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**Column: A New Generation in Librarianship**

## Thoughts for the New Librarian

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### ABSTRACT

After spending over a decade as a public-school educator and subsequent time as an administrative assistant, I embarked on what is essentially my third career as a librarian. Since being hired at an academic library in the summer of 2021, I have—for the most part—settled into my role as Instructional Librarian for Distance and Online Learning. At an age where most librarians are starting to eye the exit, I am “learning the ropes.” After a year, I still have a lot to learn; however, there are some areas where I believe I can offer insights for those just entering the profession. In this column, I will offer three pointers for how to make a new librarian’s first year less overwhelming.

### KEYWORDS

insights, first-year librarian, academic libraries

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Being new is difficult. Whether you are new in town, new to a specific position, or new to a career path, there are unfamiliar protocols to follow, different relationships to nurture, and wavering confidence to build. The times I have been new could be counted on two, if not three, hands. Over the years, I have tried my hand at the food industry, retail, education, a medical office, and now librarianship, with my longest-running stint being in education. Although my forays into the food industry, retail, and even a medical office were never meant to be long term, I had always assumed I would not leave my position as a teacher. However, life takes turns we don't expect, and I found myself starting over even after achieving tenure in my former school district. With each of these positions, however, I have gained valuable experiences that have helped me transition into the role of an academic librarian. For many people my age, they may be eyeing the exit, counting down the time they have left before they can retire. But I find myself over a year into this career in librarianship, and that year has been smoother than I would have anticipated—perhaps due to wisdom gained from past experiences. For others who are just entering librarianship, there are three insights that I believe can help make the first year a more successful one.

### **Embrace the Learning Curve**

Absolutely everyone faces a learning curve when they start a new position. Granted, the amount of experience you may already have in the field will naturally help alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty involved, but there will still be things you need to learn. As an educator, I think it took me at least three years to figure out my style as a teacher, and during that time, I changed schools, which further added to the curve. In my early 20s at the time, I think I was scared to admit that I hadn't a clue what I was doing—especially when everyone else seemed to have their classrooms and their teaching philosophies figured out. I realize now that—at the time—I did not embrace the process of getting to know my job; instead, I fought against it. I wanted everyone to believe I was a perfectly capable teacher when I was, in fact, struggling. I am pretty certain others noticed my perpetual stress and confusion, but there was no way I would admit it to myself. In my early career, asking questions or asking for assistance was an admittance of failure, and this would have been unacceptable. On the drive to school many times that first year, I thought about turning my car around and not going back. Thankfully I didn't, but my mindset was toxic. Instead of asking my supervisor, my mentor, or my principal for assistance, I struggled my way through until I finally got a grasp on things myself. But it didn't have to be this way.

Looking back now, I suppose I had unrealistically high expectations for myself as a new teacher, and it has only been through experience—and age—that I have realized it's important to embrace the curve. Good supervisors know we have a lot to learn in our new roles, and many will be willing to help if you just ask. When I started my position as a librarian, I knew there would be a period of adjustment, and I have not been afraid to ask questions. Also, I made sure to get a mentor and talk to her on a regular basis. The library where I work does not have an

official mentorship program, and as I had heard it could be helpful to have a mentor outside from where you work, I signed up for the mentorship program with the ACRL Distance and Online Learning Section. This was one of the best steps I could have taken. It has been so helpful to get a viewpoint from outside my own institution. Having people to guide me not only within my library, but also outside of it, has helped me settle into my role so much faster than if I still had the same attitude from years ago. Everyone has been new at least once, so there is no need to feel ashamed about requesting guidance from supervisors or mentors. Apparently, that struggle from years ago taught me a lesson, which has helped ease my transition into the role of librarian.

### **Be Flexible**

I know it sounds almost cliché these days, but the importance of being flexible cannot be overstated. If this was not in your skill set pre-2020, it most certainly should be now. There was a time when having to switch classrooms due to a heating/cooling issue would have put me into panic mode, and malfunctioning technology would have left me embarrassed and fumbling. While these issues can certainly throw a wrench in one's plans, they can happen to anyone. For me, it helps if I am able to use humor in these situations, skipping over what I can, or modifying what I can still use. For instance, if I have an instructional session, and the technology suddenly fails, then it is completely acceptable to do what I can without technology and schedule for a later date if necessary. I'm pretty sure I have never faced a life-or-death situation during my instructional sessions. So, if things don't go exactly how I had planned, that is okay. Flexibility is key, and maintaining this mentality has helped me to not stress about minor details.

In addition, being a librarian means you have to work with both colleagues and, for many of us, the public as well. Being willing to compromise with colleagues—considering their schedules and not just expecting them to work around your own—definitely helps pave the way for better relations. While I had collaborated with fellow teachers in the past and those collaborations usually followed strict deadlines, working with fellow librarians over the last year has shown me that in certain instances, deadlines are not always strictly set, schedules get very busy, and other tasks take priority over the project in question. When this happens, I do my part and move on to something else until my partner/group is ready to continue, knowing that they would do the same for me if my schedule dictated a halt to work on a project. And of course, most of us work with patrons as well. As anyone who has ever worked with the public knows, you have to be ready for anything. Working with university students can be very similar to working with high school students. They all come with their own sets of needs and, in order to be effective, you are going to need to be flexible and willing to change your approach as needed.

### **Value Library Staff**

My last insight may seem obvious, but as I have learned in years past, it isn't always: you need to value library staff and demonstrate that value. Whether they are the paraprofessionals

that work with you or the custodial and maintenance teams that take care of the building, they need to be acknowledged and appreciated. I learned while working in the public-school system that those positions are vital to the success of my classroom. Having an aide in certain classes was imperative for the well-being of some students, and I always wanted to make sure those professionals felt like they were on equal footing when they stepped into my classroom.

The same goes for within the library. I work with staff members who have over twenty years' experience. They have invaluable knowledge and insight gained from their experiences. Yet, I have heard terrible stories of arrogant librarians insisting to staff that they themselves are the experts, subsequently discounting anything staff has to contribute. This is unacceptable. I have collaborated with long-term staff in Instructional Services since beginning my position, and I actively ask them for help or advice. I believe this respect has helped continue the sense of community in our department, while also ensuring they are comfortable working with the new librarian on the team.

### **Conclusion**

Starting a new position is exhausting. It can be even more exhausting when you are starting over as a not-so-fresh-faced forty-something. But it doesn't have to be. Understanding that it is going to take some time to settle in and "learn the ropes" can reduce stress and increase your likelihood to ask for help when needed. Even though I have been in my position for over a year now, I am still learning something new seemingly every day. Instead of being overly critical of myself, I am embracing this process, gaining more confidence every day, and learning who I am as a librarian. Although this happened for me as a teacher too, the process was longer, messier, and way more tiresome. Learning how to take things in stride and how to value those around you can make your first year (or first few years) in librarianship less overwhelming.