Early Career Issues in Academic Librarianship

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Abstract

Are you early in your career (< 5 years) as an academic librarian or a library school student thinking about pursuing a career in academic librarianship? Do you have questions or concerns about how to plan your career and stay on track (RPT, anyone?) or even how to land that first job as an academic librarian? Bring your questions, concerns, thoughts, and more and let's talk! We'll get out that "elephant in the living room" and have a discussion about the issues that matter most to early career librarians and library school students. Are you an experienced librarian with some advice and suggestions for those early in their careers or just starting out? Please join us and share your thoughts on how to navigate successfully through the bends and turns of the first few years as an academic librarian.

Introduction

Breaking in to the world of academic librarianship can be a daunting and arduous process for new librarians and library school students. Some are lucky enough to have had coursework in academic librarianship as part of the MLS degree or experience working in an academic library as a paraprofessional or intern. Despite their levels of experience most new librarians and library school students are unfamiliar with or confused by the unwritten rules of engagement that can be unique to academic librarianship. The complexity and diversity of the academic library hiring process is the first obstacle new librarians and library school students must tackle. Those who are successful in landing that first academic position are soon confronted with a whole new set of challenges, often accompanied by a ticking tenure clock. A number of resources exist to help those starting out in academic librarianship including professional organizations (e.g., Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the New Members Round Table (NMRT) of the American Library Association (ALA)) and web sites (e.g., http://www.liscareer.com/). Mentorship is also important for new librarians and library school students (Lee, 2009). Some organizations have internal mentoring programs (Farmer, Stockham & Trussell, 2009; Munde, 2000), and many external mentoring programs are also available (Levine, 2009). Despite all these available resources, it is sometimes very helpful just to sit down and talk with others about one's questions and concerns in a face-to-face setting.

The intent of this discussion was to give new librarians and library school students an opportunity to voice their questions and concerns and get input and answers from their peers as well as those with more experience in academic librarianship.

Description

The purpose of this discussion session was to allow participants to have a discussion on early career issues of importance to them, rather than those deemed important by a single presenter. The discussion was 100% audience driven, but moderated by the author. To facilitate this, at the beginning of the session each attendee was given a 3"x5" index card and asked to

write down one question or issue he or she would like to discuss. All of the cards were collected and placed into a "hat." An index card was drawn randomly by an attendee and that question/issue was discussed for 15 minutes. The question/issue was written on the flip chart, which allowed attendees to recall the question/issue on the floor, if necessary. This process continued until four questions/issues were selected, which took approximately 60 minutes. The discussion of each question/issue was free-form, allowing the attendees to determine the direction of the discussion. The moderator kept track of individuals wanting to speak and monitored the time clock for each of the questions/issues. The Appendix shows the questions that were submitted for the discussion.

Key Points

The following are the four questions/issues from attendees that were randomly selected for the discussion.

Are there any tips on transitioning from a paraprofessional to a professional position?

This discussion began with one participant expressing concerns about transitioning from one to the other, stating that in some organizations there may be an "invisible wall" that is difficult to get through (i.e., once a paraprofessional, always a paraprofessional). Several attendees commented that part-time experience as a paraprofessional had helped them to land professional positions. Another shared that her graduate internship led to a paraprofessional position that she has held for more than two years. She felt that this position has offered the same opportunities and experiences as a professional librarian (i.e., providing library instruction, attending conferences). An attendee who has served as a recruiter mentioned that some organizations do not hire internally, and those who have been in paraprofessional positions for years at a particular library may not be hired as professionals after attaining the MLS degree. The advice was to get experience, but move out or up as quickly as possible after getting the MLS degree. It was also mentioned that experience in adjunct professional positions will get more "points" than paraprofessional experience.

The discussion then moved to the topic of screening applications. Several attendees shared that there can be vast differences in the application screening practices used by different institutions and organizations. In some places, applications are received at a centralized Human Resources (HR) Department, while at others, the applications go directly to the librarians on the search committee. HR departments may not be able to discern the nuances of paraprofessional and professional experience. One attendee explained how HR departments use criteria checklists to verify the qualifications of applicants initially and then identify those whose applications will be forwarded to the search committee for further consideration.

How to engage faculty and foster collaboration

A variety of different strategies were shared during this discussion. One attendee shared how she developed a pilot program for teaching information literacy to student teachers and how this helped her to connect with the faculty in her assigned area. Another attendee shared how being a new librarian can work to one's advantage when reaching out to faculty. Someone who is new in a librarian position has an opportunity to build new bridges between the library and the

department, especially if there had been a lack of outreach in the past. One attendee suggested targeting those faculty who show interest in the library. Another recommended participating in events hosted by the departments, so they can see that the librarian is interested and engaged in their activities. Some other suggestions included hosting fun events for faculty in the library and presenting at department meetings on topics of interest to the faculty. All of these can help to make the librarian more visible to the faculty. One attendee shared three tips with the group to help engage faculty and encourage collaboration – first, ally with new faculty; second, purchase materials to support the faculty's research; and third, target a research methods course, where a librarian is most likely to be needed as a partner.

Is there a time limit on being an adjunct? At what point is it too long?

The immediate and reiterated response to this question was two years. One attendee mentioned that the current economic situation has made the job market tough, so the answer to the question might not be so straightforward. Another attendee stated that from the hiring committee's perspective this can be highly variable. The cover letter and resume should explain why one might have stayed in a particular position (adjunct or paraprofessional) for longer than usual. Several people mentioned that staying active in the profession was most important, whether it came in the form of attending conferences or volunteering at a library. The more active one can be, the better. Another attendee mentioned that personal circumstances did not allow for full-time professional work, so part-time paraprofessional work was a better fit at the time. This individual was still active in the profession and participating in "librarian" activities.

The conversation then shifted to a discussion about movement in academic libraries and how to move around without being "too shifty." In response to this, an attendee shared that it is very important to build relationships, especially since the library world can be a small one. This was supported by another, who recommended getting to know other librarians and learning about how they got to where they are. Making good impressions is equally important. Lastly, it was mentioned that attending conferences, such as CARL, presents opportunities for networking and professional development, which can give one an advantage over others. It's also another good line on the resume.

How important is having a research agenda when starting a career?

Several attendees stated that it was difficult to know one's research agenda at the start of a career, as it is something that develops as one progresses in his or her career. Others suggested determining one's niche and interests and building research activities around that. It was mentioned that the research agenda is important for tenure-track positions and this often comes up during the interview process. A question was asked about the scholarship requirements of tenure, and consequently, this shifted the discussion towards the topic of tenure. Several people responded that there is a large amount of variability in the tenure requirements from institution to institution and that these requirements can change over time. Planning is critically important for tenure-track librarians, and working ahead 18-24 months was suggested. The importance of developing a Professional Development Plan (PDP) was emphasized, as this often provides a way to facilitate long-range planning. Lastly, one attendee suggested picturing where one wants to be in three to five years, and then setting realistic and attainable goals for getting there.

Conclusion

These were just four of the 18 questions submitted for the discussion (see Appendix for complete list of questions), and each evoked a good conversation on the topic. It was evident from the discussion that new librarians and library school students pursuing academic librarianship do have questions and concerns about how to embark and sustain in this field. Clearly, there is a need to continue these conversations and provide other means of support to create a vital next generation of academic librarians.

References

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Appendix – Questions/Issues Submitted by Attendees for Discussion

- Publications
- What qualifications do academic library hiring committees look for? (Ex. teaching philosophy, credentials/work experience/education, etc) Which factor is most important?
- What is something that surprised the veterans in their first 5 years?
- How are resumes and cover letters reviewed? By HR first? A selection committee?
- Interviews
- How long should you stay at a library that might not be the "right fit" in order to not look like the type of person who is always changing jobs, doesn't have longevity, etc? i.e.: How much movement is there in academic libraries?
- What are the best ways to network? Early in your career?
- Do you (new/soon to be) librarians have a 3, 5, 10 + plan? Set goals and objectives?
- How do people find mentors/partners for research?
- Any tips to introduce yourself/establish relationships with faculty to whom you are liaison?
- Is it easy to change between different academic institutions (community colleges, small universities, large universities) during one's career as an academic librarian?
- What is the right time to start sending out resumes? (Just prior to graduation, post graduation)
- What kind of strategies do you recommend for balancing work, professional development, and personal life?
- Think of the last time you hired for an entry level position. How many applicants, how did you narrow the pool? When have you hired someone out of library school?
- Are there any tips on transitioning from a paraprofessional to a professional position?
- How to engage faculty and foster collaboration
- Is there a time limit on being adjunct? At what point is it too long?
- How important is having a research agenda when starting a career?