



Rarer Still: Professional Development as a Special Collections Assistant

Anna Opryszko, *University of Minnesota*

ABSTRACT

Pursuing professional development in special collections is hard for a paraprofessional, especially when many library schools offer limited instruction in special collections and inadequately prepare students for a professional position. When the “traditional” resources are underwhelming, it is important to know where to find knowledge, training, and professional connections. In this column, I explore my experiences with professional development while working as an assistant in a rare books library and offer advice for others who may be struggling to figure out their own path.

KEYWORDS

early career, special collections, professional development, paraprofessional

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As with so many others in this field, my path towards being a verifiable capital-L Librarian has not always been straight or smooth—and it is not over yet. Eight library-related or library-adjacent jobs in eleven years; institutions of varying sizes and libraries of varying campus centrality; service areas ranging from circulation to cataloging to student supervision; and all with one thing in common: the official job classification has always been “library assistant.” Around maybe my eighth year and sixth job, I started trying to create a professional narrative for myself that would show development and advancement without a title change.

The roadblocks I have faced are the same ones that plague the field. There is a dearth of jobs in general, and in special collections even more so. Without an MLIS, you are mostly relegated to the paraprofessional sphere, where wages are stagnant, and schedules are so tightly packed with operational responsibilities that the idea of part-time graduate school or pursuing other professional development opportunities becomes unthinkable. Despite the lateral moves and the frustration of stagnation at times, I am still an optimist at heart, and I believe that there is so much we can do to advocate for ourselves, find support, and actively work towards goals that sometimes feel out of reach. I would like to offer a handful of suggestions, based on my own experiences getting serious about professional development in special collections.

Some of this advice is widely applicable in librarianship, but I will be talking about my experience working to advance within special collections specifically. As a smaller subset of the library field, I did not always find general advice applicable to my path, and I have sometimes felt so intimidated by the expertise and accomplishments of rare books librarians and curators that it felt impossible to seek advice from the top. I offer this advice as someone still in the middle of figuring it all out.

You Cannot Do It Alone

This might be obvious to some, but it certainly was not to me, so I want to begin by spelling this out: professional development does not happen in a vacuum! I had convinced myself that after a certain amount of time plugging away at the work that I enjoy, I would suddenly find myself replete with the skills that I needed to advance. I also thought that finding inspiration in others’ work meant that I had not “earned” the right to feel inspired, and that solo work was the only “pure” work. Slowly, I have learned to acknowledge these things are not and will never be the truth.

In some ways, accepting that it will take actual work and collaboration to develop professionally is a bit of a relief. It has changed my self-reflection from unproductive ruminating (“maybe there is something I inherently lack”) to actionable brainstorming (“what are my next steps, and what support can I seek to take those steps?”). For me, this shift happened because a supervisor made a point to regularly ask me how she could help support me in my professional development. That question stumped me at first, but when I realized that I was being offered the chance to ask for help, opportunities that I had not considered suddenly became manageable. Of

course, this is not always the case with supervisor-supervisee relationships, and that is why finding multiple types of mentors is essential.

Network, Join Organizations, and Find Mentors

Informal and formal mentors can be incredibly impactful. Talk to as many people as possible, ask them about their paths and their advice, and choose a handful to reach out to regularly. It can be nice to have a variety of informal mentors within your institution, community, or region, and beyond. There are also formal paths to mentorship that can be particularly useful for would-be special collections and cultural heritage workers within professional organizations like the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), and the Society of American Archivists (SAA). And if membership costs are prohibitive, there are often early career scholarships and mutual aid efforts that can help! I have been amazed to discover the generosity of my peers and mentors, and how willing people have been to give an hour of their time to speak with an early career paraprofessional.

As an example, here's a story about one easy step that jump-started a significant amount of my recent professional development. I first found out about a mutual aid fund for ALA membership in early 2022, which allowed me to join RBMS—a crucial membership for someone pursuing special collections librarianship. After becoming a member, I decided to apply for a scholarship to attend the virtual RBMS conference that summer, which I was awarded. Because of that conference, I learned about the RBMS mentorship program, got matched with a fantastic mentor, and from there was encouraged to join the RBMS 2023 Conference Program Planning Committee to provide some early career perspective. Within a year these opportunities unfolded one-by-one, snowballing from a single decision.

Look Outside of Special Collections

Sometimes, the perfect opportunity will not present itself at the perfect moment, and that is okay. I acquired many of the skills that helped me enter special collections through other library employment. Of my eleven years of experience, only about three have been spent working with rare books, but the sum of the whole is what counts. Through access services positions, I learned about patron privacy, communicating policy, and student supervision. Working opening and closing shifts gave me the ability to demonstrate a level of responsibility in managing secure spaces and coordinating operational procedures. Familiarity with integrated library systems, cataloging standards, user services, or instruction are often preferred components of paraprofessional jobs, and can easily be translated into special collections competencies.

Do not Overburden Yourself

This is where I find it difficult to take my own advice. The most challenging aspect of actively pursuing professional development opportunities while working as a paraprofessional is that it will almost always be extracurricular, since professional development is rarely written into paraprofessional job descriptions. It can feel like there is too much to do and not enough opportunities at the same time, and the frustrating experience of not seeing the fruits of your professional development labors quickly can easily drive you to overburden yourself with tasks and applications and books to read and things to learn. Find time that is not dedicated to getting ahead. Find peers going through the same thing and remind each other to be kind to yourselves. Slow down and enjoy one exciting new step at a time.