

Trouble for a New Generation in Librarianship

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Abstract:

Library students and new librarians face many challenges when deciding to become librarians, including increasing entry-level requirements, a very competitive job market, and increased cost of education. This article is a discussion of some of the realities new librarians and library students face when entering the profession.

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Keywords: *libraries, librarians, library students, library school, students*



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The day I received my master's degree felt perfect. Like many others finishing their degrees, I felt a sense of accomplishment. Finally, I was done, and I thought that this time next year I would officially be a librarian. Taking the advice of my professors and mentors, I had begun applying for as many jobs as possible after graduating and though I hadn't heard back from any, I still felt optimistic. As I sat listening to our commencement speaker talk about her career, I received a rejection letter over email. It wasn't my first, but somehow it seemed different. I know that rejection is a part of any job search, and at the time, I didn't think much of it. Looking back, however, this seems to be symbolic of my own job search process, and the struggles that many new librarians face in the job market. The optimistic air of the commencement was soon undermined by a large amount of debt, difficulty in securing a job, and lack of support for professional development, all while trying to juggle the demands of daily life.

Whenever I attend a professional event, I meet people who have been looking for librarian jobs for years, and some have given up. Unfortunately, this seems to fit societal trends. Many other college graduates struggle with unemployment, underemployment, and a rising cost of education (Abel et al, 2014). A quick search in the news about unemployment and college graduates shows that students at all levels are struggling to find work in their field (Goodman, 2014), and librarians and library workers are no exception. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics *Occupational Handbook* (2017), librarians can expect a projected job growth rate of 9% or about 12,400 jobs from 2016-2026.¹ As of

¹ Recently, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2017) increased its projection from 2,700 for 2014-2024 to 12,400 librarian jobs created from 2016-2026. The number of graduates will still outpace the growth

September 25, 2017, the American Library Association's directory of accredited programs (2017) shows 60 accredited library schools across the country, and, according to the Digest of Education Statistics published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 5,259 Master's Degrees in Library and Information Science were awarded in 2015. Clearly, the number of graduates heavily exceeds the number of projected jobs, and this does not bode well for those entering the profession. While I was vaguely aware of this when I decided to enter librarianship, like many people, I didn't understand the implications of this.

I don't have a solution to greater societal problems that are pushing the cost of education up and the rewards down. Nevertheless, there are things libraries and librarians can do to make our field better. As a profession, we need to acknowledge that there are more library school graduates than there are jobs. I would never discourage somebody from pursuing librarianship, but we should be frank about the realities of our profession. We should encourage students to enroll in programs that will prepare them for their career, both inside the classroom and out, while pulling accreditation from schools that do not. This is not just about academic rigor or creating barriers to becoming a librarian. It is also about confronting the deficiencies of our profession, professional culture, and professional development programs.

One of the barriers to entering librarianship is the ability to get experience. Libraries need to stop requiring experience for entry-level positions and acknowledge other types of experience outside

in jobs, even if we factor in a 20% retirement rate. This also does not include library school graduates who are currently unemployed.

of librarianship. Librarianship is my second career, so I thought that my years of experience in customer service would be an asset in the job market, but it seems that this was not true. I have yet to do the research to quantify this trend in libraries, but a glance at job postings proves the necessity of existing library experience to be competitive as a candidate for librarian jobs. For those who are only just entering the field, it is a ridiculous expectation that people should take unpaid internships just to get experience in a library. This is especially true if library-hiring committees are only going to acknowledge library work as “experience.” Stop requiring applicants for entry-level jobs to have pre-existing library experience. It is not “entry level” if you require, or prefer, years of experience.

If we are going to insist on library experience, libraries need to support library students in getting experience. If you are going to have student workers, pay them. If you *really* cannot pay students, make sure that the experience you give them is actually useful. Sometimes this means you will have to do more work, but if librarians are serious about the core value of social responsibility, then we cannot take advantage of our workers. I was privileged enough to live in an area with a number of paid library positions, and I also had the support of my spouse and family; yet this was still insufficient. In order to get through the library degree, I had to take out a large amount of student loans. This experience is reflected in a 2014 New America Report on Student Debt, which showed that the average combined undergraduate and graduate debt was \$57,600 (Delise, 2014). This number is much higher for me, despite my having received a scholarship. If our profession is serious about creating a diverse workforce in librarianship, librarians need to start accepting new kinds of experience and acknowledge the financial struggle it is for many students to go to graduate school. We need to

stop using the concept of “fit” as a way to exclude people from jobs. It’s okay that your co-workers do not think, act, look, or have the same experience you and the rest of the library do.

The reality many new librarians face is stark. These highly competitive jobs require more experience, and require an education that costs 60% more than it did in 2006 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2016). I did my best to get this experience, and it still took me a year to find a temporary position. I am lucky and grateful that I was able to get this job, but it is also discouraging to see my classmates struggle to find jobs. Considering this, I know that many readers may not be in a position to make these decisions, but you can say something when your institution is preparing to hire a graduate assistant, intern, or entry-level employee. Finally, I would encourage us all to be empathetic and do what you can to support library students and new colleagues. Acknowledge where you fall short, remember when you were looking for your first job, and be mindful of how excited and nervous you were when you got it. I have been lucky to have great mentors and I hope and strive to be a good one for others.

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Not to mention the many highly qualified staff members who do fantastic work in libraries. They are often underpaid, overworked, and are not necessarily classified or payed as “librarians” while regularly doing the same work as librarians and holding master degrees.