



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Taking My Own Advice: Moving from School to Academic Libraries as an Early-Career Librarian

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ABSTRACT

This column examines how a career change from school to academic libraries mirrors the experience of first-year college students in their transition from high school. It outlines advice for new students and new faculty alike and illustrates how, for one librarian, making a career switch led to a better understanding of the first-year college student experience.

KEYWORDS

school librarianship, academic librarianship, college readiness, career mobility

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Introduction

Like many librarians, I was inspired to join the field by a positive experience with an information professional. While writing my undergraduate honors thesis I worked closely with my university's librarian for Germanic and Slavic languages and literatures, who provided me invaluable access to primary sources and other nineteenth-century materials. It was then that I realized that becoming a librarian would allow me to assist patrons in their own information pursuits, as well as satisfy my own curiosities through research and teaching.

A few years later I began graduate school for my MLS. I was confronted very early on with a difficult choice: pursuing a career in school or academic libraries. At my institution these were two different degree paths with very few overlapping courses. While working in academic libraries had been my original goal, school librarians were in great demand at the time and, having just returned from two years teaching high school English abroad, I felt that I could succeed in K-12 education. Because of the additional certifications and student teaching opportunities integrated into the School Librarianship program, I chose to undertake that track.

As hoped, I was able to quickly find work as a school librarian. I spent the first two years of my career as an elementary librarian before moving up to work with my desired grade level, high school students. Beginning a high school position in the 2019-2020 school year was a unique challenge, to say the least. My two and a half years working in high school libraries were accompanied by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the dream job I had imagined was, like so many others, irrevocably different than expected. Still, working with older students on higher-order research projects and on college-preparedness was exactly what I had been looking for in my library career. I especially enjoyed working with college-bound seniors through my school's International Baccalaureate program, which focuses on high-level coursework and intercultural competency.

Though my favorite aspect of the position was aiding in college-level research, I had not explicitly thought of moving into academic libraries until a serendipitous listserv posting caught my eye. The tenure-track role, Student Support and Engagement Librarian, at the largest public research university in my area, also my graduate school alma mater, seemed like the perfect role for me. The position focused on providing support to first-year students through information literacy instruction, liaising with campus support units, and pursuing pedagogical research.

I was lucky enough to be offered the position in December, set to begin in February 2022. With a few months to prepare for my transition, an expected uncertainty set in. How would I make the transition from a high school to a university library? After much distress, I came to realize that, in my work as a high school librarian, I had helped numerous graduating seniors prepare for their transition to college. What would be so different for me? In reflecting, I

have found that four of my most sentient pieces of advice for my college-bound students have also aided me in this time of transition.

Stay Organized

When helping my high school students with a research project, “stay organized” was a never-ending refrain of mine. I know from my own personal experience through college and graduate school that being unorganized in a research project is one of the biggest possible morale-busting, frustration-inducing problems to have, and I had seen it play out firsthand with my students as well. My former colleague and I metaphorized that online materials were all part of one’s “digital locker,” and keeping it tidy was a key for success.

In transitioning to my new position, I was given a fresh digital and physical space to inhabit. The physical space of an office, an exciting prospect after only having public workspaces in schools, required a personal level of organization that I had to get used to. But the true challenge came with navigating my digital office. Not only did I have an entire new set of files and online workspaces of my own to manage, but I also was now working in collaborative teams and on group research projects that required the utmost detail in management, or else the disorganization mindset would creep in. Just as I had told my students, keeping your space organized lays the groundwork for success in all future endeavors.

Follow Your Interests

Just like a student transitioning from high school to college, moving from school libraries to a tenure-track academic position required me to think about academic research on a level I never had before. I was about to take part in that scholarly conversation I had always harped on. The main advice I would give when preparing my high school students to undertake college level research was to pick a research topic that genuinely interested them. Oftentimes when faced with the broad scope of any possible topic, it is tempting to just choose whatever seems easiest. With regards to college-level work, however, students often spend an entire semester or more with the topic of their choice. It is not ideal for them, nor for the quality of their work, to pick something they are not truly passionate about or interested in.

As I moved from instructing about research to actually carrying out my own research, I have found myself utilizing this metric often. I am working to find my niche in the scholarly conversation, with the understanding that the research narrative I build for myself early on will inform the work I do for the rest of my career. A first step to success was seeking a position that focuses on work I am enthusiastic about: information literacy instruction, aiding in the high-school-to-college transition, and working with international students. It has also allowed me to infuse my own interests into my work and research, like investigating TikTok as a learning tool and exploring social media-based applications of the Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.

Get Involved

Another parting piece of advice for my high school seniors, whether college-bound or not, was a reminder to stay involved. Whether with childhood friends, local initiatives, or online communities, taking an active role in a group with like-minded folks is essential for human development and happiness. For students heading to higher education, I would recommend building on their high school interests while also looking for activities that may help with their future goals. Early on, students are often seeking community with their new group of peers. Finding a group with shared interests, whether they are academic or social, is an ideal way to find a sense of belonging. From there, students may have the confidence to seek opportunities outside of their comfort zone that build on their professional goals.

I have followed a similar path in my new role by first finding like-minded people to work with on my large campus. I have engaged in existing opportunities that relate to interests I had pursued in my previous work. These have included groups for fun and community-building, like our University Libraries book club, as well as opportunities for engaging in professional service, like our libraries' Equity & Social Justice Advisory Group and library association committees. Since finding a solid foothold in areas I am more familiar with, I have felt empowered to move beyond pre-existing opportunities. I am taking the initiative to build on my relationships and spearhead a new working group for student engagement through library programming. This has been a chance to utilize my specialized knowledge and experience from high school libraries, which typically focused more on student programming and engagement, to effect positive change in a new environment.

Make Connections (but Keep in Touch!)

Making positive connections is a key to success in almost any role; I always encouraged my graduating seniors to be open-minded and willing to connect with new people. You never know if someone you encounter will become a cherished friend, effective collaborator, or invaluable connection to a dream job. Transitioning to work in higher education opens an entire world of new possibilities for networking. Still, I would never hesitate to remind students that high school and local connections have their own importance and that they should not disregard their previous experiences.

For me, starting a new academic job has been all about making connections. I am part of an eight-person team, and building personal, as well as professional, relationships with my colleagues has improved the work we do together. I am also working to build connections across the University Libraries, our campus, our university system, and academic libraries nationwide. In my previously mentioned student engagement initiative, I had the opportunity to build a connection with a neighboring SUNY school that undertook a similar project when we connected after our librarians' association conference. Still, I have remained in touch with my high school colleagues, graduate school connections, and even resources from my time working

abroad. Each group has provided valuable insight on the state of schools, particularly graduating students, and opportunities for research or improvement of my practice. In seeking professional development activities, I aim for a balance of academic library conferences and opportunities that speak to my own unique skill and interests. For instance, I recently attended an educational technology conference, hosted by an organization made up of majority K-12 educators, with an eye to harnessing my K-12 teaching experience to work to bring EdTech to higher education.

Conclusion

Switching library roles, even relatively early in my career, was a scary, vulnerable experience. All the research in the world could never have fully prepared me for my new position; instead, I combined my existing skills with a resilient growth mindset to take on whatever awaited me. While some people might want to settle into a new role quickly and forget the associated growing pains, I want to remember this experience—everything from my feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty to my first glimpses of success. My personal experience mirrors what my first-year students are navigating daily and has provided me an invaluable sense of empathy toward their experiences. I can candidly say that I, too, have felt those overwhelmed, scared feelings that they may feel, and I have come out on the other side. And while we are at it, I may just have some advice to help them out—it worked for me, after all.