



Tenure-Track Expectations in a Nebulous Environment

Anonymous

This piece has been anonymized to protect the identity of the author as well as their institution, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The author believes that the issues discussed exist in numerous institutions across the field and would like to address those shared experiences without placing undue attention on any particular organization.

ABSTRACT

I joined the research and instruction department of an R1 university soon after library school. Approximately six months after my arrival, that department split in half. The shifting work environment, coupled with the newness of the job, presented several challenges, particularly dealing with interdepartmental tension and navigating contradictory priorities among colleagues. New librarians are often encouraged to bring innovative ideas to the table, but ambition and change are not always welcomed by seasoned professionals with preexisting notions about librarianship. I will examine the added stress of maintaining collegial relationships and finding professional identity in delicate and unfamiliar conditions.

KEYWORDS

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What it Means to be New Blood

Librarians entering the workforce right out of graduate school are typically equipped with the most up-to-date methods, approaches, and practices for the profession. They are often familiar with recent literature and project trends, which may significantly contribute to their values or identity in the workforce. However, as professionals in any industry can attest to, theoretical knowledge and practical know-how are two very different things. Therefore, the relationship between a new librarian and their more experienced colleagues or supervisors is critical. Unfortunately, because librarianship is a rapidly evolving field, new ideas do not always fit the traditional mold of established procedures. This can throw a wrench in the development of professional relationships.

Balancing High Hopes and Complex Obstacles

Though people may enter the field of information sciences for a variety of different reasons—an interest in public service, academia, or instruction—many new librarians have the same desire to make an impact on their community or organization. This may be accompanied by ambition, eagerness, and a willingness to be involved in various initiatives. New hires who express these traits are often encouraged to pursue their interests and tackle projects when they first arrive, as supervisors or colleagues seek to stoke the fires within new librarians and take advantage of the fresh energy they bring. Experienced professionals must also provide reality checks, though, with the burden of explaining policies and procedures or other obstacles that may interfere with some projects. While this is an unavoidable part of starting any job or career, it can be especially draining for new librarians depending on how traditionally-minded their organization is.

When change is possible, being on the front end of innovative projects can be invigorating for new librarians. When change is not possible, it can be easy to lose steam, particularly when new librarians do not yet understand the reasons for the barriers. While some barriers to change are easily explained by organization-wide policies, such as classroom technology, other issues may boil down to politics or longstanding beliefs specific to the library. A new academic librarian, who may not have worked in a university environment and may not know any of the history or initial reasoning behind certain practices, also may not be able to make sense of these kinds of obstacles. If many of their new ideas or projects are effectively shut down for reasons that they do not understand, new librarians may lose motivation and take less initiative over time. Colleagues or supervisors can try to combat this by maintaining an encouraging and supportive work environment, providing verbal validation or advice even when new librarians are unable to successfully implement changes, but it can still feel like an uphill battle on both sides. Seasoned professionals may not intend to discourage new blood; many may welcome healthy discussions about difficulties for new librarians. Questioning established structures or boundaries can make it harder for newcomers to strengthen meaningful work

relationships, though, particularly in longstanding institutions where radical change is rarely welcome.

When Change is Welcome but Not Widespread

While new librarians may not be in a position to spread new ideas and practices throughout their entire department or library, there are still opportunities for them to pursue individual projects. They may be given leniency to teach a class in whatever way they wish, restructure some of their online learning materials according to new critical literacies, or conduct outreach using methods totally different from their colleagues. Others in their department may applaud these endeavors and encourage experimental approaches—particularly in universities where autonomy is highly valued—but may not actually have any intention of adopting others' ideas for themselves. Though well-meaning, this can also have a negative effect on new librarians. Even in a work environment where a librarian can do whatever they want with their individual roles and responsibilities, not being able to innovate or make meaningful changes on a larger scale can still be demoralizing. New librarians in this situation, being praised for new ideas but not seeing them implemented, may eventually feel as though the effort of pursuing new initiatives is not worth the payoff. Having to conceptualize and complete projects singlehandedly is significantly more time-consuming than having teammates to share the workload with, which makes it more difficult for new librarians to fit those kinds of projects into their schedules. This is especially true for tenure-track librarians who may feel more pressure than their tenured colleagues to fulfill research, service, and other professional requirements. Practical projects such as revamping instruction or developing learning materials takes time away from those requirements, forcing new librarians to reprioritize things that they may be very passionate about.

Finding Footing on a Moving Platform

Recently, I was hired as a librarian at a research university. Since earning R1 status, the library administration has placed more emphasis on innovative technologies and other research trends. As a result, a data services department was founded a few months after my arrival, pulling some librarians from the existing research and instruction department. Though many agreed that the new department would fill growing gaps in our services and resources, losing people put considerable strain on the remaining librarians who were still responsible for traditional research and instruction services, including myself.

Shifting Roles and Responsibilities

The creation of a new department required some shifting throughout the library—paperwork, policies and procedures, office spaces, etc.—but especially within the research and instruction department where I work. Our department is responsible for the first-year instruction program, which typically includes up to eight courses and one hundred individual class sections in the fall semester. Historically, these classes have been divided among the

research and instruction librarians, to give everyone an equal load for teaching library sessions. The sessions are mostly straightforward, either introducing students to the library as a whole or covering research topics such as developing keyword searches and using peer-reviewed sources. Though each course requires similar instruction, the sheer number of class sections meant that each librarian wound up teaching at least twenty first-year sessions per semester, in addition to the subject-specific instruction requested by their liaison faculty.

Having lost some of our previous librarians to the new department, the remaining research and instruction librarians had to reevaluate how we could meet instruction needs with fewer people. Having previously worked with one of the first-year courses to develop online learning materials for students to access outside of class, I recommended a self-guided online instruction approach. I decided to develop a library course in our course management system, which students and instructors could work through on their own without having to come into the library for a traditional session. The idea of replacing face-to-face instruction, however, did not go over well. I created the course, and my colleagues promoted it as a supplement, but the official stance of our department was still focused on doing as many traditional in-person instruction sessions as possible. I saw and attempted to take advantage of an opportunity to shift my responsibilities from first-year service provider to online learning coordinator but was unable to make the new approach viable to the rest of my department.

As a new librarian, this was disheartening, but my colleagues and supervisor were supportive of my desire to continue with the course even though we were not going to use it as I'd originally hoped. I ended up creating the course on my own, working with faculty across several academic departments to integrate it into as many different classes as possible. I was still assigned traditional first-year face-to-face library sessions, though, in addition to the subject-specific sessions requested by my liaison areas. Therefore, I wound up with two different instruction-related roles—one that was assigned to me and one that I felt passionate about. While running and maintaining the course singlehandedly has been rewarding, not being able to get buy-in from colleagues and other faculty members has felt like being pulled in two different directions, which has added to the stress of finding my feet in a new place.

Establishing Professional Identity

Amidst juggling multiple roles, starting a career in a library with a changing organizational structure and varied professional priorities has made it difficult to determine what my values are as a librarian. Because I was part of the library committee that later informed the creation of the new department, I witnessed many conversations that illustrated why those kinds of advanced services and resources are needed on our campus. Because I am part of the department that lost multiple people and had to redesign our instruction approach over the course of one summer, however, I've also directly experienced the consequences of reassigning roles without having new people to fill them. As tensions between the new department and old department have built, I have struggled to remain a neutral party. Not only

has this added to the stress of an already overwhelming position, but it has also made it more difficult to effectively communicate and comfortably collaborate with the librarians that have moved departments.

As a new librarian, having conflicting opinions on best practices and library policies is par for the course, but having one foot in two different departments puts a strain on several professional relationships. Many librarians have areas of expertise that other information professionals can reference or relate to, usually based on interests or experience. For new librarians, pursuing similar initiatives or researching in similar areas allows them to establish a professional identity that influences their work and benefits their institution in a unique way. Not being able to drum up excitement for passion projects or confide in colleagues about workplace tension, for fear of seeming in favor of one set of values over another, can create a tricky environment for exploring new interests. This, in turn, makes it more difficult to innovate library services and resources.

Reflecting on My Experiences

The obstacles I have faced trying to implement new instruction projects and shift some of the thinking around librarians as service providers represent unique tensions that exist outside the organizational structure. In some ways, I think the line between tenured and new librarians is even more distinct than the lines that separate supervisors. The shrinking research and instruction department at my current institution is highly collaborative—no task is deemed too insignificant for our supervisor nor too lofty for me as the newest member—but the consistent network of support and communication only extends to the shared responsibilities previously established within the department. While it is easy to get a class or reference shift covered, asking for input on other projects yields little to no engagement. The gap between me and my colleagues is wide and intimidating because they have more experience and feel like they know when something isn't going to work or will not be worth their efforts. In contrast, the gap between me and higher-level library authorities who share some of my professional goals feels much more manageable, despite the organizational structure.

This is an unsettling position to be in, because I have no desire to side-step those in my department but am always eager to work toward a shared vision. Finding supporters is great, but I have found that building those relationships is even more difficult when they exist outside my home department. Verbal support at the outset of a project often gives me a sense of purpose and increased motivation, no matter where it comes from, but that has sometimes been overshadowed by the direct skepticism or indifference expressed closer to home. Other library employees and administrators have responded positively to new projects I have participated in, though, which has made my work feel more meaningful. Therefore, even though I may have felt isolated while completing a project or coming up with new ideas, I've had proof in the end that I did good work. The praise I have received from others, even though it has not come from the places I had hoped or expected, has encouraged me to keep pursuing new initiatives.

Pushing Through the Fog

At the end of the day, I would encourage new librarians to remember that they were hired for a reason. On an institutional level, it can seem like we are being asked to come up with solutions to problems that nobody really wants to solve. The bigger picture, though, is that librarianship as a profession is changing. The field of information sciences has always been rapidly evolving, and it can take time for individual units to adjust to new user needs. Librarians bringing new skills and perspectives should feel confident in the fact that they do have a unique voice. Libraries of any kind can benefit from alternative approaches to traditional services and resources, whether that sentiment is universally shared or not. New librarians should pay attention to the people at their institutions who are genuinely supportive of their endeavors, especially those who are willing to offer direct advice or help and lean on those developing relationships even if they are struggling to build others. Librarians experiencing feelings of isolation from those they work directly with can also take the opportunity to collaborate outside their home departments, or even outside the library as a whole. Others with shared or complementary visions can provide additional sources of motivation and input as well as aid in the implementation of new projects. New librarians should always seek to strengthen their departments and build relationships with their immediate colleagues, even if it requires more patience or persistence than anticipated but building a support system for individual pursuits can make navigating traditional duties or workplace tensions less stressful.