

Planning for a second career: Why make a change and why library science?

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Abstract: This column details the decision-making process and research that second career librarians conduct as they contemplate a career change.

Author Bio: Paula Pergament is an information services librarian responsible for providing reference services, technology training and classes, book displays, collection development, and a book discussion group for seniors at a public library outside Chicago. Prior to embarking on a career in librarianship, she was a fundraiser for a variety of Chicago cultural organizations.

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Library science attracts individuals already established in other professional fields as far ranging as real estate, law, the military, education, journalism, marketing, science, social services, medicine, the arts, and many others (Corry & Mendez, 2014). People decide to change careers for a variety of reasons, the most common being: 1) lack of work/life balance; 2) poor alignment between the skills and talents they possess and the career they are pursuing; 3) lack of feeling appreciated or valued; 4) absence of higher purpose or the ability to make a meaningful contribution; and 5) disengagement (Caprino, 2011). Individuals expressing a strong interest in switching to a career in library science often undergo a lengthy decision making process to analyze their strengths and interests, review their transferable skills and experiences, and establish confidence that library science is the best career path to pursue.

My own experience in reaching the decision to change careers to become a librarian mirrors those of many individuals who leave one career for another. For 20 years, I was a professional fundraiser; at the zenith of my career, I worked for marquee cultural institutions. Although I was securing financial support for worthwhile projects that served a higher purpose, such as a music program for incarcerated youth, I found that fundraisers have little-to-no involvement with program planning or implementation, and that there was limited contact with program participants.

As a fundraiser, I had reached a point where I felt I had nothing new to bring to the table in my individual work. I was rehashing the same ideas and verbiage to present community needs and program concepts. I knew I wanted to find a new profession that still represented a life of service, but one that was more fulfilling and which also provided opportunities for one-on-one interactions with those being served. Like many second career librarians, I had burned out in my first career, a trend noted by Corry & Mendez (2014).

Choosing a new career path can be paralyzing, as it entails both professional and financial risks. The idea of returning to school to obtain the required credentials is daunting and expensive. About halfway through my fundraising career, I considered changing professions and explored librarianship. My career trajectory at the time, however, was on a fast track, and I had secured a director level position at a major cultural institution. I was not ready at that time to take a leap into the unknown, derailing a successful career to start over again.

For anyone considering a career change, especially a move into librarianship, a career counselor can help create a roadmap, which encourages individuals to inventory their interests and strengths. I worked with a career counselor/psychologist who specializes in helping people at a career crossroads. With her guidance, I compiled a list of areas in which I excelled, both inside and outside of the work environment. I also took personality and aptitude tests, and I drafted a statement about how I envisioned my life in five years. I wrote a second statement that focused on my worth—not in dollars, but my real worth to myself, my circle of family and friends, and the world. Finally, I completed a research project. The research project required investigating different professions using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Projections*. I studied possible career paths and their prospects for growth, education requirements, potential career paths, chances for securing employment, and salary expectations.

Prior to working with the career counselor, I began volunteering at two special libraries and one public library. This “fieldwork” helped me make the final decision to become a librarian. The librarians at each of these institutions shared with me the realities of entering the profession, such as the tightness of the job market, the challenges of working with a patron base that holds high expectations, the information technology required to make materials available to patrons, and the intricacies of collection development and responding to challenges, among other issues.

My volunteer experiences demonstrated how my previous work in nonprofits parallels many of the realities of working in a library setting, especially working within strict budget parameters and other resource limitations, navigating the nonprofit/public organizational structures, and striving to provide excellent and thoughtful customer service in each patron interaction. I discovered that librarianship capitalizes skill sets and experiences that many people develop during their first career: 1) hard skills in technology, project management, writing, graphic design, media creation, teaching, and financial management; and 2) soft skills in diplomacy, navigating formal and informal organizational structures, and collaboration (Corry & Mendez, 2014). In my own case, fundraising involved project management, solid written and verbal communication skills, an ability to develop and implement a plan, attention to detail, and diplomacy with peers, superiors, and external constituents. These were the skills and experiences I could bring into librarianship.

By the end of my work with the career counselor, and through my volunteer experiences, I had gathered enough data and gained the insight I needed to confirm my decision to become a librarian. I was ready to get started on a new and rewarding career path. The process I undertook to reach this decision is one I would recommend to anyone considering a career change with one caveat: take the time needed to not only reach a decision, but to ensure that a new career direction is achievable and realistic.

References

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