



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

On the Clock: Time Management Experiences of New Librarians

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ABSTRACT

This short column will be a discussion of what is expected of librarians versus what they are given time to do, from the unique perspectives of an Academic Cataloguing Librarian and a rural Public Librarian. As new librarians themselves, they will discuss the challenges of librarianship across disciplines. “I’ll do it on the clock” means the task will be completed when one is being paid for their efforts. Yet when “this needs to be done,” it doesn’t matter what the clock says. They will discuss their day-to-day tasks, as well as their commitments like service and publication, to engage with the well-established conversation of work-life balance in a profession known for giving as much as it takes.

KEYWORDS

service, vocational awe, work-life balance, early career

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Librarianship draws certain people in through its welcoming doors—those who agree with its tenets and are willing to give just a little bit extra for the sake of the patron. However, this does trickle down. When does a little bit extra become an unwritten expectation? The presumptions one has when entering the field can vary based on their discipline. Academia brings publication priorities to those who choose this path, while time for filing grant applications creeps beyond dusk for the public realm. What we are given time and compensation for does not always align with what we expected. The following is a conversation between two new librarians who will share what this has meant for them.

Q: Tell us a little about yourself and where you work.

Kaia: I am a member of the James Smith Cree Nation. I am the Indigenous Cataloguing Librarian for the University of Calgary, and I have been here for just under two years. I am a salaried faculty member who works a regular 9-5 on weekdays, with no evenings or weekends required. I did my MLIS at the University of Alberta in 2021, and I come from a library family.

Petra: I am a first-generation Lebanese immigrant to the Land that is colonially known as Canada. As a Community Services Librarian in a rural public library, I work four days per week with one evening. Depending on community events, I work the occasional Saturday as well. Although I make the 45-minute commute to work in the small city of Wetaskiwin, I live in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton), Treaty 6. I completed my MLIS at the University of Alberta in 2021.

Q: When you were in library school, what did you think you would be doing in your day-to-day job?

Kaia: As Fobazi Ettarh says in her article, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves”: “If the expectation built into entry-level library jobs includes experience, often voluntary, in a library, then there are class barriers built into the profession.” This aligns with my assumption that I would be in one-year contracts for 3-5 years. I wanted to be an academic liaison librarian, so I knew my job would be filled with meetings and emails, sitting on committees, producing publications, and teaching.

Petra: I assumed that whether I was in academic or public libraries, I would be at the front desk or in the stacks providing point-of-need service, running programs, developing collections, and being a welcoming presence to the public.

Q: What are you expected to do in your day-to-day?

Kaia: As an Indigenous Cataloguing Librarian, it depends on the day. Sometimes I have meetings from when I start to when I go home. On other days, I don’t have to talk with anyone and can spend time cataloguing books, writing procedures, answering emails, and pondering my

scholarship goals. It can change pretty quickly if we have a shipment or donation coming in that requires all hands on deck.

Petra: There is no day-to-day! Daily plans are highly subject to change depending on service and operational needs, so I stay flexible. I could come in to work expecting to plan social media posts for the week, and instead end up taking care of an intellectual freedom complaint. Planning literacy programs, writing grants, and providing leadership support to our small team are also major parts of my role. Sometimes I get to hang out at the reference desk or in the stacks, but I wish I could more. Rather, I am expected to provide general oversight for reference service and programming. For me personally, it can be difficult to balance wanting to be everywhere all the time with the limited number of hours in a workday. I want to put the same level of care into each one of my tasks, but that is not realistic. Regarding vocational awe, Ettarh (2018) wrote that “[i]n the face of grand missions of literacy and freedom, advocating for your full lunch break feels petty” (para. 14). Yet we can sense that not taking one’s breaks or paid time off, even when something seems pressing, will lead to an unreasonable precedent for yourself as well as your colleagues.

Q: What are some examples of service expected of you as a librarian, and what can you do on the clock?

Kaia: Service is sitting on committees, offering your expertise and time. As an academic, it is part of my job. My managers have already calculated it into the amount of time I spend on something. I am supposed to spend 5% of my time on service, 5% on scholarship, and 90% on professional practice (AKA the day-to-day). This means that when I attend meetings, it’s between 9:00 A.M.–5:00 P.M., unless there is an extenuating circumstance; for example, if I am talking to someone from the UK, the time difference needs to be considered.

Petra: In a rural public library, participating in scholarly or voluntary profession-related activities to develop myself as a librarian would be done on my own time. Reading for library book clubs and the collection I manage is something I would not be granted work time to do either.

Aside from the responsibilities I mentioned before, I am expected to be out in the community doing outreach, attending town events, and connecting with our organizational partners. This is all done on the clock, and as such, I represent the library as “the librarian” off the clock as well. Attending focus groups, open houses, or any other local events on my own time is done with acknowledgement of this expectation.

Q: Does this expectation of service impact your work-life balance?

Kaia: I wouldn’t say it negatively impacts the balance, but it is something I need to take into consideration before agreeing to do anything work or personal life related. In my office, my whiteboard is filled with my projects and commitments, so that I can see how much I have on my plate.

Petra: Not really, but mainly because I don't live in the town where I work. Running over to check the return bin on a long weekend or to cover a colleague's break could be an unwritten expectation had I lived nearby. Ettarh (2018) discusses burnout as a common phenomenon within librarianship. So, I would like to mention that there is a compassion that goes into public librarianship that could easily disturb the balance and lead to burnout if one is not mindful.

Q: Should service components be stressed in library school, job postings, etc.?

Kaia: Coming from a library family, I always knew service was part of the deal when becoming a librarian. The expectation was not stressed like this during my degree. It almost feels like everyone assumes we know what we are getting into already. Being a member of a school committee was pushed for the sake of the capping project, but there seemed to be a missed connection between doing this for school and doing it so you have practice for work.

Petra: When applying for positions, I would have liked to know what kind of time I would or would not have had for professional development, like serving on award juries or writing columns. As for library school, emotional labour as a component of library service was discussed often, but there is no way to understand its actual meaning and its intertwinement with myths regarding the profession until you are there.

We came together to have this conversation because we were in the same library school cohort and became friends. Although we decided on two different paths in librarianship, we wanted to share our experience as new librarians. Together we found that it does matter where you work—expectations and day-to-day work do not always align, and this is in part because of vocational awe. New librarians should anticipate service aspects to their positions, and there should be further discussion of these topics in the field. This would help new librarians better step into their roles and accept that their positions would reach into corners they did not expect. At the end of the day, this profession *calls* passionate people who love their jobs and will bring their whole selves to their work.