step outside our own experiences.

The hidden transcript of library work relates to how policies actually get enacted or enforced; how library workers adhere to, resist, or circumvent policies. There are multiple power imbalances for library workers, especially for those working most closely with the public, in public spaces. Library workers generally have less power than administrators; and often have less power than students, especially certain kinds of students (legacy students, wealthy students); and library workers are stratified—in my library we are split between faculty librarians and classified staff. Some of the ways those with less power can exercise power is to resist enforcing policies, to apply policies selectively, and to claim territory, to claim library spaces as belonging to those who spend the most time in them (over years, not just hours in a week).

- A challenge, then, is to create policies that empower rather than further disempower particular groups of employees and library users.

## **Decentering Policies**

- Engage in deep conversations with all library personnel, with particular attention to accountability. Accountability means to recognize that our work is connected, that we are interdependent within and outside of the library. Accountability means being open to and working through critique, holding ourselves responsible and accountable for harmful behaviors, practices and processes.
- Collaborate as broadly as possible, with students, staff, faculty, and administrators across the university. Ongoing conversations with student groups, public safety, and other student support services.
- Attend to language and multiple perspectives. “Name the problem” (Damasco quoted in Vinopal, 2016): don’t leave concepts vague if you mean something specific.
- Especially for those of us who are white: listen, and demand that our white colleagues listen.
- Center the experiences and needs of women, specifically women of color in our feminized profession; center colleagues who work most closely with library users; center lower-wage earning colleagues; center working class and poor students; center LGBTQ colleagues and students; center transgender colleagues and students; center disabilities, shaping work around accessibility. In other words, we need to seriously do the work of decentering whiteness, heterosexuality, patriarchy, elitism, ableism, Christianity, and all the other categories/status groups we consider the default in the United States.

## References

- Armacost Library. (2018). Community agreements.  
<https://library.redlands.edu/policies/communityagreements>
- Emmelhainz, Celia, Erin Pappas, and Maura Seale. 2017. "Behavioral Expectations for the Mommy Librarian: The Successful Reference Transaction as Emotional Labor." In *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations*, edited by Maria Accardi, 27–45. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press. <https://escholarship-org.ezproxy.redlands.edu/uc/item/2mq851m0>
- Ettarh, F. (2018, January 10). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. In *the Library With the Lead Pipe*.  
<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/> ar
- MacCabe, C., & Yanacek, H. (2018). *Keywords for Today: A 21st Century Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, A. G. (1998). Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly* 11(4), 499-535.
- Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.
- Shirazi, R. (2014, July 15). Reproducing the academy: Librarians and the question of service in the digital humanities.  
<http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities>
- Sloniowski, Lisa. "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian." *Library Trends* 64(4), 645-666
- Vinopal, J. (2016, January 13). The quest for diversity in library staffing: From awareness to action. In *the Library With the Lead Pipe*.  
<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/>



# CARL 2020 Virtual Conference

June 4-5, 2020



# Code of Conduct

We expect all participants in CARL-related spaces, including guests and vendors, to behave in ways that support the dignity and well-being of everyone present. This includes formal and informal CARL-related spaces, including digital communication, social media, and in-person interactions. We acknowledge that mistakes will be made, but we also expect all participants in CARL-related spaces to be humble, be comfortable with being uncomfortable, acknowledge the mistake, and commit to continuous learning and improvement.

For the full code of conduct and to report violations, please visit [bit.ly/carlcode2020](https://bit.ly/carlcode2020)



# Land Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that I live, work, and learn on the traditional territory and homelands of the Cahuilla and Serrano people.

I am a guest on this land and commit myself to listening to and supporting indigenous people. CARL encourages attendees to know, acknowledge, and support the peoples whose homeland you live, work, and learn on.



# *DECENTERING POLICIES*

Shana Higgins  
CARL Conference 2020



# Outline for Session

- Institutional Context
- Practices and Epistemologies
- Group Discussion: Language of Policies
- How we came to an agreement.





# Context

## At a glance

The numbers don't tell the whole story about the College of Arts & Sciences, but they do paint a vivid picture. We offer limitless opportunities, and give our students personalized attention with small class sizes and accessible faculty.

**1907**

Year founded

**2,527**

students from 41  
states and 46  
countries

**12:1**

student-to-faculty  
ratio

**120,000**

community  
service hours

**19**

average class size

**50+**

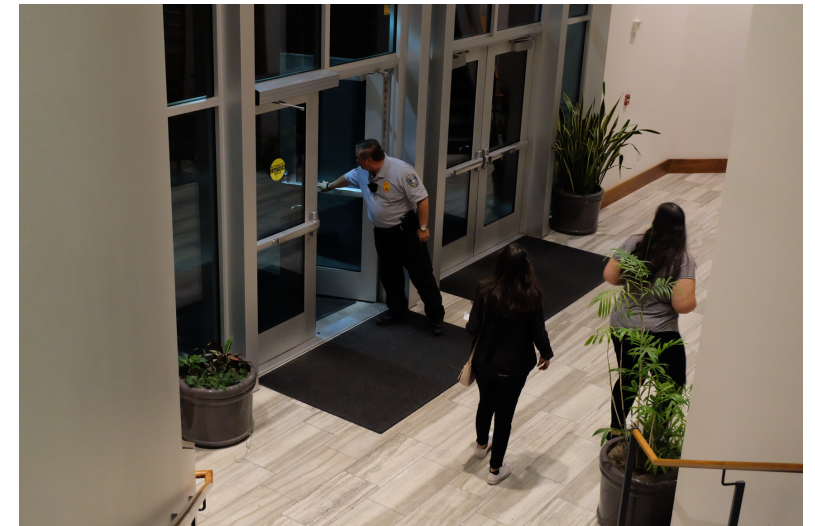
programs of  
study, ranging  
from chemistry to  
studio art

**100+**

student  
organizations

**177**

full-time faculty  
members



# Academic Library Policies: The World as It Is

## General Policies

- Do not disturb the research and study of other users.
- Do not tamper with or damage University resources and property.
- Observe Quiet Study Area designations.
- Place cell phones on silent mode and use them only in the lobby.
- Beverages are to be kept covered.
- Smoking, including tobacco and/or e-cigarettes, is prohibited in the library.
- Do not leave backpacks, cell phones, laptops, purses or valuables unattended.



# Who Does the Library Belong To?

## The Public Transcript\*

- Mission Statements
- Professional Guidelines (i.e. Core Values of Librarianship)
- Vocational Awe\*\*

\*Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.

\*\*Ettarh, F. (2018, January 10). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*.



# Who Does the Library Belong To?

## The Hidden Transcript

“the interactions, stories, myths, and rituals in which employees participate beyond the direct surveillance of power holders”

Murphy, A. G. (1998). Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly* 11(4), 499-535.



# Gathering Our Communities

- Library Faculty & Staff
- Library Advisory
- Center for Diversity & Inclusion
- Academic Success & Disability Services
- International Student Services
- Academic Computing
- Associated Students of University of Redlands
- Chairs and Sponsors of Siblinghoods/Greek Life
- Director & Staff of Jaspers Corner (tutoring for K-8)
- Staff of Counseling Services (clinical counseling)



# Care of Spaces (library faculty & staff survey responses)

## *Users – Positive behaviors*

- Clean up
- Courteous
- Quiet
- Generosity toward others
- Reporting problems to staff
- Respectful of others
- Respect quiet areas
- Seek staff to resolve issues/conflicts
- Respect library as shared, communal space
- Respect and care of library materials and spaces

# Care of Spaces (library faculty & staff survey responses)

## *Personnel – Positive behaviors*

- Take student feedback seriously – respond
- Do our part to keep library tidy and maintained
- Welcome students to rearrange and inhabit spaces in the way they wish
- Courteous, polite communication
- Promptly responding to patrons
- Communicate that the library belongs to our users
- Promptly addressing issues
- Clearly articulated/posted procedures
- Consistent presence in all areas of library to foster sense of safety
- Provide clean, safe spaces
- Provide equipment that functions, and that we know how to function
- Materials should be described and shelved properly (findable)
- Manage expectations and change processes to meet patron needs (shrink turnaround times on ILL and ordered items to checkout, communicate when and why we cannot meet users' needs)
- Sharing public and staff spaces

# Gathering Our Communities

- Library Faculty & Staff
- Library Advisory
- Center for Diversity & Inclusion
- Academic Success & Disability Services
- International Student Services
- Academic Computing
- Associated Students of University of Redlands
- Chairs and Sponsors of Siblinghoods/Greek Life
- Director & Staff of Jaspers Corner (tutoring for K-8)
- Staff of Counseling Services (clinical counseling)





## **Commitment to this shared space includes:**

Sharing responsibility for creating and maintaining an **inclusive**, respectful, and positive work space...

**Armacost Library personnel also commit to:** Supporting and maintaining an **inclusive**, respectful, and positive work space...



# Name the Problem

“Don’t disguise the issues or use euphemisms. In research under way to evaluate library diversity plans, Ione Damasco notes that, while the word “inclusion” was frequently used, none of the plans included words such as “racism,” “anti-racist,” “whiteness,” “white privilege,” “privilege,” or “racial justice.” ... We need to learn not just to see and name bias in ourselves and in the world around us, but to understand the underlying dynamics that perpetuate them and speak openly about them.”

Vinopal, J. (2016, January 13). The quest for diversity in library staffing: From awareness to action. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*.

## **Commitment to this shared space includes:**

Sharing responsibility for creating and maintaining an inclusive, **respectful**, and positive work space...

**Armacost Library personnel also commit to:** Supporting and maintaining an inclusive, **respectful**, and positive work space...



# Respect/Respectful

The polysemy of **respect** has allowed for a slippage that makes the word a placeholder for the ideology of the speaker. To a crowd of likeminded individuals, petitions for **respect** (either absence of harassment or esteem for authorities) are prudent and sensible. To onlookers who disagree, petitions for respect can be combated as entitled and obstinate. The still lively history of this word's contention indicates a complex argument about how members of our culture assign worth to individuals. Moreover, the reactionary aggression to certain calls for **respect** shows the word's importance in constructing our understanding of the world—deciding whom we deem worthy and unworthy of **respect**.

MacCabe, C., & Yanacek, H. (2018). *Keywords for Today : A 21st Century Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.

## **Commitment to this shared space includes:**

Sharing responsibility for creating and maintaining an inclusive, respectful, and **positive** work space...

**Armacost Library personnel also commit to:** Supporting and maintaining an inclusive, respectful, and **positive** work space...



## **Commitment to this shared space includes:**

Sharing responsibility for creating and maintaining an **inclusive, affirming, and welcoming** work space, in which we can all expect to work in an atmosphere **free from discriminatory and oppressive attitudes, comments, behaviors, and actions** (i.e. racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, classist...)

## **Armacost Library personnel also commit to:**

Supporting and maintaining an **inclusive, affirming, and welcoming** work space, in which we actively work towards creating an atmosphere **free from discriminatory and oppressive attitudes, comments, behaviors, and actions** (i.e. racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, classist...)

# Decentering Policies

- Engage in deep conversations with all library personnel, with particular attention to accountability.
- Collaborate as broadly as possible, with students, staff, faculty, and administrators across the university.
- Attend to language and multiple perspectives.  
“Name the problem”; don’t leave concepts vague if you mean something specific.
- For those of us who are white: listen, and demand that our white colleague listen.

# Armacost Library Community Agreements

<https://library.redlands.edu/policies/communityagreements>



# References

Emmelhainz, Celia, Erin Pappas, and Maura Seale. 2017. "Behavioral Expectations for the Mommy Librarian: The Successful Reference Transaction as Emotional Labor." In *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations*, edited by Maria Accardi, 27–45. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press. <https://escholarship-org.ezproxy.redlands.edu/uc/item/2mq851m0>.

Ettarh, F. (2018, January 10). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*.

MacCabe, C., & Yanacek, H. (2018). *Keywords for Today : A 21st Century Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.

Murphy, A. G. (1998). Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly* 11(4), 499-535.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.

Shirazi, R. (2014, July 15). Reproducing the academy: Librarians and the question of service in the digital humanities. Retrieved from <http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities>

Sloniowski, Lisa. "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian." *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 645-666

Vinopal, J. (2016, January 13). The quest for diversity in library staffing: From awareness to action. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*.

