

# ***Calling the Shots: Examination of a Self-Managed Team in an Academic Library***

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## **Introduction**

Participative management, widely used in the corporate world, is scarce in academic libraries.<sup>1</sup>

Although libraries share several common characteristics with other types of organizations, they are different in some ways. They are service agencies for information not profit-making organizations. They perform functions both of supply and guidance...Currently libraries do not have clear-cut objectives because they have accumulated functions and methodologies which make for rigid structure and resistance to change.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, few academic libraries have adopted team management as their standard. Instead, libraries have lagged behind and remained a bastion of hierarchical structure.

When Dowling College granted faculty status to the full-time librarians, it also created a self-governing department. The librarians took the re-organization one step further and began to run the department as a self-managed team. Although there is an elected department coordinator, everyone shares in the responsibilities and decisions of the

department. In the eight years since its inception, the department has progressed from a dysfunctional group to a smooth-running, collaborative team. This transformation has been dramatic.

While the results have been exceedingly successful, the librarians have learned that self-management inherently has pluses and minuses that need to be explored. A well-functioning team empowers the participants, allows for diversity, and earns campus respect. But a team, by its very definition, also diminishes accountability, creates powerless leaders, takes time, and can be frustrating. Awkwardnesses are further accentuated when the team structure exists within a hierarchical one, such as the faculty/administration structure of a university. The Dowling librarians found that continuous communication and team-building sessions are essential to creating a smooth-running participative management team. This paper will discuss both the positive and negative aspects of working in a team environment and the critical factors necessary to make it succeed.

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**Critical Factors**

An organizational crisis<sup>3</sup> or the promise of resultant benefits<sup>4</sup> provide a fertile ground for the creation of a successful self-management team but a team's success begins with proper design,<sup>5</sup> appropriate size,<sup>6</sup> and an enabling structure.<sup>7</sup> It is also dependent on team members being committed to common goals, open communication, mutual trust, and a "shared conviction."<sup>8</sup>

The organization needs to be supportive of the team, clarify the team's authority,<sup>9</sup> and provide open lines of communication.<sup>10</sup> The reward system of the organization must be supportive and reinforce the team approach rather than single out individuals and, thus, undermine the cohesiveness of the team.<sup>11</sup> From the beginning, the team needs to establish norms with guidelines for attendance, cooperation, and conflict management, etc.<sup>12</sup> If these factors are in place, the self-managed team has good prospects for success.

**Dowling College Library: a Case Study****Background**

Dowling College is a small liberal arts college on the south shore of Long Island, New York. It serves a non-traditional population of 6,000 graduate and undergraduate students and specializes in aviation, transportation, business, and education. In 1992, Dowling College Library was reorganized from a hierarchical academic library whose faculty librarians were supervised by and reported directly to an administrative director, to a flat organizational structure: self-management and no director. Under the new structure, the librarians became responsible for the professional administration of the library. Administrative networking and overall vision for the library program, originally rested under the aegis of (the administrative position of) Assistant Provost for Learning Resources who reported to the Provost. However, this position has been unfilled for over three years, necessitating the Department Coordinator to assume many of these responsibilities. The Manager for Services and Systems, a non-librarian, assumed the budgetary responsibilities, oversight of the physical plant, and supervision of clerical staff when the Director of Information Services left. At present, the librarians report directly to the Provost. Like other academic departments at the College, the Department Coordinator is elected by peers but has no actual authority over those peers—a unique structure, which is at once tremendously empowering and terribly constraining.

**Benefits of Self-Management****Empowerment**

With each member of the department having one equal vote, each person has an equal say and stake in the governance of the department. No one member has more power, or more authority than another. This method of representation protects the newer members of the Department from being overshadowed or intimidated by more senior members. In fact, because everyone's input is valued equally it encourages the participation of newer members. Team equality allows newer ideas to be heard, and not buried beneath outmoded behavior or practices, while still valuing the wisdom and experience of older members. When everyone has an equal say in the operation of the department, a mutually beneficial relationship develops. The team benefits when everyone works together and each member benefits when the team runs smoothly. "Team members want to divide the labor fairly and effectively. They feel a sense of personal accountability to complete their tasks so that other team members can complete theirs. They do their own jobs and whatever else it takes so that the team as a whole is successful."<sup>13</sup>

As Dowling's team members became accustomed to working together, they found that they were more productive. The result, whether it was service to customers or a proposal to administration, was better than if any one individual had led the department alone. Such successes encouraged further collaboration and reduced competition among department members. The librarians discovered that working together could be both productive and fun.

When Dowling College Library first approached self-management, it was a team in name only. In reality, the "team" was a dysfunctional group of people that perceived plots and hidden agendas everywhere. Members were not at all mutually supportive. After essential personnel changes, a major team-building effort began with a thorough assessment of the disparate personalities and work styles represented in the team. The insights each team member gained about her/himself and her/his co-workers was invaluable. They found that understanding and learning to appreciate the diversity of personalities and approaches helped them to respect each other as individuals and accept the unique gifts each member brought to the team. The team members knew that they had come a long way when, after a particularly long, intense, meeting, one member said, "We introverts can't take any more of you extroverts." Another member replied, "I'm so glad because we extroverts have just about had it with you introverts, as well." Everyone laughed and the meeting continued. The team members had learned to value one another's differences and to

recognize the strength such diversity offered. They had discovered that differences were not wrong; they were merely different.

### **Personal Growth**

As self-management encourages acceptance of differences and, thus, does not dictate member conformity, so, too, it allows for personal growth and individuation. Though they must perform as functioning, contributing team members of a team, people need not conform to a hierarchical dictate of work style. In other words, team members retain their individuality and bring their own talents and strengths to bear on the team.

### **Cooperation**

When the team fulfills its responsibilities to the organization and is productive, team members gain a greater amount of individual freedom. In the Dowling Library team, each person determines her or his own responsibilities, work hours, and job description. Leftover tasks are divided up equitably. Each member is expected to oversee her/his areas of responsibility with all of the other members included on that area's team. For example, one librarian is responsible for the oversight of Reference Services, but the remaining reference librarians are expected to contribute time, ideas, and energy to the Reference Department. Another member coordinates the Information Instruction program, but the remaining librarians are expected to contribute to Information Instruction by teaching and helping to streamline the curriculum. This cooperative structure and inter-coordination of activities results in a great deal of input and freedom. Everyone is on everyone else's team (or sub-team, if you will), therefore, each team member is aware of just what is happening throughout the department, thus strengthening communication and improving department performance.

### **Decision-making**

Major decisions are made by consensus so that each team member has a stake in the final outcome. That does not mean that everyone is in agreement at the beginning. "Constructive controversy"<sup>14</sup> is encouraged or as Drucker has said, "The first rule in decision-making is that one does not make a decision unless there is disagreement."<sup>15</sup> To come to an acceptable solution is thorny difficult work and it requires examining all sides of a situation, but the ultimate resolution of a problem is invariably better because of the involvement of all the team members. "Working as a member

of an effective genuine team provides the advantage of having others' knowledge and experience immediately available to support and assist, especially in moments—or days—of crisis or challenge."<sup>16</sup>

Decision by consensus forces teams to work together. Such close contact demands understanding and sensitivity to other members' needs and shortcomings. For instance, if one team member has faulty listening skills, another might ask the individual to paraphrase the current discussion, write down the recently given instructions, or read them to the group for clarification.

### **Equality**

The team environment levels the playing field, and a flat field is essential to the success of a flat organizational structure. This is especially important when a group has become stagnant and needs to be shaken up in order to progress. It does no good to bring in new personnel to revitalize a group if new personnel will be easily outvoted because of seniority or weighted voting.

If one has grown up in a hierarchical world, it seems only fair that having attained seniority, one should enjoy the status. In such a world, merit is often of little consequence. But in a self-managed team, seniority does not give more of a say. For those with seniority that is frustrating; for those without, it is refreshing. Thus, seniority can be a mixed blessing in an organization. Long-time members have the advantage of historical perspective: the successes, failures, and changes of the library and an organization. They are able to contribute the wisdom of their experience through mentoring newer members, know how to work the system, and usually have a network of connections within the organization.

Yet there must be room for change and new ideas within the organization in order for it to grow. When the Dowling College Library was restructured, new faculty librarians were accorded votes equal to those of senior librarians; their mission was to speak up and to make a difference. For someone starting a new job, it can be intimidating to have colleagues who have been in the field longer than that person has been alive. On an effective team, this kind of differentiation is moot. Each team member is a valuable resource. The newly hired may be just out of library school, but s/he has information about the latest technology resources. A new librarian may never have had academic library experience, but s/he may have an interest in the latest teaching techniques that s/he can share with the team. The person with seniority may, indeed, be able to contribute the history

of the organization, but the others have much to offer as well.

**Cohesiveness**

Since team members do not compete with each other, team members work towards the common goal of an improved library. All team members' ideas, productivity, and services are welcomed. Team members also assume a mentoring role, assisting each team member to grow and succeed. When everyone works together and shares information, other members of the team are inspired to do more.

When the library went from DOS to Windows 95, CD-ROM to online with full-text, and from stand-alone to networked access, the team was extraordinarily selfless. The success of this major conversion directly resulted from the substantial efforts of the entire team. Each member of the team contributed to the technology plan and, when there were budget cuts, each team member forfeited a sizeable chunk from her/his budget to the project. Once the conversion was completed, the team shepherded the Library through the painful transition (due to multiple platforms and inadequate computer support) that ensued. The project impacted every member of the team. Each person had to give up old, familiar resources and learn new ones, develop new teaching tools for the new resources, and deal with the vagaries of the new technology. Now everyone rightfully takes credit for a successful project.

Being part of a self-managed team does not automatically invite teamwork, however. Anyone who has ever been part of a committee knows that teamwork is difficult work. When working alone, one has to agree only with oneself, but working on a team, requires cooperation, sensitivity, honesty, and communication with a number of different people, each with her or his own point of view. But, teamwork is worth the aggravation.

**Campus Respect**

Although the librarians at Dowling have had faculty status since the College was founded, their fellow teaching faculty have traditionally viewed them as second-class faculty members. Self-management has altered that perspective. When the Library became a self-governing department in 1992 and the department was reorganized, the success of the librarians' team-building efforts made the Library more responsive to campus needs and the librarians subsequently earned the respect of the teaching faculty.

As faculty, the librarians participate in all faculty activities and college governance, and are active on campus-wide

committees and task forces. As a team, they have worked hard to update their library service programs; customize their Information Instruction program; provide personalized research; create a dynamic web page, teach searching skills, and, in short, become a presence on campus. The librarians have been successful and little by little they are remaking their image from unresponsive and reactive to technologically savvy and proactive leaders on campus.

Although the faculty librarians have been liaisons to the various Schools and Divisions of the College for some time, it is only after recent contract negotiations that they were granted designated seats on all standing campus-wide committees, thus allowing them to fully participate in administrative governance. Now with votes on the following committees: Academic Research, Academic Standards, Curriculum, Long Range Planning, and Faculty Personnel Committees, the librarians have entrée to many other campus sub-committees and task forces (Scenario planning, Electronic Resources, etc.). They have also presented at Faculty Colloquia and the President's Administrative Council meetings. By making every effort to cooperate and become known on campus, they have helped publicize their programs and improved their campus-wide image. Such college participation is part of the librarians' team effort. Each team member selects her/his preferred committees and division or school and then the team nominates accordingly. In addition, everyone has contributed to department documents, course curricula, library web pages, announcements, etc.

Now that the Dowling Library is self-managed, not only do the teaching faculty recognize them as academic equals, but the administrators recognize them as truly capable managers. In fact, because of their record of library management, the new Provost and the new President recently commended the librarians for a job well done. They saw a library that has changed and is progressing, that can provide current information when they need it. They saw a library of which they can be justifiably proud.

**Dilemmas of Self-Management****Diminished Accountability**

Team management can have its flaws. When no one person is directly responsible for the supervision of the "team," there is less accountability. In addition, unless the team determines how it will handle specific types of difficult situations, conflict management may present a problem. Both of these issues must be addressed early in the team's formation.<sup>17</sup> It cannot be over emphasized that the team needs to agree to norms, accountability, and conflict resolution proce-

dures, and each of these needs to be discussed and revisited often.<sup>18</sup>

In Dowling's situation, each team member accepts responsibility for carrying out her/his tasks, overseeing her/his area of leadership, i.e. Information Instruction, Collection Development, Electronic Resources, but one person does not have the final say or authority to ensure that all areas are running smoothly. The team as a whole shoulders that responsibility. Since each member has equal status and say, no one person has the authority to hold the group accountable or take it to task for infractions. If one group member does not complete a project or fails to come to work, no "director" will reprimand her/him. The team leader or Department Coordinator is nominally responsible and currently reports directly to the Provost as the team spokesperson. The coordinator can speak to the individual, but the coordinator has the same vote as her/his peers and no authority over her/his colleagues. The team itself must deal with whatever the issue is but its only power is to influence its members by censuring any individual and bringing peer pressure to bear. There are no tangible consequences for infractions unless the team recommends them. That is why it is vitally important for the team initially to decide on team norms, and goals and to determine how to deal with accountability and conflict.

Having no one colleague with authority over others is a facet of self-management that demands a great deal of attention. It is the flip side of the freedom benefit of self-management. At Dowling College Library, the librarians are still working hard to master this unruly aspect of teamwork. They handle it in a number of ways: they hold weekly meetings where everyone reports on her/his responsibilities and neglected items are repeatedly placed on the agenda until accomplished. Minutes record the meeting and can be used to chart progress and check decisions, and open discussion on problem areas is encouraged so that team members take responsibility for participating. When there is a difficulty, they seek to resolve it. Through team-building workshops, the librarians have learned a great deal about each other and know that by using *all* of their talents, they can accomplish great things. The key is to tap into those special and unique talents, and channel them into the team's mutual goals.

### **Conflict**

Some team members will avoid conflict at all costs, which wreaks havoc when issues need to be resolved. The librarians have tried numerous approaches to dealing with this,

from: group discussion to one-on-one discussion, compromise to avoidance. While they have learned that avoidance is probably the most damaging approach (since the issue remains, festers, and is not resolved), avoidance still abounds. Research shows that the healthiest thing for everyone involved is to use a problem solving or collaborative approach so that all sides win.

"Self-governing" has as many definitions as there are team members. Some take self-governing to mean determining their own work parameters. They are free to decide when to come and go and what to do while they are at work. This has the potential to become an abuse of the system. There is no problem if someone comes in late and makes up the time, but repeated lateness, without time made up, makes it difficult to get a job done in the remaining shortened hours. As a self-governing entity, some team members consider their privileges to be rights and do not recognize that these rights come with responsibilities. For example, unlimited sick time is a privilege, but if taken at the slightest provocation, it can create stress for the one taking the time and those who must fill in for the absent person. Since the person taking the time off still needs to accomplish her or his work in a shortened time span, the resulting stress is not caused by the job, but by rather by an abuse of a freedom. Such an abuse also has ramifications for others. Colleagues will need to pitch in for the absent co-worker, leading to additional stress for the substitute, and possible conflict with the absent co-worker. Eventually, the team must get involved.

### **Group Size and Problem Solving**

The group size of the self-managed team is important. If the group is too large, decisions will not necessarily reflect the sense of the whole group. Martell advises teams to beware of fake participation<sup>19</sup> wherein some members may participate in decisions only by voting—going along with the majority vote but not investing any of their own thoughts into the process. If they see themselves as not being personally affected, the ultimate decision is unimportant to them. On the other hand, with *groupthink*,<sup>20</sup> team members avoid introducing any controversial issues. They want the decision to reflect the agreement of the majority. Unfortunately, when the team proceeds as if in agreement, not considering critical information that would necessitate a reconsideration of the decision, the decision made is not necessarily the best for the whole team. The Bay of Pigs and the shuttle explosion are classic examples of *groupthink*. In both instances, members of each team had information that contradicted the group decision but these members did not want to

appear contrary by disagreeing with the group. In each instance, the information would have prevented the resulting disasters.

In addition, when the team is too large, *social loafing*<sup>21</sup> occurs wherein members of the team let others do the work for them. They are group members in name only and get neither intellectually nor physically involved.

With eight members, the Dowling team is a workable size, large enough to provide a variety of points of view and small enough to be productive. Adding the eleven part-time librarians to the team would change the focus of the team since the commitment of a part-time employee is different from that of a full-time one. The librarians, therefore, hold separate reference meetings and the part-time librarians act in an advisory capacity to the full-time librarians.

### **Powerless Leaders**

The leader of a self-managed team is in an excruciating position: virtual authority with no real power. The Department Coordinator sets the agendas for meetings, runs the meetings, submits reports, represents the Department at college-wide functions, and acts as a liaison with the Provost, other administrators, faculty, and customers, but s/he has no power over her/his peers. When a complaint is made about customer service, the Department Coordinator must deal with it appropriately, but when the complaint involves one of the team members, s/he has little recourse for getting the colleague to alter her/his behavior. For instance, they had an issue with posted hours not being adhered to by the team member responsible for a particular collection. The Department Coordinator brought the matter to the responsible individual, to the team, and, finally, to the appropriate administrator who gave his advice on the matter. The constraints of team leadership being what they are, the problem continued until the person left the team.

### **Frustrations**

Although there are many satisfying aspects to self-management, it can be time consuming and frustrating. The person who is the Department Coordinator is not necessarily selected because of leadership ability, skill, intelligence, or knowledge. The person is elected by peers and does not have to apply, be interviewed, or selected from a pool of candidates applying for the position. Simply put, there is a pool of team members and the team elects the Department Coordinator from within the team. The tradition in the library has been to rotate the position. This has pros and cons. While everyone is given an opportunity to share the re-

sponsibility, to learn and to grow from the position, the team will need to adapt to different approaches towards management and allow for the steep learning curve during which time the leader is not as effective as s/he might be. Rotation also allows for some incompetent leaders but the hope is that, strong leadership will set a certain standard for succeeding coordinators to follow. Ultimately, however, the team is responsible for achieving its goals.

### **Time Consumption**

Working as a consensus building team is a time-consuming endeavor. Meetings can proliferate and lengthen in an effort to gain agreement. There are certainly times when one person/one vote is a disadvantage: consensus is time consuming and can delay decisions while discussion ensues. Simply having the authority to direct some activities would be a welcome quick fix. On the other hand, when a decision is made by consensus, everyone supports it and the benefits of one person/one vote, far outweigh the disadvantages. The creativity and productivity that teams engender are much too valuable to give up for the opportunity to say, "Just do it because I say so."

Although the Department Coordinator has more responsibilities that take more time, the extra compensation is only a token. While other faculty coordinators teach fewer classes, that does not translate easily into library management and team responsibilities. At first the team determined that the Department Coordinator would be responsible for fewer hours of duty at the reference desk. Next, as the Department Coordinator took on the Associate Provost's responsibilities, the team relieved this person of all desk duty and teaching responsibilities. This was a great help but ultimately resulted in resentment among the team members who had initiated the offer. While the Department Coordinator was doing the job, some feared s/he was not fulfilling the faculty contract. Airing the grievances helped clear up the issue.

### **Authority**

The self-managed team system is just that, *self*-management. It does not grant any say in what goes on in any other department on campus. In point of fact, self-management does not even have the final authority on what goes on in the library. Its authority begins and ends with how the librarians regulate their workday and their work responsibilities. When there is a major problem, the team leader still has to go to someone within the administrative hierarchy for help. Although self-managed, the library team still has to find a

way to work within the hierarchical structure of the entire college, and go to it for final approval on all major plans, budget requests, or proposals.

Teamwork has proven to be an invaluable weapon in their arsenal when the team has to produce a document such as the library's strategic or technology plans, or course curricula. Each member brings different talents and strengths to the project, which makes the final document that much stronger and ensures a greater likelihood for success. Working together on various projects has helped build and reinforce mutual respect and trust. It has also made the library's team members ardent supporters of team management. Yet no matter how eloquent the document or how cogent the argument, only those in administration have the final say on whether or not a proposal may be accomplished. Administrators do not have to abide by the consensus recommendation of the self-managed work team. Even when the librarians have spent countless hours writing and justifying a new faculty position, those in authority can table the proposal. For this reason alone, it is especially important for the team to have a good working relationship, with mutual trust and respect, in order to overlook disappointments and continue to work together to improve the department.

### ***Hierarchical World***

While the librarians all have the same status and are all equal, the library staff is hierarchical in structure. This complicates staff interaction with the librarians. Although everyone working in the library is a member of the same "team" and the librarians view each other as peers, the staff have supervisors. Misunderstandings can arise when the librarians work with staff. Because of their hierarchical orientation, staff view themselves in a position inferior to the librarians. On the other hand, the librarians, recognizing the interdependence of the roles, view the staff as equals who, when they are doing their job, make it possible for the librarians to do theirs. The hierarchy can further complicate the interaction when a librarian asks a staff member to perform a task. The librarian is making the request of a colleague; the staff member hears it as an order coming from someone superior who is not her/his boss. Thus, a hostile situation can arise that was never intended. When librarians interact with administrators, an additional complication arises. Some administrators view themselves as superiors of the librarians who are accustomed to viewing everyone else as peers. The lines of communication must be constantly re-defined.

### **Conclusion**

- Self-management is empowering. By giving each team member an equal say, everyone gets to participate equally in an organization.

- Self-management develops greater team spirit, collaboration and mentoring. When team members work closely together, they develop a deeper respect and trust for one another. Self-management does not encourage competition.

- Because of the potential for conflict, groupthink and social loafing, self-management works best with inner-directed individuals who are self-motivated and want to do their best. Self-management is not for all persons or all organizations.

- A self-managed team needs to agree to norms and goals early on in order to handle conflict, and accountability. If it does not, oversight may become difficult when reprimands are necessitated. It is much more difficult for a peer to correct a peer than it is for a boss to lay down the law.

- Development is an important component of self-management. That includes training in decision-making, problem solving, communication and team-building. Team-building efforts and programs, which take time, energy, and patience, are an essential component of a successful self-managed team.

The reorganization of a hierarchical academic library into a self-managed team of equals can create a safe environment for personal and organizational growth and improvement. The ultimate success of the re-structuring requires intense team-building efforts, improved communication, the establishment of trusting relationships, and some drastic personnel changes. The resulting flat team structure will be a stronger, more creative, and much more productive entity than the former hierarchical one, as long as each member accepts responsibility for being a significant part of the team. The essential challenge for any team is to balance empowerment with accountability.

The self-managed team in the Dowling College Library has come a long way from its paranoid, dysfunctional beginnings. Today the Dowling librarians are a cohesive group—they work well together, trust each other, value their differences, mentor one another, and respect each other, as well as enjoy working, laughing, and having fun together.

Theirs is a self-management success story of which they are proud. They are aware that there are many successful hierarchical management stories, as well. Despite many studies of library management style, no one has shown objectively that one style is superior to another. The librarians at Dowling can attest that their staff morale and performance

have greatly improved under the new management structure, even if it does take longer than formerly

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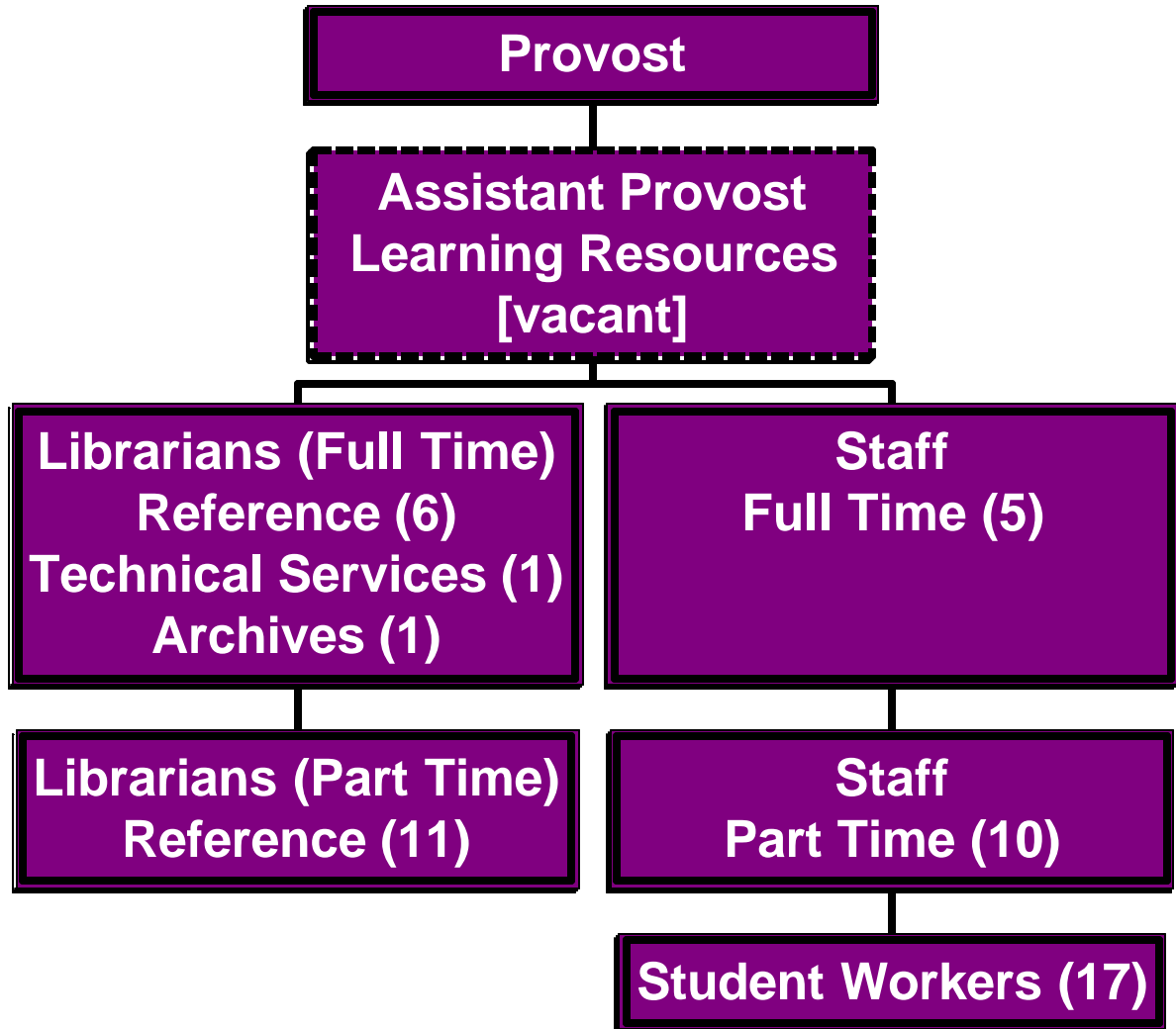
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## **Appendix**

### **Dowling College Library Organization Chart**



Indicates the position is currently vacant.