Column: A New Generation of Librarianship

Pandemic Professionals: Beginning a Librarian Career in a Crisis

Edward Gloor, *University of Houston*
Natalia Kapacinskas, *University of Houston*

ABSTRACT

Acculturation to a new profession is always challenging, but the COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique set of difficulties for new librarians. As librarian colleagues at a large research university, the authors of this column find that their early-career experiences of networking, training, and the promotion process during a pandemic have differed from those shared by more established librarians. These differences have affected our experiences of our positions and the field of librarianship, as well as our relationship to our careers. This conversational column explores the complexity of these experiences. We hope that it offers validation to other librarians who began careers during the pandemic, just as we have found camaraderie in the process of writing it.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, academic librarianship, networking, early career

SUGGESTED CITATION

Gloor, E., Kapacinskas, N. (2023). Pandemic professionals: Beginning a librarian career in a crisis. *Journal of New Librarianship, 8* (1), 123–127. https://doi.org/ 10.33011/newlibs/13/13

Changes to work environment, culture, and norms resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have created a unique set of challenges for librarians starting their careers in the past three years. One of the two authors of this column, Edward Gloor, entered the profession in the fall of 2019, shortly before the start of the pandemic. The other author, Natalia Kapacinskas, graduated from library school in May 2020 and became a professional librarian in the midst of the pandemic. In conversation, we have shared perspectives and concerns about how the unique circumstances of this time period have impacted our experiences as early career librarians, and how our experiences differ from those of our colleagues whose careers and reputations were established prior to the pandemic. These differences include onboarding and training experiences, opportunities for networking within our library and the field of librarianship broadly, and our scholarship and service efforts within the librarian promotion process. We have noticed effects on our identities as librarians and our relationships to librarianship and work itself. The foundations of our careers are not the same as those built by previous generations of librarians, but we see this as neither wholly negative nor wholly positive. This column, written in a conversational style, reflects on our experiences thus far.

Onboarding and Training

Employee onboarding in academic libraries is often a lengthy process; our institution suggests that fully acclimating can take up to two years. Changes in the work environment and its customs in the wake of the pandemic complicated new librarian onboarding.

> *Natalia*: I started my new position while librarians at the University of Houston (UH) Libraries were still working remotely unless required to work onsite. At the time, the University was still prioritizing virtual instruction, so my entire training and initial onboarding process was virtual. When we returned to campus full-time in August 2020, I found myself in what felt like another onboarding process for site-specific and in-person matters.

> *Edward*: When UH started going into lockdown, I had already established a routine and some familiarity with work patterns, and I felt I had an understanding of what was expected of me. However, when everything went online, it was hard to get a grasp on how those expectations shifted and what was still feasible.

> I know that everyone was going through an adjustment period, but since I wasn't hearing much from anyone, I felt like I was sitting on the sidelines. My career timeline was moving forward, but it didn't feel like I was moving forward in my career. I wasn't able to establish a new set of routines. It felt like a dead period in my career, which feels awful looking back on it now. I do realize that this wasn't a completely unique experience, because many other people had this issue too. However, since it was at the start of my career, it felt especially significant. Had I been a librarian for a long period prior to the pandemic, the shock would have still been there, but established patterns would have

helped carry me through it. "No one wants to hear from me, everyone is scrambling, what do I do?"

Opportunities for Networking Within our Library and in the Profession

Another concern was whether the remote and asynchronous work environments encouraged throughout the pandemic would impact our careers by restricting networking opportunities. We felt the effects of this at both a local level, regarding relationships with faculty at our University and colleagues within our Libraries, and at a broader level, related to networking opportunities within librarianship as a whole.

As teaching librarians, much of our work hinges on relationships and outreach to faculty and colleagues across campus.

> *Natalia*: When I started this position, the path to forging these relationships wasn't clear since many of the strategies I heard others use (such as attending faculty events where mingling is encouraged) were not accessible. Although less spontaneous, I have developed solid relationships with faculty and campus collaborators through outreach for specific projects and teaching collaborations.

> *Edward*: Faculty working relationships completely shifted. While some remained, I hardly heard from anybody during the pandemic. I was able to maintain my relationship with the Associate Dean for Graduate Research and working with her was a real boost to my morale. It was satisfying that she knew me and wanted to work with me on a regular basis. Despite even having evidence for why collaborations were beneficial, return emails from faculty were rare. I don't think this was malicious, but more the nature of the situation; people had a lot on their plates. During this time, I began to resent liaisonship as a whole. The nature of the work started to feel parasitic because I needed faculty contact for my work to be successful, but faculty could go their whole careers without speaking to me and be very successful.

When reflecting on professional networking opportunities within librarianship, library conferences readily come to mind. Many conferences were canceled or shifted to virtual settings throughout the pandemic, an understandable and necessary consequence of an ongoing public health threat. However, as new librarians, it was difficult to avoid feeling that we lost opportunities due to the reduced networking and socialization times available at virtual conferences.

> *Natalia*: In library school, my librarian supervisors often touted the benefit of making connections at conferences. They said that through conferences, one could learn about opportunities like job postings or committee work. Although I see definite benefits to virtual conferences, I also feel that there are drawbacks specific to this point in my career. For instance, I'm starting to recognize names of fellow attendees and presenters

when I go to conferences and webinars, but since there are rarely opportunities to mingle or network, I haven't been able to speak to these familiar people. I have still benefited from the content of the conferences, but I have not found them to be valuable from a networking aspect.

Edward: I feel similarly. For example, I was in a committee meeting recently (my first national committee) and one of the other members was saying how she knew a lot of the mentors in their mentor-mentee matching project, and I realized how little I knew of the individuals in the group. I only loosely knew one mentor, an instructor from a Library Juice Academy course. The connection I have to the larger profession feels flimsy, and as in-person conferences become more common, I would like to change that.

Scholarship, Service, and the Promotion Process

At our institution, librarians go through a promotion process with reviews at three and six years, with promotion in rank from Assistant Librarian to Associate Librarian occurring after successfully passing the sixth-year review. Job performance, scholarship, and service are factors in this review, so the impact of pandemic-related interruptions and changes is a legitimate concern.

Edward: Before expressing my concerns about promotion, I considered delaying my third-year review. Internally, I didn't see a lot of opportunities to find co-writing partnerships during the pandemic, and the feeling of "I haven't actually done anything" started to creep in. I have been reassured (at least during the height of the pandemic when I was turning in my third-year portfolio) that everything would be fine due to COVID considerations on the promotion process. I still have a few years before I go up for promotion, and I no longer feel concerned about passing.

Natalia: I'm not really worried about the effect of COVID on my promotion process. I feel that our organization has taken COVID and subsequent changes into account during their evaluation of promotion criteria and has sufficiently shared how they will be doing so, such as valuing virtual presentations and professional development and being understanding of any COVID-related delays or interruptions to anticipated opportunities.

Thinking Ahead

Early-career academic librarians are often given the impression that the initial years in the profession form the foundation of our careers and are especially impactful within our careers. In writing this column, we returned to this idea again and again, asking ourselves whether this is true, and if so, what it means that the first years of our careers have been subject to such a time of crisis and change.

Edward: Does this make for a poor foundation? It's at least a different foundation than anyone else previously had.

Natalia: Because I was in my final semester of library school when the pandemic began in the United States, my entire professional career has occurred in pandemic conditions. I think that led me to reevaluate my career before it even started. That was a jarring experience. Up to that point, all the stories I had heard from fellow librarians undergoing career changes were stories that happened through their work experiences, such as someone who shifted library settings or positions. But my situation was different in that I felt that I needed to negotiate my career goals and desires in a world filled with sudden loss. I realized that I had to prioritize what was most important to me in my non-work life along with my work aspirations when job searching, and that my "dream job" could only be one where I had other important factors available: a livable salary, good health insurance, access to a support system outside of work, and a supportive and safe work environment.

My enduring predicament is that it is difficult to connect with things that my more experienced colleagues share about what was most meaningful for their professional development. Certain conferences no longer exist, and many practices seem to have fallen out of date very quickly. This makes me feel like I am embarking on a career in uncharted territory compared to previous generations of librarians. When I look forward in my career, I often ask, "What pathways forward exist?"

Edward: COVID exacerbated the isolation of moving to a new place. Before COVID, the possibility to create a new community existed, but during and post COVID, these communities and the possibility of engaging with them were really affected. Before the pandemic, I wasn't thinking that my next job would need to be somewhere that I wanted to settle; it didn't feel pressing to settle close to people I care about in the near future. The isolation of COVID made it apparent to me that being near my community will be my priority moving forward. The reality of working in academia is that you have to follow the job. I could be waiting years before the right position opens up, or maybe it becomes available when I am not ready to leave.

While we are both still at the beginning of our careers, the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced many aspects of our entries into the field of librarianship. In writing this piece, we benefited from the opportunity to validate one another's experiences, and we hope that it will offer similar validation to other new librarians.