Let's Get to Work: Exploring the Intricacies Behind Newly Created Roles in Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

In this article, three academic librarians discuss the benefits and challenges in starting inaugural positions as tenure-track librarians at the University of Illinois. Using an autoethnographic method, the authors reflect on what it is like to grow, develop, and maintain relationships and collaborations in a primarily online environment during a global pandemic. The various complexities of their experiences are discussed, and recommendations for other librarians in newly created roles are included toward the end of the article.

KEYWORDS

academic librarianship, new roles, communication, autoethnography, campus partnerships

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Introduction

Libraries are versatile institutions that are tasked not only with adapting services to fit user needs, but also to address evolving environmental and cultural conditions. Academic libraries do this by examining the current student body needs and looking for ways to support their institution's faculty and staff. While support is created through library resources, programs, and different services, sometimes the best help is provided by creating new academic librarian positions that reflect the growing needs of the college campus. These inaugural positions offer more than services and programs; they keep abreast of academic trends and challenges and contribute to students' sense of belonging, retention, and academic needs. However, those that start newly created positions find themselves with unique challenges and barriers that are not often discussed or well understood.

Beginning a new position in any career is an adjustment. New employees have to learn new processes, meet new people, and acclimate to a new workplace culture. However, new hires in inaugural roles have the additional challenges of further defining what their new role is, how the employee wants to shape that role, and how to communicate the value of the position to others in the library and other entities. There is also the challenge of working with limited (if any) institutional knowledge that could guide some of the responsibilities of the inaugural positions and difficulties with networking. Additionally, there is a gap in librarianship literature that addresses the challenges of working in recently created roles, adding to the struggle of guidance and best practices from which to learn.

Between 2019-2021, three academic librarians started in newly created tenure-track positions at the University of Illinois These new positions of eLearning Librarian, Student Success Librarian, and Public Service and Engagement Librarian addressed campus wide initiatives and the growing needs of the student body. The three librarians used an autoethnographic method to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of working in their newly created roles; they interviewed each other and their department heads about their positions. Since the librarians started their new roles shortly before or during the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), they also reflect on how the pandemic impacted their adjustment to these roles.

This article argues that librarians in newly created roles need different support structures and specialized training than those that start already established positions. There are currently little to no conversations happening around best practices for inaugural positions, however, with the constantly evolving field of librarianship, it requires more attention. While this article focuses on new positions in an academic library at a large research institution, the authors believe their reflection is helpful for librarians who find themselves in newly created positions at all library types. At the end of this article, the authors suggest ways to create a smoother transition for new positions, as well as provide recommendations for supervisors who are supporting employees in new roles in their departments.

Literature Review

When starting new programs, practices, methods, and other aspects of librarianship, it is normal for librarians to turn to library literature to gather background information and recommendations from those with prior experience. There is an assortment of literature highlighting the importance of organizational change and transformation in libraries (Michalak, 2012; Watts, 2019; Delaney, G., & Bates, J., 2015), how libraries changed with the emergence of the internet and technology (Becker, 2015; Paulus, 2011; Horava, 2010; Williams, K., 2009), and how to conduct managerial change (Brundy, 2014; Chang, A., & Bright, K., 2012). However, there is a definite lack of literature that explores the realities and best practices of inaugural roles in academic librarianship, which further isolates and challenges those who are seeking guidance in these roles. This is also problematic as libraries actively analyze and shift in response to community needs, which will continue to result in the creation of new roles.

Due to the gaps in literature that address the experiences and challenges of starting newly created roles, the literature review of this article reviews literature that examines added and evolving responsibilities to established positions. It also reviews literature about the autoethnographic methodology, which was the methodology approach used for this article.

New responsibilities to established positions

While different from starting a newly created position, it is not unusual for librarians to incorporate new responsibilities into their existing roles. This can be due to new demands that need to be addressed, and either make sense for someone with experience in those areas to perform them, or because there is not support available to create a new position that addresses these needs. There is literature that explores the integration of some of these responsibilities, such as the need to interweave functional and liaison responsibilities together (Ducas, Michaud-Oystryk & Speare, 2020; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013), functional specialties (Cox & Corrall, 2013), or provide a focus on researcher needs (Hickerson, Brosz, & Crema, 2022).

Transitions in established positions

There is also literature that focuses on the transition to becoming a unit or department head and overseeing employees (Galbraith, Smith, & Walker, 2012; Chang & Bright, 2012; Brundy, 2014). Chang and Bright (2012) focus on how roles have changed and adapted for middle managers as libraries have evolved, acknowledging that users are the ones determining the changes in libraries; "In a climate of technological change, middle managers are not only facing the challenge of embracing technology, but also recognizing that users are in the driver's seat for change." Again, while not the same as starting an inaugural role, the articles focusing on this transition reflect on the guidance and support needed with the change in position. If there is acknowledgement of the need for literature for transition into a higher, but already established,

role, then it would make sense for there to be literature for librarians entering newly formed roles.

Evolving roles of academic libraries

In addition to literature highlighting new responsibilities in librarian and management roles, as well as guidance with transitioning to higher positions, there is also literature that focuses on how colleges and universities respond to the evolving roles of academic libraries, such as the necessity of creating campus partnerships. Articles exploring library collaboration with Student and Academic Affairs (Forrest, 2005; Walter, 2018), faculty (Campbell & Wesley, 2006; Díaz & Mandernach, 2017; Owens & Bozeman, 2009), and other campus entities (Pun & Kubo, 2017; Kelleher & Laidlaw, 2009; Benjamin & Dermody, 2016) all show how the perception of the library and its role has developed over time as new needs and initiatives have emerged on college campuses.

There is an abundance of literature that reflects on the different entities of change within academic libraries, which demonstrates an understanding of the importance of addressing these changes. However, despite this helpful literature, there is still very little that discusses how librarians in brand new roles that are a result of these changes need additional and different support than those entering already established positions.

Autoethnographic research

The authors of this article decided that an autoethnographic methodology was a helpful analysis method to reflect on their experiences in their newly created roles. They found through informal discussions with each other that they had similar benefits and challenges related to their inaugural roles, which provided a deeper understanding of their personal experiences. By having formal interviews with each other and their unit heads, the authors felt they could provide helpful and important information and feedback regarding their circumstances.

Autoethnography, a qualitative research method that is a form of ethnography, was described by David Hayao (1979) as a way for people to analyze members of their own cultural groups. Since then, the uses and definitions of autoethnography have expanded, as well as an increase in the disciplines in which the method is used. Ellis and Bocher (2000) led the development of autoethnographic methods to be more reflective of personal experiences outside of cultural groups.

Arguments for and against autoethnography

However, this method is not without controversy. Walford (2004) expressed concern about Ellis' and Bocher's work, particularly about the actuality and truth of events told through an autoethnographic point of view. Atkinson (2006) also argues against autoethnographic methods, stating that "the fact that these personalized, experiential accounts are sometimes

justified in terms of social criticism does not excuse their essentially self-absorbed nature." Stalked Wall (2016) argues for a moderate autoethnography and encourages users to find a balanced perspective "that captures the meanings and events of one life in an ethical way but also in a way that moves collective thinking forward."

Despite the criticism of some regarding this method, the authors still saw the value in their personal experiences and how it could potentially help others in similar situations. Ellis, Adams, and Bocher (2011) argue that "autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality…rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist." As previously mentioned, there is a gap in the literature about newly created positions, not only in the personal experiences of it, but also in the guidance of different processes, like onboarding, relationship building, preventing isolation, and more.

Methodology

To develop a sound, effective autoethnographic narrative that resonates with readers, this study favored two key components: introspection, and analysis of experiences within one's social or cultural context.

In this study, autoethnographic tools were applied by a group of three academic librarians to document their personal reflections, observations, and reactions to their experiences beginning inaugural positions within the [] between 2019-2021. The method parallels Reed-Dana hay's (2019) discussion to "interrogate one's own group" as a form of autoethnography as well as Hughes and Pennington's (2016) description of accounts that "focus on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature." As an introductory space to discuss their unique experiences, the authors chose this method as a guide to developing a personal narrative that would reflect on views of their roles and experiences as they walked through them.

The University of Illinois Library has over 300 employees with over twenty campus libraries. Due to the large size of the library, extensive coordination and communication is essential between units to maintain cohesion. Each role explored in this study works collaboratively to serve undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff, as well as a global community. Specifically, the eLearning Librarian provides support, consultation, and instruction around eLearning methods and best practices; the Student Success Librarian identifies student needs and creates opportunities and develops partnerships to help them succeed in college; and the Public Services & Engagement Librarian builds strategic relationships with on and off-campus communities through outreach and engagement activities.

The authors also looked outside of their own personal experiences and included those who were heavily involved in the creation and hiring process of their roles. The authors created

interview questions for the heads of their departments that discussed the creation of the roles, the reasons why they were created, and how they chose to onboard and support the new librarians. These interview questions allowed the authors to learn how others viewed their roles' challenges and benefits, as well as provided more background in the development and need that the University of Illinois Library considered during the process. The discussion from these interviews were used in creating recommendations for future employers to consider when hiring and supporting inaugural positions.

The authors met through Zoom or Microsoft Teams several times during this project, with some decision-making over email. Authors developed reflection questions for library unit heads (Appendix A) in tandem with reflection questions for one another (Appendix B). The unit heads were instrumental in creating the authors' positions, and their responses (through a set of emailed questions) provided an institutional point of view into the need for these positions. The authors incorporated collaborative autoethnography to respond to questions from one another and used Google Documents to record their answers. During spring 2022, themes were identified through thematic analysis of interview notes by one author/librarian, while another imported interview notes into ATLAS to assess the frequency of words and phrases used during discussions and those with greater prominence were documented as potential themes. The themes that emerged included campus partnerships, communication of the purpose of the newly created positions, and COVID-19. Literature and citations were managed in Zotero.

Discussion and Findings

Using the autoethnographic process, the authors constructed a personal narrative that identified prominent themes they each experienced through the process of starting in a new role. They found that despite the differences in their respective roles, including being located in different libraries across campus, they experienced similar challenges and experiences. Through shared conversations they identified several prominent themes: campus partnerships and initiatives, communication of new positions, goal setting and planning, and finding your place. Below are short definitions of what each theme encompasses; further down, more detail is provided for each theme with examples and quotes from the autoethnographic interviews.

It would be neglectful not to mention the impact COVID-19 had on the authors. All were hired shortly before or amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while COVID-19 impacted (and continues to impact) everyone in various ways, those that started in newly created positions faced substantial challenges. Starting new positions can be lonely and isolating for anyone, however the pandemic amplified those feelings for the authors of this article.

Campus partnerships. For technology and engagement positions, campus partnerships are major components for their positions to be successful. Campus partnerships are built over time and through communication, and can include staff, faculty, and community partnerships. This

theme was important for the authors of this article but may not be a prominent theme for other inaugural positions since it depends on the type of role.

Communication of new positions. This theme ties into how inaugural librarians communicate to others in the library and outside the library about what their role is and why it was created. Strong communication is essential for relationship building.

Goal setting and planning. This theme refers to the necessity of planning out the role's tasks and goals, which helps while beginning newly created positions and determining its priorities. It also communicates to others how the librarian views their role, and what they see as important to prioritize.

Finding your place. This theme refers to navigating the organization and departments or units of the library. While most positions will have a home department, inaugural librarians are still learning what their role is without overstepping and assuming others' responsibilities.

Campus partnerships and initiatives

One of the prominent themes that emerged during the authors discussions was the influence campus partnerships and campus initiatives had on their roles. Many outward-facing academic librarian positions (instruction, student engagement, research, and more) form campus partnerships to provide services to students and the public. These partnerships are essential to expand and adapt the role and purpose of academic libraries. They are instrumental to how the library is perceived and how the library's role has developed over time as new needs and initiatives have emerged on college campuses. It is important for campus units to view libraries in new ways and understand that libraries provide resources through their collections, databases, and services to support their campus needs.

A large responsibility of all three of the authors' new positions include forming connections, relationships, and partnerships both in the library and on campus. The Student Success Librarian highlighted the importance of this by stating that new partnerships create, "… many possibilities for new ideas and programs. The value of the library can be brought to new places, and more people can learn about the versatile role of the library." However, since they were starting newly formed roles, the authors all found difficulty creating those connections due to several different reasons.

Since the authors work at a large institution, many potential campus partners were not aware of the creation of their roles, their purpose, or even a strong understanding of different supports and programs academic libraries can offer. Another major complication in forming those impactful relationships was COVID-19. Since the entire campus switched to remote work, students were not able to access services in-person as they typically did. The Student Success Librarian commented, "COVID has impacted everything, especially those who are already

struggling. The same goes for students. Those already struggling with finances, physical and mental well-being, classes, and more now had to add on a pandemic to work through. Support services are needed even more now, but how can it be done safely? How do we engage students when they have no extra bandwidth? How do librarians continue their work when they are also struggling with the challenges of COVID?"

While forming campus partnerships may not be a concern for every newly created position, being able to create meaningful partnerships regardless of role with others is important to being successful in any position.

Communication of new positions

Another theme that emerged from the author's interviews centered on the challenges of communicating the value and necessity of their positions to others, both in the library and with other campus units. While the newly created position demonstrates the different ways libraries can support their universities and colleges, the authors discussed that many campus areas do not fully understand the potential role that the library can contribute to different campus services. The communication of new positions is integral to the success of the position. All three authors often found themselves having to communicate to others their role's purpose and why they were created to address growing community needs.

The authors discussed the need to be flexible and creative as an important factor when discussing their positions with others. Empowering people to be creative and explore their new roles expands the possibilities of new partnerships. To balance out the empowering aspect, there were also fears, particularly that of the unknown; knowing whom to reach out to, knowing who may be doing similar work, and learning about the size of the library and institution. While these are normal anxieties of anyone starting a new position, those in inaugural roles have to navigate through these fears without any foundation to look towards for guidance. The department heads acknowledged this in their interview responses, reflecting that the onboarding process could be tailored to alleviate these challenges, fears, and provide much-needed support to those hired for the new positions. The Public Services & Engagement Librarian added, "It empowers me to craft the role into how I view it while also addressing library issues. This allows me to determine where to grow to be successful. I am fond of acknowledging that this role does not fill anyone's shoes - so when I consider the possibilities of where my role can go and what it can do, multi-faceted opportunities are always in front of me."

The librarians found themselves discussing the importance of being patient and open to communication. The Public Services & Engagement Librarian said, "As a tenure track professor, with research and writing expectations alongside fulfilling engagement goals for the library, connecting with colleagues has been extremely hard and isolating during this pandemic. I now rely heavily upon virtual introductions as my primary start in making connections. Being "zoomed-out" also creates an additional hurdle in building partnerships and when I attempt to

share my work." The authors agreed that COVID had eliminated those more serendipitous meetings and the work to create collaborations and partnerships, while not impossible, became more difficult.

Initial meetings and conversations that typically occur when starting a new role allow for collaboration and opportunities and provide a chance for the employee to understand the work culture. However, the added layer of an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic increased the difficulty of communicating the versatile roles of the library. The Student Success Librarian said, "COVID also prevents organic meetings and ideas from happening. It's difficult to run into someone at the campus coffee shop, learn about each other's jobs, and realize you could work together on a project. You can meet people through Zoom, but you don't have the relaxed conversations you would have if you sat down next to each other in a physical room. COVID has eliminated organic happenings."

While libraries are ever-changing, especially with technology and engagement librarian roles, there is still a gap in policies and practices with how to best support inaugural librarians. These types of support are communicating the importance and necessity of their roles to others, connecting new librarians with campus partners, navigating library politics, and forming communities.

Goal setting and planning

Another theme that the authors themselves continuously came back to was the importance of goal setting and planning. New roles often have the complexity of having a wide range of job descriptions. This can often translate to someone in a new role quickly becoming overwhelmed with learning what the job entails. There is also often a lot of flexibility built into newly established positions. The authors also found that other colleagues may have ideas and goals for the position.

All of these factors have the potential to create stressful and overwhelming situations. The Student Success Librarian commented that, "Figuring out a process and time management can be a challenge. Many times, the new role that is created is a large one, and you need to figure out who can help with the work and how much can you do yourself (in addition to learning about the new place you are working in). You have to readjust goals and priorities sometimes; what is important to get done now, and what can wait for a couple of years?"

In order to alleviate that stress, the librarians found themselves reviewing their job descriptions and meeting with the heads of their departments. Setting attainable and adjustable goals was integral to being successful. New positions often have little to no framework available as a reference unlike already established positions. Therefore, goal setting and planning is an exercise that is helpful in establishing a workable framework and path forward. The authors also

found that establishing realistic goals assisted with the added complexity of COVID-19. Their initial plans often took longer to implement.

Part of goal setting and planning also relies heavily on understanding the new role and its potential relies heavily on the librarian in the position. Meeting with colleagues inside and outside the library allows new librarians to understand the culture around establishing new programs. Departmental colleagues can help answer questions around the new role's expectations and challenges, which is integral to understanding what goals need to be set.

Librarians in these roles may find themselves being the only person in the library serving a particular constituency or campus initiative. The eLearning Librarian commented, "Taking on the role of eLearning Librarian I was worried about the sheer size of the university and the library. I was also genuinely excited about the vast possibilities around collaboration and partnerships."

Finding Your Place

Through their conversations the authors acknowledge that starting anything new takes a lot of time and patience. This would be true of any new role. However, a person may find themselves not only in a newly created role for the institution but also one for librarianship in general. Finding colleagues that may be in similar positions is difficult if the position is not already tied into established groups and organizations.

The eLearning Librarian reflected on finding their place within an organization, saying "This is my second position in a newly created role. I think there is an interesting intersection in the space between the official job description and what the position becomes. In that space is much room for interpretation and creativity."

The authors' found that creating a list of priorities while exercising patience proved invaluable to being successful. They recommend being flexible and adjust as needed as more information about the position and institution are discovered. They also recommend looking for professional listservs to find others in similar positions. Be aware that a particular group or organization may not be an exact match, however, they may still be influential in identifying connections who can provide insight and support.

Each of the authors discussed multiple times throughout their interviews with each other the curiosity, creativity, and freedom that is possible in their new roles, and each of the authors was initially attracted to the possibilities of being able to build and explore a new position.

Recommendations

After analyzing the responses of the librarians and unit heads, the authors crafted a list of recommendations and best practices to support librarians entering into newly created roles.

Patience

- Set realistic timelines. Adjust as needed and as more information about the position and institution is discovered.

- Figure out the most pressing priorities in this new role. If something does not work, adjust, and keep trying.

Goal Setting & Planning

- Create a list of short-term and long-term goals to accomplish within the first year or the first three years. Tie the short-term and long-term goals to the needs identified in the job description.

- Hold regular meetings with the supervisor or head of the department to figure out how to best form the position.

Relationship Building

- Strategize whom to make connections with by speaking to colleagues and supervisors.

- Meet with colleagues at all levels (library, campus, outside community) to establish knowledge and relationships.

- Consider holding informal office hours to encourage communication.

- Depending on the individual's comfort level, attend social hours for campus partners or popular hang-out spots on the campus or local community. This can be helpful with forming relationships.

Finding Your Place

- Find supporters by reaching out to various people, library departments, and campus units. Simple meet-and-greet meetings are recommended to build community.

- Look for a professional listserv that could help. If there is not one yet, establish it.

- Consider being more flexible in where the position "belongs." Join a group or organization that may not be an identical match but has some overlap with responsibilities. This will help form connections and identify people who may be able to provide support and assistance.

Elevator Pitch

- Design an elevator pitch in a way that explains the purpose and vision of the new role. This can help when establishing potential partnerships.

- Design an email template. This helps when cold emailing potential campus partners and can relieve stress.

Limitations

Ethical issues were a recurring concern during this project and were discussed when the authors met. Does their work fall into "Mesearch" when Pickles (2017) describes it as a diary entry where a researcher's own experience answers academic questions? Or could their project's use of self-reflection be portrayed as an "exhibition" rather than self-analysis within a social or cultural space (Bourdieu, 2003)? While the authors recognized these issues while writing this narrative, their approach seeks to illuminate the value of autoethnography as a tool and a way to express a personal narrative.

Conclusion & Next Steps

While the authors found solidarity and comfort in their conversations about the advantages and disadvantages of beginning a newly created role, it became clear from the interviews with each other that librarians in newly created roles need different support structures and specialized training than those that start new positions in already established roles. While it is challenging for everyone who starts a new job, there are different and additional challenges to starting a newly formed position, which is why there needs to be a different approach to the onboarding, orientation, and support process. There is a lack of knowledge and best practices regarding this topic in librarianship, and more awareness and a stronger understanding will benefit those who start inaugural positions. Librarianship is a constantly evolving field; with more attention brought to this issue, librarians in new roles could experience a smoother transition while navigating a new phase in their careers.

Emerging themes in this autoethnography illuminate the necessity to address evolving inaugural roles within academic libraries. Though challenges such as creating campus partnerships, communication of responsibilities and roles of positions, and more are prominent throughout this article, these challenges will likely change in the future. The authors acknowledge that some of their experiences and responses are unique to their roles at a public Illinois research institution. Depending on the size and type of library or organization, there are likely different challenges and benefits that other librarians in inaugural positions may experience.

For next steps, the authors plan to broaden the conversation by surveying and interviewing North American librarians and department heads who have started or created inaugural roles to examine if similar themes emerge, and if there are patterns or consistencies of challenges and needs of inaugural librarians dependent on the size and type of library. These conversations will be open to librarians and department heads of all library types.

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Appendix A. Questions for Unit Heads

1. What created the need to build these positions?

2. What did/do you see as the biggest challenges for these roles?

3. How did you see these roles contributing to the mission and vision of the University and Library?

4. What did you look for from people interviewing in these roles?

5. Starting in newly created positions can face unique challenges, such as helping others understand their roles and building partnerships. What were steps taken to help with some of these challenges?

6. What goals did you have for these positions?

7. What advice would you give to those who want to create new positions in their institutions?

Appendix B. Questions for Librarians

1. Position description/why it was attractive to me:

2. What are the unique benefits in starting in newly created roles?

3. How do these positions create possibilities?

4. What are the challenges of starting a brand-new position?

5. How does COVID impact starting a new role?

6. What would you recommend / best practices for librarians starting out in these roles?