



Essay

Reflection: Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship

Allan Van Hoya, *University of Colorado Boulder*

ABSTRACT

Eight years after publishing *Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship*, the author reflects on his experience now. Drawing on a decade of professional experience the author argues that many structural inequities identified in 2018 remain. The profession continues to rely heavily on prior library experience, often gained through low-paying, part-time, or unpaid work creating significant barriers for those from marginalized backgrounds. The author continues to argue that libraries must pursue more equitable pathways into the profession through paid opportunities and broader recognition of transferable experience. The reflection builds on these ideas to include two other important factors: mentorship and the exposure of librarianship's hidden curriculum. By expanding access to both, libraries can better support new professionals and advance equity, opportunity, and inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Mentorship, Hidden Curriculum, Professional Growth

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Reflection of *Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship*

Eight years ago, I wrote one of my first articles as a librarian, *Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship* (Van Hoya 2018). At the time of writing the article I had just landed my first professional job after graduating with my master's degree. While I was and still am thankful for this job, it was a temporary position that had the basic benefits, was underpaid, and overburdened by work others couldn't do. I am one of the lucky few who was able to successfully turn this into a permanent position. Unfortunately, the structural and institutional issues new librarians faced at that time still exist today, in addition to the growing threat of anti-intellectualism, skepticism of the freedom of speech, and the rise of authoritarianism.

After 10 years and serving on countless search committees, watching deans come and go, and talking at nauseum with colleagues about the profession, I cannot help but feel as though much of what I wrote eight years ago is still true. Sure, there is nuance to some of my points, but my views on inequality and opportunity in the profession have hardened. When I think about the barriers to becoming a librarian, both institutionally and societally, the cards are stacked against library students and new librarians; especially those who do not come from privileged backgrounds. The trouble I saw a decade ago is still present in our profession. With that said, as I've grown in my profession and experience my perspectives have evolved, and while the problems persist, there are things that can help that I haven't considered before.

At the core of *Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship* was the connection between a saturated talent pool and the emphasis of library specific experience in the hiring process, specifically that often to get this experience you have to take low paying or unpaid positions. After being on numerous search committees. I have gained perspective on why this happens. When looking through hundreds of applications it is hard not to prefer candidates with experience because experience does matter. This is a structural issue that cannot easily be solved by one institution or group. However, inequity persists and creates lack of opportunity for marginalized groups, and we have an obligation as a profession to work against this inequity. Paid opportunities are still important to push against inequity. Unpaid and low paying positions prioritize people with ability to be supported outside of work.

Further, as a profession we should consider how library schools support and prepare library students. I don't know how we address the issue of more graduates than jobs, but we can start by making it clear that the profession is competitive and prepare students for this competition. On social media you will often see advice that if you don't work in a library, you should not go to library school. While I understand the practicality of this advice, this cannot be allowed to become the norm uncontested. Libraries are for all, and all should have the opportunity to work in libraries.

One of the core values of ALA is "Library workers play a crucial role in fostering equity by actively working to dismantle barriers and create spaces that are accessible, welcoming, and

beneficial for all (American Library Association 2024).” We cannot accomplish this if librarian positions are exclusive to those with traditional library experience. Beyond the loss of outside knowledge, it creates a feedback loop of exclusivity. Library positions are difficult to obtain with many entry level positions being volunteer, low paying, or part time. The only people who can take these positions are those with the ability to work for less. To get higher paying positions one has to have experience, even with a degree. Which means that only those who can afford to take low paying or temporary positions get higher paid positions. This doesn’t even account for the cost and time it takes to get a master’s degree. The traditional process can never be equitable, and the only solutions are either pay more or accept different kinds of related experience. We should be doing both. Certainly, there are positions that require experience, but when hiring, libraries should be honest about what they are hiring for. It is not an entry level position if you will not be considered without any library experience. This is true whether the job posting says so. This has not changed since I originally wrote the original article.

Lessons I have learned

This leads me to two lessons I have learned in the last decade that are missing in *Trouble for A New Generation in Librarianship*; the importance of mentorship and the need to expose the hidden curriculum. Unwritten rules, ideas, and social norms are all a part of the hidden curriculum. These hidden ideas or expectations are not formally in the curriculum but are often important for success in many fields, including librarianship. Hidden curriculum is often discussed in how librarians interact with students and patrons, but new librarians and library students must learn the hidden lessons of working in a library. It is impossible to be successful in or change a system if you don’t know how it works. So much of the library profession is hidden. I think this contributes to why so many people feel like library school does not prepare them to be a librarian and to go through the hiring process. Library schools have a role to play in exposing the hidden curriculum, but the responsibility to expose, explain, and push back on the hidden curriculum lies with all librarians.

I’m now a seasoned librarian in a permanent teaching faculty position, working on a second master’s degree in public policy. When I wrote *Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship*, I had just started as a temporary Government Documents Librarian at the University of Colorado Boulder. After three years in this position worrying about contract renewal and taking too much so that I could prove my values, a permanent line was approved for this position. I applied for the position and was hired permanently in March of 2020. Literally a week after my official start date Covid happened. To add to this chaos, library leadership decided to push through a planned reorganization during the pandemic which moved me from a liaison focused department to one focused on rare materials. As one might expect, this caused confusion, chaos, and uncertainty in my position and throughout the library.

Luckily, I had had experienced librarians as mentors who guided and still guide me as a librarian. Mentors help explain the hidden curriculum and make professional connections. They help support you when feeling overwhelmed or lost and answer questions about the realities of librarianship. One of the most important factors in my professional success is having mentors. As a graduate student working as a TA at Auraria Library I had fantastic mentors who took time to explain the hiring process, give me chances to try things, and expose the ins and outs of academic library life. As a new librarian at the University of Colorado, I had mentors who brought me to meetings, introduced me to people, and explained the weird quirks of faculty meetings. Without mentorship I would not have made it through this tumult. Exposing the hidden curriculum and ensuring good mentorship doesn't solve all the structural and institutional biases that create barriers to librarianship. This work can help individuals navigate librarianship and the hidden curriculum. It also provides the foundations to tackle many of our intuitional and structural bias by exposing them. It is for this reason that librarians must ensure diverse and equitable access to librarianship. Because this work is so vital for success, we cannot expect those without this access to be successful in our profession.

Final thoughts

The issues I highlighted in *Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship* continue. Unfortunately, in my experience library leadership does not seem to take these issues seriously. I entered the profession with a lot of hope and a decade later the realities of librarianship often weigh on me. So often I see leadership talk about equity in hiring and providing opportunity, only double down on inequitable practices. And yet, I still have hope for the profession I love. I have seen how much good can come when we provide opportunity. When I was asked to write this reflection, I asked myself what I was trying to say back then and how I lived up to it. My answer is this; we need to advocate for pay and opportunities for library students, we must expose the hidden curriculum of libraries, and we must mentor the next generation. In short, we must be better.

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