



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

From School Library Media Specialist to Academic Librarian: Finding and Landing the Job for You!

Amy Dye-Reeves, *Texas Tech University*

ABSTRACT

The following article denotes a library media specialist's journey to obtain an academic librarianship position through the lens of imposter syndrome. The information contained in the article is presented through a singular lens and provides insight to help inspire library media specialists to apply and obtain future academic librarian positions.

KEYWORDS

career change, library media specialist, academic librarian

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School Days in MLS Program

In 2011, I was accepted into the Master of Information Science Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The summer before getting accepted into the program, I worked as a special education teaching assistant in a self-contained classroom within a rural East Tennessee school district. Because I already had some expertise, I quickly selected the school library media track instead of looking at public or academic pathways. The program now has additional tracks such as health informatics, research data, and more for future consideration.

During my program, I took courses in collection development, instructional design, and technology-centered topics. My favorite elective course of study was government libraries. I spent a week in Washington, DC, and had the opportunity to visit and network with professionals within the National Library of Medicine, Pentagon, and Smithsonian Libraries. The overall experience allowed me to look beyond the school librarian track and think more about other areas of librarianship for future consideration.

Upon returning from DC, I applied and began work as a graduate research assistant in the Reference and Instruction department at the University of Tennessee Libraries. In addition to my busy schedule, I also student taught eight hours each weekday with continuous rotations between elementary, middle, and high school in varying parts of town. Holding a graduate assistantship and completing a student teaching assistantship was no easy feat. I was exhausted from working weekdays and weekends to complete all the necessary coursework to graduate. In hindsight, I cannot believe I did everything without giving myself the essential self-care to propel myself through difficult times.

Graduation Conundrum

While working in both arenas, I was torn about which areas I should pursue. Should I choose academic libraries or continue with the school librarianship pathway? On the other hand, should I consider adding another year and working on the academic librarianship track? I decided to continue on my school library pathway and graduate according to my original timeline, because I did not want to take out any additional student loans.

During the following months, I applied for academic and school librarian jobs. I interviewed interchangeably for both types of positions during the summer of 2013. The first time, I was turned down for multiple academic librarian positions because I did not have a solid academic librarian background or enough related experience required by the listed institution

Simultaneously, I interviewed for a few school librarian positions. After three interviews, I finally landed a solo library media specialist position within a rural kindergarten to eighth-grade school.

Library Media Specialist Experience

I was thrilled but quickly became overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work required by one person without any support staff. I taught up to eight classes a day, led individual reading intervention groups, conducted collection development analysis, managed textbooks, and was the technology coordinator for the building. I was also a spelling bee and drama coach for the entire school and led multiple scholastic book fair fundraising efforts. I also created a STEM reading camp for reluctant readers (grades K-3) that showed a significant gap in literacy levels. In addition, I received a statewide grant to create a community garden with complimentary fruits and vegetables. I provided multiple field trip experiences for the entirety of the monthly camp experience. Finally, each student received three weekly books during the 2017 five-week summer camp experience.

Nevertheless, I was exhausted but nevertheless proud of the efforts put forth in working with our faculty, staff, parents, and students in our building. However, I still had the desire in the back of my mind of “what if?” What if I tried the academic librarianship route again? I sat down and made a pros and cons list of why I wanted to change career: the pros on my list won out in the end. I decided during the summer of 2017 to apply for any available Reference and Instruction positions. But where would I start?

The New Kid in Town...

In applying for academic librarianship jobs, I felt many feelings, primarily associated with imposter syndrome. Was I good enough, or was my experience not being valued? Where do I go to find jobs that might fit my unique CV? First, I visited the ALA JobLIST and started looking for positions that include both my education and instructional background. I would immediately feel like I didn't have any experience in the required and preferred qualifications listed. Who would want a library media specialist? I would print off job listings and start making lists of my qualifications and how I might contribute to the organization. Because of my previous experience, I had only aligned myself with the Reference and Instruction Librarian position. I also had no idea about tenure-track faculty life and what those terms meant within academic librarianship. I had to teach myself academic librarianship and tenure-track librarianship through books from the Association of College and Research Libraries, Rowman and Littlefield, and other publication venues.

After much self-convincing, I took a massive leap of faith and applied for general and subject-specific liaison reference and instruction positions. I also have a master's degree in History and felt I could use it for something that would allow me to contribute my academic knowledge on that particular area. Like most academic librarian positions, it took me a while to hear back about the possibility of an interview. I would sometimes get turned down and occasionally was invited to interview via phone call. However, I was told the same thing. I did not have an academic librarian background on my CV, and I still did not have enough experience. In the fall of 2017, I finally landed two in-person interviews for a general reference librarian and a subject reference librarian. I never heard back from one position, and I was selected as the final applicant for the other. I was thrilled but also nervous to begin a brand-new journey.

Upon my first day, I was told by my new colleagues that I was the last person that they wanted for this position, and I didn't quite fit it. But they had to hire me anyway. I learned and grew through the process of being lonely and isolated by my peers. I kept questioning why I decided to move my family to another state and felt like I was an imposter in this field. I felt miserable every single day during my employment there. I kept blaming myself and relieving conversations and often found myself picking parts of every conversation. I felt like an outsider and was often left out of my department.

After enrolling in therapy, I concluded that it was not me, and perhaps the institution was not the best fit for me. I quickly decided to move on and apply for other positions in the academic field. I told myself that if this did not work, I could always return to being a library media specialist. During the spring of 2018, I applied for every job on the ALA JobLIST postings. I was not selective, and I highly recommend that people do not follow my lead on this effort. I learned that I should only apply for jobs I feel confident about and locations that might work for my family. This time around, I had academic librarianship experience. I received many job interviews, phone calls, Zoom interviews, and in-person opportunities.

Continuous and Lifelong Learner: The Journey Continues

After months of waiting and being unhappy in my current job, I finally accepted another job in a different state. I moved to Texas and began my current position as the new Education Librarian. I feel like I fit this job as I was a certified teacher and wanted to make an impact on current and future teacher-educators in the field. I felt more confident and comfortable this time around. I have people who want me here and encourage me to succeed in all areas of my life. I encourage people to keep going and not give up during this challenging process! You can achieve great things!

I want to give others the following advice:

1. Do not be afraid to apply for jobs (even if you are not feeling qualified through the job postings). Make a list of qualifications on how you can contribute to that particular job. Try not to overthink ways you might not “fit” the position. You have a unique background and exciting work experience. Demonstrate Your Worth!
2. Read the job description carefully. Do you feel comfortable in this role and the location? Do you see yourself in this location for an extended amount of time? Would your family be happy living in that particular location? Does the job location provide you with both a position and a work-life balance? Being mentally and physically comfortable goes a long way in continuing your job.
3. Do not be afraid to seek out mentorship opportunities. Your information science school can also help connect you with professionals in your selected field. The professionals in your area can also help you understand the job duties and provide a list of other opportunities to explore that might be suitable for your future! ALA and ACRL conferences have job placement opportunities. Someone there is also available to help review your CV and give you advice that could improve your chances of receiving a job interview! The important part is not giving up and always being willing to continue learning from the experience.
4. Also, do not be afraid to incorporate mental health days. I searched for a job every day and including the weekends. I regret not spending time with my family and giving myself a break. You deserve a break! Take that walk, go to the movies, or do anything that makes you happy. You’ve got this!