Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

One Year In: What I Learned in My First Year of Librarianship and What I Wish I Would Have Done Differently

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ABSTRACT

This paper ruminates on my first year as an academic librarian on a health sciences campus. Discussed topics include lessons that were learned, reflection on what I wish would have happened differently, and nominal but helpful advice for recent graduates with little experience in libraries or those making a career transition into librarianship.

KEYWORDS

librarianship, academic librarianship, new librarians, recent graduates, career change

Throughout my undergraduate life, I joked that if I could find a job that would just pay me to go to school, I would be blissfully happy. While trying to figure out what path I wanted to pursue in graduate school, I learned about librarianship, believed it would fulfill my desire to learn, and have not been disappointed. After graduating in May 2021, I was fortunate to land a job in August that same year at an R1 research university, as an Embedded Clinical Librarian.

My path to librarianship was unconventional, to say the least. I completed a 100% online dual-degree program that put me on the path to medical librarianship, never having stepped foot in an actual physical library throughout my schooling. In fact, before my first day on the job at the university, the last time I had been in an academic library was around 2004, 17 years prior to the completion of my graduate program.

The program itself was unique in that it was a dual-degree program, so upon completion I received a Master of Library Science and a Master of Health Studies. I figured I would focus my time and energy on subjects that I found interesting, and my goal was just to get through my program. The duality of my program had me taking courses where I learned about librarianship in one track, and then health research in the other. I learned so much throughout my program, however as with any program, there were parts of the program that I wish had been different, and things I wish I would have done differently.

My first year of librarianship has been a major learning curve. Prior to landing my dream job, I had been a kindergarten teacher in China. To go from teaching non-native-English-speaking children to American medical students was a major shift in my career path. Not only did I have to adjust to living back in America after almost a decade, but I was also learning my new job on the spot. The following three points are lessons I learned in my first year as a clinical librarian and reflections on what I wish I would have done differently during library school.

Learn What's Hot in Librarianship

This might seem like a given but, as a student who is working full time, it can be difficult to look beyond what is being asked of you in the moment. You get so focused on completing assignments, keeping your head above water, and just pushing through to get the work done. Taking time to explore librarianship beyond what is being asked of you in the classroom could be beneficial in many ways. In addition to getting a better understanding of how the profession is evolving, you can learn what employers are looking for in candidates and what skillsets are in high demand. Learning about this while still in school can be helpful for completing projects and marketable after graduation.

When I was in library school, I actively avoided any courses that had the word "data" in the title. I did not want to work with data, I was intimidated by the language, and I was generally unfamiliar with what it all meant. Nine days after my first day as a librarian, my director sat in my shiny new office letting me know that one of our colleagues had decided to leave, and she asked if I would be willing to take over the data management services that we currently offered.

We did not offer a massive array of data management services, and my main role would be to field queries from researchers about finding suitable data repositories. This was not a large addition to my workload at the time, yet I was very intimidated at the idea of helping researchers in an area I knew little about. Nonetheless, being a life-long learner and not wanting to say no to the first thing my new boss asked me to do, I said that I would take on that role.

I began reading articles and learning as much as possible about data management and how it applied to health sciences librarianship. Eventually my role grew from simply being a point of contact within the library to direct researchers to outside resources, to developing my own data management resources, serving on a university-wide data management policy development task force, and getting involved with outside organizations that were focused on data management.

Lessons learned: you never know what you will be asked to do. Though this is a scary thought, in my case it led to me learning about another facet of librarianship that I had never considered before. Though I have no desire to switch paths into data management librarianship, learning about it has given me insight into what my researchers deal with and how I can better assist them in my current role. I took initiative and completed the Medical Library Association's Data Services Specialization, and with that added knowledge, I feel confident developing a workshop for my colleagues on the basics of data management so that they, too, will have an added area that they will be able to help their researchers in.

What I wish I would have done differently: for this scenario, I really wish I would have explored more of the professional organizations and literature beyond that of what was required for assignments, and then applied what I learned to choosing the courses I enrolled in. There was ample opportunity to take data management courses as electives and I chose not to. I then had to make up for that as a new librarian.

No library is the same. Departments are different, roles are different, and overall dynamics and interactions with the institution outside the library are different. In a mixed-methods study, researchers reported that 100% of libraries interviewed were involved in data management in some form (Pinfield, Cox, & Smith, 2014). Depending on the institution and relationship, this involvement ranged from leadership roles and contributing to policy development at the institutional level, to facilitating discussions between researchers and people in other departments that could assist in research data management.

Had I had more than simple statistics classes and actively sought out data management courses, The benefits for me would have been twofold. First, I would have had an extra skill set to add to my resume. Data management is a hot topic right now, and with new policies going into effect soon, institutions are scrambling to make sure they are equipped to help their

researchers. Second, had I taken more diverse classes, I would not have been so intimidated by a new field, and it might not have taken me as long to get my footing as a new librarian.

If you know what library you will be working in, that is great. You have an opportunity to survey your work environment, see where there may be a lack in services, and make recommendations. If you are like me in that you are finishing library school and applying for any job that you are remotely qualified for and hoping that you do not end up in that statistical group that could not find a job after graduate school, the answer may not be as straight forward. Reading the literature and getting an idea of where other libraries are making changes will be insightful and give you an idea of what environment into which you will be walking.

For example, there is learning more about collection development. In my coursework, I took one collection development course. With more and more resources in all disciplines becoming digital and/or more expensive, collaboration and sharing of resources is an essential exercise for getting our patrons access to what they need and want. Levenson and Nichols Hess (2020) discuss collaborative collection development as a way for libraries to act as a consortium of information that is then shared amongst members, thus alleviating costs to the institution.

Mi, Wu, Zhang, & Wu (2021) discuss the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) recognizing the need for arts and humanities education to be integrated into and throughout physician education curricula. Whether you are going into humanities librarianship or health sciences librarianship, understanding the need for and learning how to effectively integrate different educational criteria into a cohesive lesson could make you stand out when applying for jobs. For librarians, this could mean including media or health literacy, cultural competence, equitable access to resources, or any number of additional aspects that could be included in a presentation or lesson.

Change is inevitable and what is important will depend on which area of librarianship you are going into. In research for my classes, I kept seeing "data management" and I chose to ignore it. Even if I had not been passed the data management torch, I would still need to be learning about it to better serve my patrons.

Librarianship is a diverse and growing field of practice and study. There are many working parts in a library, especially an academic one. Specializations are great and they provide you with specific information and skills that can make you an asset when working collaboratively, which is an essential part of librarianship. No one person has all the answers, but everyone who can contribute is appreciated.

Teaching and Engagement

I had been told by my mentor in graduate school that the teaching skills I had learned as a kindergarten teacher would be useful as a librarian, though I did not understand how at the time. Teaching kindergarten required organization, lesson planning, understanding the

mechanics of how topics build on one another, and patience. At the university level, unsurprisingly, these all hold true. Most of what I have been teaching in my first year have been half hour-long introductions to library services, which differ greatly from teaching semester-long courses. However, having organization and planning skills has proven immensely useful. It surprises me every time I teach a class when students, and sometimes professors, mention that they had no idea that the library offered so much. Successful delivery of these orientations introduces so many students to what the library has to offer and seeing that look of amazement on faces in the crowd never gets old.

Lessons learned: the basic educational needs of university students are not much different from those of young learners. To learn, they must remain engaged in the material, which can be addressed through presentation skills and enthusiasm for your topic. I love seeing those "lightbulb moments" when students learn about the library and realize they have a phenomenal resource to lean on, so that's what I strive for when I am teaching. Another lesson has been that planning is everything—not just planning your lesson, but also planning for the unknown. What happens if the internet goes down? What do I do if I cannot hook up my own computer? Do I know my lesson well enough to where if my notes are not available, I will still be able to teach it successfully?

What I wish I would have done differently: because teaching is a huge part of librarianship, I wish that course design and evaluation, or educational theory and pedagogy, would have been part of my academic program. Evaluation of tasks is how we learn and grow as educators. Knowing how to get usable data and properly evaluate my teaching would be very helpful, especially as a new librarian.

Though much of what is covered in an education degree program would be very useful and applicable in librarianship, obtaining another degree is not necessary for successful teaching as a librarian. Information literacy is an essential component of education; however, it is often added as a supplemental lesson within the full semester, if it is added at all. This means that we librarians only have about an hour (or less) to impart the knowledge we can to a group of students, who we may or may not see again.

Booth, Lowe, Tagge, & Stone (2015) found that engagement with a librarian—either by taking an information literacy course or by having a librarian involved in syllabus or assignment design—had a positive impact on student performance. Mullins (2014) discusses the IDEA (interview, design, embed, assess) Model for incorporating information literacy into courses. I have found that engaging with professors and discussing specifics of lessons with them beforehand (1) sometimes enlightens the professor to what the library can actually do and often leads to a more active relationship with that faculty member or department, and (2) allows lessons to be customized, and allows orientations to address specific tasks or assignments that

students will be expected to perform during the course, which means that they get much more out of the lessons, as opposed to a general library orientation.

The bottom line is that you will likely be teaching at some point in your career as a librarian. This does not mean that you need to become an expert in educational theory, curriculum design, or pedagogy. It simply means that the more you know, the more confident you will feel in your abilities when you stand in the front of that big room and try to get students and faculty excited about the library. General knowledge of lesson planning, course organization, and evaluation will be helpful, regardless of the branch of librarianship you are venturing into.

Utilizing Your Support Network

Throughout my academic program I was fortunate to have an amazing mentor. She, too, had been through a dual-degree program, was an academic librarian, and loved what she did. The only challenge in our relationship was that her area of expertise was in humanities, and I was studying to be a medical librarian. Though there is some overlap in the basic functions of an academic librarian regardless of subject matter, there can be differences in terminology, search strategies, publications, projects, and professional development. I felt like I did not have access to professionals outside of my mentor and instructors. Though I was happy with those relationships, there was something missing, and I felt like I had questions that could not really be answered by those in my current circle.

As a practicing clinical librarian, I have learned that networking, seeking mentorship, and developing relationships, both with your immediate colleagues and those you partner with through professional organizations, is paramount to success. I cannot speak to other areas of librarianship, but collaboration is a major part of clinical librarianship. The aforementioned publications, projects, and professional development are rarely done as solo endeavors. In my institution, though our team is small, and we are usually short-staffed in some way, we are still responsible for providing services to the entire medical campus. The only way we can do this is to work together and utilize each other's strengths. Getting involved with professional organizations, such as the Medical Library Association (MLA), is all about connecting with your colleagues from across the globe and working together on various projects or learning from each other's experiences.

Lessons learned: through the relationship with my mentor, I learned a lot about how to transition already learned skills into my new career as a librarian. I learned that having a mentor is extremely important, and developing those relationships is beneficial to both the mentor and mentee.

I have also learned that taking time to learn from your new colleagues provides one with a bounty of information. As a new librarian, one of my biggest concerns was simply not knowing how things actually worked in a library. When I first came on the team, I tried to do everything

myself. I did not want to bother anyone with my seemingly endless questions, and I tried to just get things done the best I knew how, which usually ended up creating more work for me. By finally taking the time to ask my colleagues what their role was, how they approached problems, and if I could shadow them for various tasks, I was able to get a much better understanding of how we all fit together as a team and what my role was and could be developed into.

What I wish I would have done differently: in addition to the wonderful mentor I had, I wish I would have reached out and pursued a mentor/mentee relationship with a practicing medical or clinical librarian. Learning more about the day-to-day real-world work of a medical librarian, the projects they work on, and problem solving they are expected to do would have been very helpful as I began my job search and eventual career.

If you are transitioning to librarianship from a different field, do not be afraid to reach out to current librarians. I was nervous to do this as a graduate student because I did not want to bother anyone and assumed that no one would want to take time out of their day to tell me what they do. Oh, how wrong I was! If I have learned anything, it is that librarians love to talk about librarianship.

Moving Forward

I could probably fill a book with what I wish I would have known, but the three points discussed in this paper have dominated most of my time in my first year of librarianship. A lot of learning is done on the job, and that is to be expected. Just as with any profession, knowledge is power. No one can possibly know everything, though learning how to get information and where to go for help will give you the foundation needed for a strong start. Gathering experiences and talking to each other is an essential part of learning and growing as a librarian. Take advantage of the resources that are available to you and seek out more. Build those relationships, cultivate a passion for information literacy, and never stop seeking out learning opportunities.

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