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*Column: A New Generation in Librarianship*

## Transitioning to Academic Librarianship from Outside the Profession

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### ABSTRACT

Even with experience, transferable skills, and education, a new job always has a learning curve. When the new job is also part of a new career in higher education, the curve is often steeped with different expectations, communication practices, and workplace culture in general. As two academic librarians who previously worked in other fields, we have discussed our observations with other second-career librarians and noticed some similarities. In this column, we share our perspectives on the differences in work procedures and culture. We hope these considerations will be helpful to librarians entering the profession, to their colleagues, and to supervisors.

### KEYWORDS

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Even with experience, transferable skills, and education, a new job always has a learning curve. When the new job is also part of a new career in higher education, the curve is often steeped with different expectations, communication practices, and workplace cultures in general. Researchers writing about librarianship as a second career have explored the topic broadly, often focused on motivations (including Deeming & Chelin, 2001; Ho et al., 2018; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2015). However, studies on librarians' experiences after the switch are not as prolific.

As academic librarians who previously worked in other fields, we have discussed our on-the-job observations with other second-career librarians and noticed some similarities. We hope to investigate this further in a future study. In this column, we share our perspectives on differences in work procedures and culture. We hope these considerations will be helpful to librarians entering the profession, to their colleagues, and to supervisors.

### **Onboarding**

Onboarding in academic libraries seemed very different from what we experienced in our previous jobs in other fields. The human resources benefits component was similar, but we noticed less structure in learning the ropes as part of the team. Staples of past onboardings, like workflows and organizational charts, were covered very informally. Our colleagues were asked to provide us with on-the-job training and direct us to key contacts in our work areas. Even though we realized academic library work was different from standardized corporate functions, like submitting reports and content for publication, we were a bit taken aback hearing colleagues' different interpretations of the same library job duties and processes.

Our past workplaces had varying amounts of documentation covering department procedures, software, and more. The libraries we've worked at have had some resources, but we found they largely relied on employees to provide training and share institutional knowledge. Unfortunately, we also found that questions we posed during this process were sometimes viewed as criticisms of a policy or procedure. In a field centered on encouraging and answering questions, it was surprising when polite inquiries to check for understanding were misconstrued as challenges to the status quo. However, to provide the best service, we felt it was better to get that clarification. Now, we try to remember this when we explain policies and procedures to others.

During the early months, we also encountered abbreviations and acronyms. While most industries have their own vernacular, academic librarianship revels in initialisms; the existence of several online glossaries illustrates this point. Adding to this confusion, libraries may create internal acronyms out of convenience or to make a name "fun," but may also fail to explain them during meetings or in meeting invitations. More than once, we had to ask what an event title meant in order to decide whether or not we should attend. A larger issue is that once acronyms and jargon become more familiar, they can creep into conversations with patrons and add

unnecessary complexity. We suggest preventing this by explaining acronyms, abbreviations, or initialisms, and using them sparingly.

Finally, we observed that some new librarians may be asked to provide instruction to students—usually about locating, understanding, and evaluating library resources. Previous careers may have included one-on-one or group training responsibilities, but working with undergraduate classes and their varied educational backgrounds is a very different situation. LIS courses on teaching or instruction are often electives (Dodson, 2020), so effective teaching strategies are more likely learned on the job. Observing classes, reading professional literature, and talking with other instructors can better support this process. Supervisors should encourage these efforts, and may also wish to pair new hires with seasoned instructors for a few team-taught sessions.

### **Understanding Academic Librarian Jobs – And Keeping Them**

Library workers new to the field may need support in identifying their roles. Those who began their second career as librarians in public libraries (like Renee) may find few similarities. Those spending a couple of years in one academic library (like Kelly) may realize in a new position that they have more to learn about their second career. We have gained a greater understanding of different facets of academic librarianship through our own efforts talking with colleagues, reading professional literature, and reflecting on our own work.

Reappointment or tenure guidelines are also new concepts to academic librarians coming from other careers, where job performance is the primary metric. Even if new hires are provided with an institution's general guidelines, these are likely not written with enough detail for someone new to academic language and expectations. Having a grasp on these requirements is essential for the next review, which seems to come quickly. We tried to understand our guidelines enough to ask reasonable questions about the criteria and process.

### **Adjusting to a New Workplace**

Both of us came to libraries from fast-paced work environments. We may seem impatient to our colleagues who are accustomed to the ebb and flow of academia. Our first careers required efficiency and speed in making decisions, meeting deadlines, and quickly responding to emails. The years we spent in these conditions shaped our work habits.

We've adjusted to decisions in higher education being made by committee or through a chain of command, which sometimes seems to take an eternity. In our previous jobs, deadlines were so intertwined with the bottom line that missing them had major consequences. Now in academia, some deadlines are considered moving targets, which can depend on other priorities and the approval process.

By far, the most noticeable difference in perspective has been in timely communication—email, specifically. Our past professions required a response to at least acknowledge receipt within a business day. In academia, our experience has been that emails can sit in limbo for much longer. A cluttered inbox is often given as the reason. Follow-up emails make the sender appear impatient and can irritate the recipient, even though the intention is to move a task forward. Patience and some expectation-setting early in a project can help with this.

The self-motivated pace fostered by deadline-driven cultures of our past workplaces has also made us very productive in our current positions. This brings many benefits—such as meeting performance goals, providing concrete examples for the annual review, and being a sought-after collaborator—but there can also be a downside. A potentially overwhelming effect of being a productive, reliable colleague is that you may find yourself being continually added to committees, side projects, and more. Learning when and how to gracefully say no is key, because it's easy to get overcommitted quickly.

### **Transferring Our Skills**

Technology is also an important part of librarianship. Our past work prepared us well, as we often had to learn and use new systems quickly. When our university IT department deployed Microsoft Teams for collaboration and communication, we followed their instructions and incorporated it into our work as a staff. Years later, we still encounter colleagues in other units who haven't made it part of their routine. Coming from the corporate world, not adopting company-wide software has seemed strange to us.

Related to this, our students sometimes prefer using platforms or formats that aren't directly compatible with campus systems or their professors' requirements. Directing students to helpful documentation and helping them troubleshoot comes quickly to us after having worked within fast-paced system updates in our previous jobs.

Our past careers (Kelly: media and customer support; Renee: account management) required developing skills and confidence in networking, public speaking, and casual conversation. These experiences were assets in our transitions to academic librarianship. Librarians often promote services in time-limited situations, trying to get into the classroom space with a literal elevator pitch. While this can be uncomfortable, our previous work gives us perspectives on framing our services for different audiences—including students, faculty, administrators, and colleagues.

Starting out in librarianship, we brought experience in customer service in physical and virtual spaces. This goes beyond greeting patrons and checking out materials. Our past work with the public in person, online, and by phone has been invaluable as we anticipate and listen to patrons' needs, add value when possible, help solve problems, and appropriately pace interactions so that patrons can continue with their work.

Just as we would research a client or community in our previous jobs, we also try to keep up with trends and general pop culture to inform our conversations with undergraduates. How are students communicating, and what are their interests? Listening and building connections can support outreach and engagement in reference and instruction. In other professions, employees' specialties were often clearly noted as part of their job titles. However, expectations can vary when patrons approach a librarian. For instance, expertise in using subject databases does not extend to the minutiae of every possible topic. By connecting with students or faculty in conversation, librarians can learn more about their research needs, and patrons discover the ways librarians can assist them.

### Conclusion

Learning the ropes in any new job can be confusing and frustrating. Moving into higher education and academic libraries presents its own challenges. This column is not intended as a critique, but as an on-the-job perspective for those who may be in similar situations. We are grateful to our colleagues who took the time to help us navigate our transitions. Whether you are new to the profession or a longtime academic librarian, we hope this column helps start conversations to foster a supportive work environment.

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