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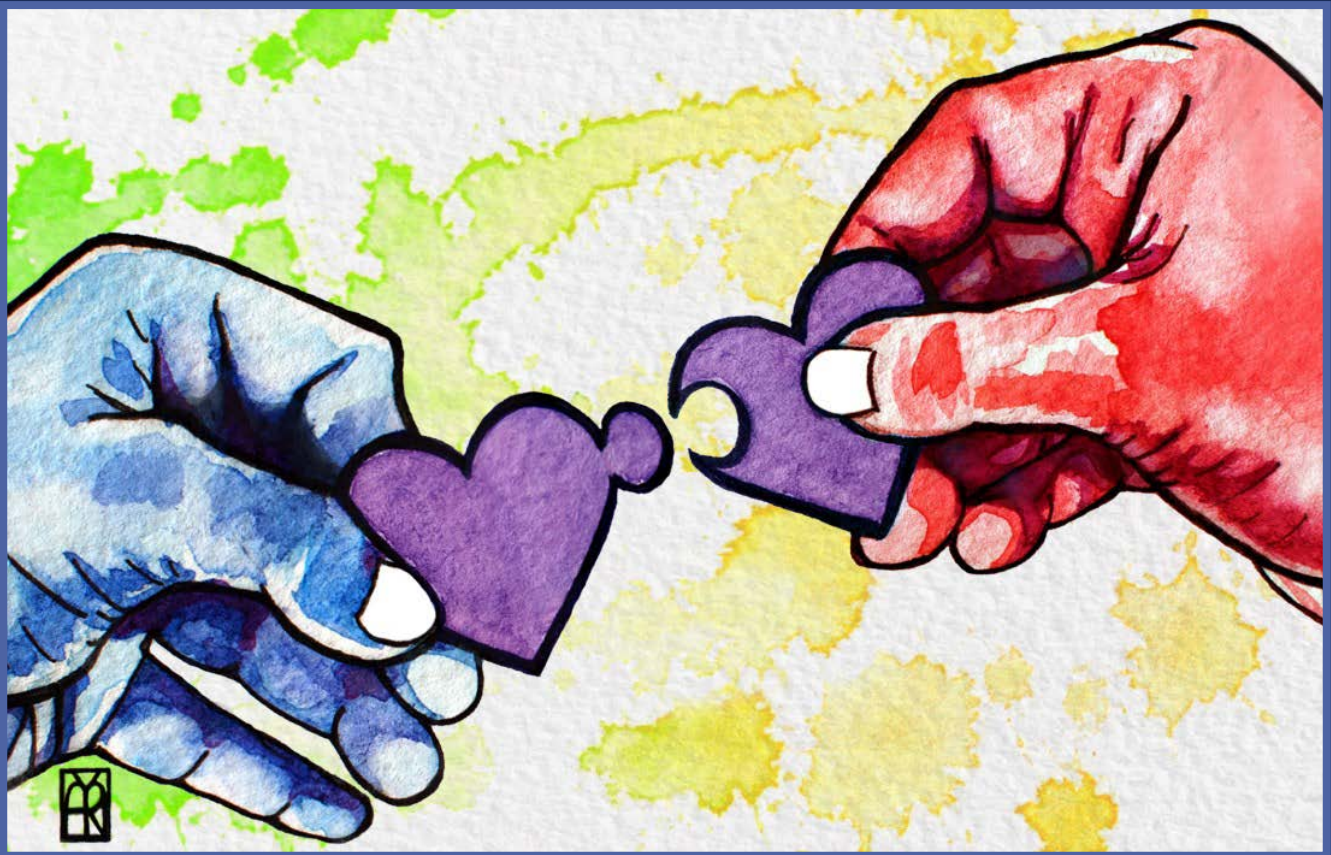
Critical Conversations

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Shape-Shifting: Personal and Career Strategies for Moving Fluidly Between Library Types

by Ann Glusker

INTRODUCTION

It took me two years to get my first "permanent" librarian job after graduate school, despite a lot of previous career experience, and a hefty dose of privilege. During my MLIS study, I had positioned myself, through coursework and fieldwork choices, to be a viable candidate for jobs in various library types (given Seattle's oversaturated job market). Academic, medical, public, special—I would just let the fates (or hiring managers!) decide. My goal was to get the job, and then be like all those long-term librarians I saw, and sit in my librarian chair and never leave. As it turned out, within 10 years from starting that first librarian job, I held four different positions, in four different types of libraries. Each time I took the new job, I thought, "This is the one! I will retire from here!" But three times, I've decided to take the leap to a different setting.

Interestingly, each transition has aroused deep suspicion among friends and colleagues. "You are leaving a good librarian job? Why would anyone in their right mind do that?" In this article I hope to turn the question around, and ask, why would anyone not at least consider changing jobs, and even library types (what I am calling a library-type-shift), if it could mean better work-life harmony, a better fit with the job, and/or a more positive work environment?

While we don't all have the circumstances or privilege that would let us consider rocking our career or financial boats, a library-type-shift may be more possible than many of us think. It seems that changing library types is becoming more common, and there are many examples beyond my own. If you'd like to check out a range of examples, read the excellent book Career Transitions for Librarians: Proven Strategies for Moving to Another Type of Library.[1] It offers almost 40 case studies and reflections, through interviews,

conversations, and authored pieces, which discuss virtually any library transition imaginable. It is also a treasure trove of ideas on what library types can be explored beyond the academic, medical, public, and special categories shown in Figure 1.

This article provides information on getting started, a discussion of planned versus unplanned library-type-shifts (including issues related to low morale settings), how to tell your story on the job interview circuit, and how to acclimatize to your new setting. (A note: while I will focus more on librarianship given experience, many of these suggestions apply to other library positions as well).

Figure 1

Some Library Types
(consider also the size and user base of each!)

Academic

School

Public

Special

Corporate

Medical

Law/Legal

Governmental

GETTING STARTED

The process of getting started, if you have the luxury of time to plan and feel ready to consider broader options, really involves an open-minded self-exploration. In many library settings—especially larger ones—there are a range of roles in which you might prosper, even if you might not at first believe you'd enjoy different library types. While we tend to characterize library types in our minds, a given position listing may be a better indicator of what the job will be like, and can help you see yourself in it. This means that the first step is

Ann Glusker is the librarian for sociology, demography, public policy and quantitative research at the University of California, Berkeley. Before moving to Berkeley in 2019, she lived in her native Philadelphia, where she was a career counselor at the University of Pennsylvania, then in Seattle for 25 years, where she got her MLIS at the University of Washington iSchool, and held various jobs around town. Her recent professional interests are related to data literacy for first generation college students and for library workers, library staff morale, mid-career librarian career issues, and evidence synthesis support for researchers in the social sciences. She is a long-time singer of medieval and renaissance music, a murder mystery fanatic, and a Janeite, currently participating in "Synchronous Emma".

continued on next page

being open to listings you might not normally read, since starting to think about roles rather than library types can be a helpful shift in perspective. Remember that once you've done one library-type-shift, you are better set up to do another, if the need or interest arises! Even if you feel your job security is iron-clad, it's still not a bad idea to have a sense of your Plan B.

In considering a move to another type of library, you may want to examine the questions about library types, your own work history,

style, values, and needs related to the different library types. The following questions might be a useful place to start (see Figure 2).

The question of what career advancement looks like in a new setting, and whether you care, may arise. You may never want to go into administration/management, preferring to do "direct work." Either is fine if they are the best fit for you. However, in some settings—mainly academia—the job requirements include engaging in a career ladder, requiring certain levels and types of professional activity at each stage. Consider this when thinking through library types that might be a fit for you.

Figure 2

Questions for Considering a Library-Type-Shift

About different library types and settings:

• What are the differences between the two settings you are considering? Will factors such as pay, job duties, hours, and other aspects of the new setting be a fit for you and your needs?

• Does urban-rural location play a part?

• How is a tight market limiting, or motivating?

• What do employers from each setting look for/value?

• What issues or concerns might you want to prepare for that relate to your new setting? For example, are there different patron codes of conduct, different organizational missions, different hiring structures for librarians and library staff, etc., or different service patterns depending on user groups?

• What role does management play in the library settings you are considering?

• What tech skills are needed?

• Does service provision/style/policy/offerings/day-to-day life differ between settings?

• What does job security look like? Consider: unions, tenure, funding streams, etc…

• What are the opportunities for professional development?

• Are there differences in salary and benefits?

• What information do you need to decide if you'd like a different kind of setting?

About your own values and goals:

• How much does setting/patron type matter to you?

• What is your tolerance for risk?

• Is job change comfortable for you in general?

• Could you achieve your career goals in a setting that's different from your current one?

• How would you work around external constraints such as family needs, desired location, financial situation, and the like if a great job was offered to you?

• What have you always wanted to learn that you might be able to do elsewhere? Are there learning opportunities you feel drawn to?

• Do you have to leave your current employer to find a better job situation, or can you do that from within the system you already are a part of?

• What skills and experience can you offer to an employer of a different library type that would fit their needs?

PLANNED VS. UNPLANNED LIBRARY-TYPE-SHIFTS:

Your reason for leaving your current job matters in considering whether a library-type-shift is a fit for you. Career Transitions for Librarians tends to center around the pull factors of shifting library types: what might appeal more about a new setting, how a new setting may be a better career choice, and so on.[2] However, the decision to change library jobs can also come as a response to workplace stresses or downright abusive work climates, and may include anxiety-inducing risk. Library jobs thought to be secure can evaporate, meaning that many library workers are job-seeking while in shock from sudden job loss.

A planned library-type shift may arise for numerous reasons. It may be that you have been lucky enough to have hit the best library type for you with your first job. But often, first jobs are a "take what we can get" situation and then sitting back a breather at the top of that first plateau. It makes sense that, after a few months or years, one might take stock and think about next steps, dream jobs, career goals, and the like. Sometimes the library type you thought you'd love isn't working as well as you hoped; sometimes, you might have wanted a different type all along.

In this case, you'll want to consider how to get experience in or about the desired library type, how to build networks to connect to that type, and how to build skills and experiences in your current setting so that you'll be attractive to an employer in the new setting. While getting a part-time job might be a way to explore a new skill set, this technique isn't usually practical, and can take a heavy toll. Volunteering and internships are what many aspiring librarians will do to get a foot in the door, and while they are great ways to meet people and get experience, once again not everyone can take the time or money for these opportunities (let alone the question of whether the volunteer work being done should be

compensated). In addition, this puts the burden on the job seeker, not the employer.

If these options are not viable, you can still make connections through creating a community of support. Most librarians are happy to help as they can, whether through formal mentoring or less formal informational meetings or interviews. If you can't find a connection by asking people in your own library (or if you don't want to for privacy reasons), check out topic-specific list-servs, webinars, conferences, and other offerings from the professional associations and their local chapters in the library type you're interested in. Continuing education can be an advantage both in making these connections and on a resume to show your commitment to transitioning to the new library type, but be sure (ideally by checking in with people in those settings) that you are targeting those in the way that hiring managers want to see. Another idea is to look for cross-type collaboration—as part of your current position, could you collaborate with a librarian in your desired library type on a project? As you explore, always have a resume and the names of references ready to go— sometimes the opportunity you want can come and go quickly, and you don't want to miss it for lack of a document! Last but not least, expect this process to take time.

Unplanned shifts are many magnitudes more difficult. Suddenly scrambling for a job after an unexpected layoff announcement (devastatingly familiar in the age of COVID), or having to find the inner strength to believe in oneself rather than what we have been told about our work in a toxic setting, and leave "a good job" for the unknown, can be extremely disorienting at best. And when you are in shock, it becomes impossible to take steps forward. The challenges of job hunting in these and similar situations are manifold, but it

> **"Shifting from one library type to another can be an exciting adventure and a reinvigoration of a career path that has stagnated, or it can be a forced leap into the unknown which brings challenge and disorientation—or a mix of both. Whether planned and desired, or unplanned due to job loss or problematic working conditions, the approaches to making a fluid library-type-shift include building a community of support and engaging with the new library type in order to show the value of your transferable skills to employers."**

is especially difficult to job hunt when feeling diminished by workplace dysfunctions. Unplanned job searches can be experiences of crushing uncertainty and disappointment.

The emotional underpinnings of any unplanned job search need to be considered and (if possible), examined, in order to have a chance at a better job and workplace fit, and a better life, regardless of the library type. If you have not yet read Kaetrena Davis Kendrick's seminal article, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study", run-do-not-walk to find it and read it [3]. Kendrick researches and writes about the phenomenon of low morale among librarians in various settings, and the additional burdens of systemic racism on many library workers. In addition, Kendrick's article, "Leaving the Low Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study," focuses on librarians' experiences of leaving low morale settings, and provides insight and validation as to what many of us experience in such unplanned career- and library-type shifts. [4] Many library workers choose to leave the library world altogether due to their long-term experiences in low-morale settings.

Kendrick's work shows that low morale is insidious and common, and taken with workplace stress in general can be expected to have negative psychological and physical effects; finding a job that turns these processes around requires healing first. Those of us who are burned out might laugh bitterly at this—who has time, and how ridiculous anyway! But I believe it's of paramount importance to put yourself and your health first if at all possible, so that you have the capacity to resist the temptation of a job that looks good but will drag you down, and to set boundaries that will further protect you in future.

> ❝ **To say that the transition was difficult would be an understatement. I struggled, confused as to why on earth I had chosen this new path and fearful that I would never, ever be successful at it. I doubted my sanity and choice-making ability, and, ultimately, I questioned whether or not I had made the right career move. Ten months later, the waters are calmer, the job itself has become easier, and I have a much better perspective on how and why I made the change.** ❞
>
> **– Holland Kessinger**

Photo by Jackson Douglas on Unsplash

In addition to the emotional work of moving forward with an unplanned library-type-shift, in any job insecurity or unemployment there is often also a sense of urgency in the search to be aware of as you navigate the process. You can still do some of the things suggested for a planned shift—check out professional association content and list-servs, find information and support from librarians in the library type you want to shift to, and rework your own resume and cover letter to target the new setting. Half the battle will be projecting confidence that you can function successfully in the new setting and add value to the organization, and the other half is making the argument that the move you are proposing makes sense organically as part of your own career story.

TELLING YOUR STORY

"This is the part of the story where I cry", says Holland Kessinger in an interview from Career Transitions for Librarians. "Job searching is intimidating and depressing and makes you feel like all of your hard work has been for naught, as every available position requires a certain specialty or knowledge that you don't have."[5] I am here to tell you that in my experience this is completely true— job searching can be a really tough process. Serendipity happens, but mostly it's a slog, and takes a lot of time (and the completion of many applications) to get even one interview. Changing library types can make you feel like you're back at the beginning, looking for a first job.

My suggestion to ease this struggle is to do some advance work to create your narrative or story. If you can quickly, as in an elevator pitch, present the core of who you are as a library worker, what you can offer the new setting, and why you want to change library types, you have internalized

Figure 3

COVER LETTER- Things I said in my letter, to state again in interview	ADJECTIVES- Three adjectives that describe me	DATABASES- Relevant to topics in job, favorites and why, comparison, what kinds of questions each is best for	DIVERSITY- Activities that show my commitment, organizational values, trainings, personal experiences	TRAININGS/ INSTRUCTION - Examples
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2. 3. 4.
COLLABORATION - Examples within library, with other libraries, with community, etc.	LEADERSHIP - Examples, formal or informal	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT - Courses taken, conferences, committee work, skill building, etc.	INNOVATION - Changes I made that were original and created impact	VISION - Examples of my vision and how I implemented it (for a service, process, organization-wide, etc.)
1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2. 3. 4.

your narrative/story/journey/whatever you want to call it. You are seeing your career as an ongoing narrative, with twists and turns, and you are helping your audience (potential employers) see it this way too. This "storytelling" makes the reasons for past changes and current desired position concrete, and shows how they fit into a cohesive whole. Once the story is understood and felt, the career process (cover letters, interviewing, networking, seeking positions) can carry forward more effectively—and with a personal authenticity that can be compelling.

As you think about engaging in this process, you may want to take a look at what I call my "Interview Cheat Sheet". I created it for my public library interviews, and have adjusted it setting by setting, and job by job, ever since. Perhaps filling it out will help you present your story more fully; even better, it will mean that you won't have to suddenly think of three adjectives to describe yourself as you're sitting in the job interview. The link is available in the Career Resources Section below; Figure 3 shows the first page of three.

SEARCHING, FINDING, GETTING, ARRIVING

Oh, the job search! The delightful details of shaping resumes, constructing cover letters, preparing for interviews, finding positions to apply for, and more! OK, not really, but here are a few strategies and resources to consider, some of which are also

mentioned above. Also, there are excellent ideas for pulling some of this together in both the advice interviewees give in Career Transitions for Librarians, and in the "Further Reading" list below.

Strategies and Readiness

- Make sure your resume, a generic cover letter (to be tailored later) and interviewing skills are totally up to date—always! You will customize these to each job listing, but don't want to start from scratch!

- Keeping your professional social media accounts up to date is also important (especially LinkedIn).

- Keep up with your professional development and training opportunities; there are many that are free (or, available through your library—for example, many public libraries have LinkedIn Learning). Stretch yourself so that you can demonstrate that you can learn new things and adapt, and also create learning goals.

- Check out the "transferable skills" section of the "Further Reading Document;" how do they apply to you? Are there any you should be buffing up now?

- Find a mentor, network, volunteer, join a professional association you might not otherwise have considered.

- Titles matter: try and figure out the language that the new library-type uses to describe your qualifications; e.g., cataloger vs. taxonomer. Functional resumes can be a way to do this.

Career Resources

- Ann Glusker's Interview Cheat Sheet (from Figure 3)

- Social Media—LinkedIn and Twitter (and some targeted Facebook groups) have listings and advice; also try Reddit.

- INALJ.com—this site started as "I Need a Library Job;" it has state-specific listings, an amazing list of job titles, and is a great starting place for ideas about roles you might not have considered yet.

- Check listings from state and local library associations, employers of interest, municipal and other government listings, other professional associations.

- Sign up for related listservs! And set up RSS feeds and alerts.

- Don't forget to check more generic job search sites such as Indeed.com—you never know what might crop up!

In many cases, the career services office of the institutions where you got your degrees (undergraduate, masters) will be glad to help with some of the position search strategies, resume and cover letter creation, and interview prep. For example, I went to the University of Washington's iSchool in Seattle, and am really impressed by their workshop recordings (which you don't have to be an alum to access).[6]

Finally—you searched, you found, and you got your job in a new library type—congratulations! What about starting your new job? The people you work with make a huge difference, and I continually lament that we don't do more to prepare students for actual workplaces and how to navigate them. I still avidly read the advice columns by Roxane Gay ("Work Friend", in The New York Times), Karla Miller ("Work Advice", in The Washington Post), and Alison Green (Askamanager.org) for suggestions about this. In terms of the library-type-shift, as you explore the settings you're applying to, consider aspects such as management styles and support for professional development. In the early work my colleagues at UC Berkeley and I are doing on the morale of library staff (as opposed to librarians), having a supportive and flexible manager is one of

Photo by Roger Bradshaw on Unsplash

the main foundations for high morale. In addition, a workplace that respects all workers equally, with low levels of librarian/staff divide, also is a crucial aspect of high morale.[7] Whatever the library type, it makes sense to seek out settings which have these healthier relationships, boundaries and support of all staff.

Additionally, it is exhausting to start a new job, especially if it's in a library type that's new to you. You meet many new people at one time, who will be important to your future, but you don't know in which ways yet. You are making many first impressions every day, but even if you are an extrovert, there's only so much perkiness to be had (and this was before the pandemic). You need to understand the hierarchies and policies in the new setting, but there may be a lot of them, and you may get conflicting reports of what they mean. You may feel that you aren't good at your day to day work anymore, and aren't sure you will be, because you are absorbing so much. Give yourself a lot of slack, and don't make any decisions for a year, if you have even an inkling it might work out. To revisit Holland Kessinger's experience when she made a planned library-type-shift from art museum librarian to public library teen services librarian:

"To say that the transition was difficult would be an understatement. I struggled, confused as to why on earth I had chosen this new path and fearful that I would never, ever be successful at it. I doubted my sanity and choice-making ability, and, ultimately, I questioned whether or not I had made the right career move. Ten months later, the waters are calmer, the job itself has become easier, and I have a much better perspective on how and why I made the change."[8]

Remember also that employers can and should be making sure that the transitions into new roles are smooth and supportive---the burden doesn't always have to fall on the future employee. Organizations, and supervisors in particular, should welcome new employees by having defined onboarding procedures and resources, setting up networking meetings for the new staff person with coworkers and other staff library-wide, giving help with personal adjustments such as finding housing, and checking in often about how both work and personal transitions are going. If this isn't happening naturally in your new position, it's fine to seek out support!

CONCLUSION

Shifting from one library type to another can be an exciting adventure and a reinvigoration of a career path that has stagnated,

or it can be a forced leap into the unknown which brings challenge and disorientation—or a mix of both. Whether planned and desired, or unplanned due to job loss or problematic working conditions, the approaches to making a fluid library-type-shift include building a community of support and engaging with the new library type in order to show the value of your transferable skills to employers. However, above all, first for yourself and then for prospective interviewers, it's essential to craft a storyline which can create sense and meaning of your journey, and indicate desired next steps. Library workers may believe that they must stay within the structures they find themselves in, but self-advocacy and reflection, and a broader view of career paths may change this perspective. For any of you considering taking the leap across the library-type-gap, I send you all my best wishes for a successful application and a smooth transition!

FURTHER READING

Please feel free to explore this list of online material about library type shifts. 📖

NOTES

1 Davis Erin Anderson and Raymond Pun (eds.), Career Transitions for Librarians: Proven Strategies for Moving to Another Type of Library (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

2 Anderson and Pun.

3 Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low-Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study," Journal of Library Administration 57, no. 8 (2017): 846-878.

4 Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "Leaving the Low Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study," Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal 37, no. 2 (2021): 9-24.

5 Anderson and Pun, 91.

6 "Workshop Recordings." University of Washington iSchool, Career Services. Last accessed September 18, 2021. https://ischool.uw.edu/advising-support/career-services/recorded-sessions.

7 Ann Glusker, Bonita Dyess, Celia Emmelhainz, and Natalia Estrada, "Library Staff Morale in the Academic Hierarchy," UC Berkeley Library, deposited April 4, 2021. Last accessed September 18, 2021. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30790731

8 Anderson and Pun, 89.

their programs and book talks have made a lasting impact on the field or on the community, though they may well have had such impact. Rather, it's that these students, who are heading for LIS professions within three months to two years, have concrete ideas about how to plan programming that centers community. They understand to begin by asking how they can best enrich the lives of children, teens and families in their communities, and how their programming can embrace the work of underrepresented authors and scholars to bring greater awareness and equity into libraries and other LIS spaces.

Students appreciated the opportunity to work with real libraries and patrons as part of their class experience. "I gained a better understanding of the thought that goes into children's programming. I also got experience presenting in a professional setting," said Diana Palacio. "This is important to me because I don't think I would have gotten the opportunity to do something like this otherwise." 📖

NOTES

1 #WeNeedDiverseBooks. "Why #WeNeedDiverseBooks is no longer using the term #OwnVoices." 6 June 2021.

2 Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors," Multicultural Literacy, Reading is Fundamental (2015). (https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf)

3 Patricia Montiel Overall, "Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals," The Library Quarterly (Chicago) 79, no. 2 (2009): 175-204.

4 Nicole A Cooke, Information Services to Diverse Populations: Developing Culturally Competent Library Professionals. Library and Information Science Text Series. Englewood: Libraries Unlimited, 2016.

5 Allegra Frank, "Lil Nas X and Wrangler Collaborated on a Clothing Line. Some Wrangler Customers Aren't Having it," Vox., accessed November 13, 2021, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/5/23/18636279/lil-nas-x-wrangler-collection-prices-backlash.

Library Crossovers: A Conversation

by Reilly Curran, Jennifer Fairchild Simms, Johanna Jacobsen Kiciman, Poppy Louthan, Jordyn Richey, and Helene Williams
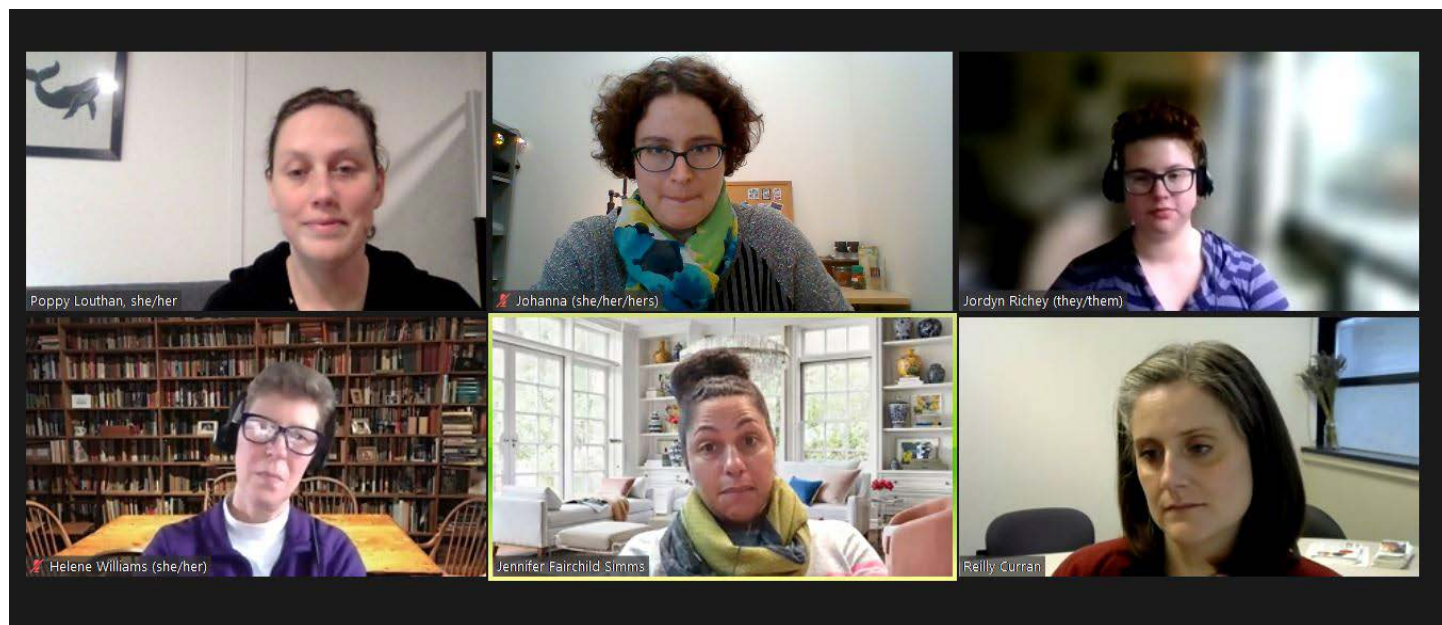
Screenshot courtesy of the authors

In this issue, Ann Glusker highlights the importance of transferable skills in switching between library types. At the same time, she creates a space of empathy and understanding for *just how hard it can be* to switch jobs. It takes hard work to build new relationships and understand a new work culture. This difficulty can be exacerbated by leaving a toxic work environment or overcoming a layoff.

This conversation between Reilly Curran, Jennifer Fairchild Simms, Johanna Jacobsen Kiciman, Poppy Louthan, Jordyn Richey, and Helene Williams, dialogues with some of the issues Glusker raises. It is complementary to Glusker's observations, and, we hope, helps also normalize the experience of switching between library types within our field. It is important to draw attention to the benefits, both for individuals and the institutions that they join.

We—a group of library workers representing academic, public, school and special libraries—met on a Thursday afternoon via Zoom, all a bit tired from a long day, but excited to meet and to engage. Our conversation is reproduced here, and we hope that it is as enjoyable to read as it was to hold the conversation in the first place. If you want to hone in on particular areas of interest, please feel free to make use of the bolded headings as a guide.

A CONVERSATION: 10/14/2021

Introductions

Johanna (she/her/hers) (University of Washington Tacoma Library): Alright, well I'm really excited to be here today in this space. We've published several conversations in Alki over the past two years, which are meant as dynamic explorations of subjects that are relevant in our LIS world. And today we're going to be talking about switching between library types.

Everyone [...] here has had an experience moving between library types and I'm really excited to explore what worked, what didn't, what tools were available, what structural issues were getting in the way. And so we'll go around [... and introduce ourselves.]

My name is Johanna Jacobsen Kiciman, I use she/her pronouns, I am the coordinator for Research Help at the University of Washington, Tacoma. So I'm at a four year academic university right now that [...] resembles a community college in many of the ways that we operate. Before this, I was a research assistant at Seattle Central College, so I have spent time at a community college as well. I will pass it off to Jennifer.

Jennifer Fairchild Simms (University of British Columbia): My name is Jennifer Fairchild Simms, and I recently became the Head of the Education Library at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Before joining UBC, I was with the King County Library System for 12 years as a Teen Services Librarian and most recently an Adult Services Librarian. I just started at UBC in June.

Poppy Louthan, she/her (Eton School, Bellevue): I'm Poppy Louthan and I use she/her pronouns. I work at an independent school in Bellevue,Washington, which is right outside of Seattle. Before that I was a youth services public librarian in Sacramento, California [working with patrons] from infancy up to 13. I also teach adjunct classes for Syracuse University iSchool.

Reilly Curran (Washington Talking Book & Braille Library, Seattle): My name is Reilly Curran, she/her pronouns and I just started working at the Washington Talking Book & Braille Library. I started in April so it's still new for me [...]l. Before that I worked for six years at Seattle University as a Research Services Librarian and Outreach Specialist.

Jordyn Richey (they/them) (Sno-Isles Libraries): I am Jordyn Richey,they/them pronouns. I'm currently a Collection Development Librarian with Sno-Isle Libraries in Washington state. Before that I was in youth services within the same library system, but before that I was a librarian at an education library at an art museum.

Helene Williams (University of Washington Information School): Thank you [...] Johanna for pulling us all together, this is great. I have a lot in common with every one of you, partly because you have all been my students. I'm Helene Williams, she/her pronouns and I'm a teaching professor at University of Washington Information School and that's the intersection I have with each of you. I have also worked in public libraries in children and youth services, and I've worked in community college libraries. I've worked in small, active, liberal arts college libraries, and huge R1 libraries. So I know a little bit about what all of you are doing, especially making those transitions. I'm really looking forward to hearing what we could do to prepare people. Or how that transition is going, especially for

> **❝ I am a huge believer that everything that you do is building your skill set; it doesn't matter if it's in retail, it doesn't matter if it's because you're running a Dungeons and Dragons game or you're working in an academic library [and] want to go into public or the other way around: you're building a lot of skill [...] there. ❞**
>
> **– Jordyn Richey**

those of you for whom this is very new. This is exciting. to catch you right on the cusp.

Decisions to Switch

Johanna: [...] I feel like the question sounds innocuous but asking—'why did you decide to switch between library types?'—may be far from innocuous and I think might unearth a number of bigger issues in the field. But I'm curious why you all decided to switch between libraries.

Poppy: Such a complicated question. You know, like you said it's not like 'Oh well, I did it for this reason' because I truly have loved all of the work I've done. None of it's been to necessarily get away from something. And while I... still think of myself as a public librarian in my heart, I also really love my work as a school librarian. So, for the sake of my family, I went from public librarianship to school librarianship. It allowed me to mother the way I wanted to mother and still do work that I love. So my kids are all students at the school where I work and I'm able to have that connection with them in their school and also with my colleagues and their teachers.

But I also feel like a public servant in my heart, and because it's an independent school, I've struggled with that. I'm trying to figure out how to match those professional goals. That's part of why I also teach at Syracuse. I get to have a hand in that work as it goes out and I'm seen as an instructor with experience in both worlds. So that doesn't answer your question at all, but that's what I had.

Johanna: But I think it does, and I'm curious what other folks have to say. I think I'm hearing that choices are not always about the career path, but about our well-being and what we need to do for our lives, whether that is income, making a decision to work someplace because that is the only place we can get a job at right now, or because of parenting choices. There are so many reasons, and I appreciate that you raised those front and center.

[What are] other folks' thoughts? Was this a decision to switch?

Jennifer: I can speak to this a little bit. I had a number of reasons to

make the switch when I did, but my interest in academic libraries goes back to when I was in grad school getting my MLIS. When I started the program, I thought I was going to be a school librarian and I took all of the classes to get my certification.

But while I was getting my MLIS, I was lucky enough to be a student librarian at Suzzallo at UW. I also worked as a student librarian with SPL and completed an internship as a school librarian at a local middle school. I enjoyed those experiences a lot, and so, when I graduated I felt like I could easily go in any of those directions. Right after I graduated, I ended up working as a Business Librarian at UW. It was a part-time position and I picked up another part-time position at Pierce College as a Reference and Instruction Librarian. This was during the financial crisis and libraries started implementing hiring freezes, so my part-time position was going to stay that way indefinitely and I needed a full-time job. In the meantime, I had applied to the KCLS Librarian employment pool and ended up getting called for two interviews. One of them was for a full-time Adult Services position, so when they offered me the job, I took it.

Photo by Owen Yin on Unsplash UBC Campus in Vancouver

I enjoyed being a public librarian, but I did often think fondly about my time at UW and being an academic librarian and I wanted to try to go back to academic libraries. It is really difficult to make the switch from public to academic, for a myriad of reasons and so, when this position came up, I thought I should go for it.

Jordyn: Yeah, I identify with that a lot—during school doing all the different kinds of librarianship. When I was getting my MLIS I worked in digital preservation. I worked as a librarian at an independent living facility for seniors. I did an internship with SPL, and I did an internship at an academic art library so I was doing all sorts of things, because I liked all of it.

So I wasn't really sure what direction I was going to go in and this opportunity just kind of popped up at the Art Museum. [...] I also have a background in Fine Arts so everything kind of just pieced together. But ultimately the things that I liked about all those different [institutions] was getting to help people and work with the community. And I felt that at the institution I was at I didn't really have that opportunity like I would at a public library, I felt like there

was a big separation between me and my patrons and what I was able to do for them and provide for them. [...] So I then actively sought out public libraries and I'm not gonna lie, pay has something to do with it as well. I know we don't think of public libraries as paying very well and they don't, but museums are worse. Way, way, way worse and I wasn't making a living wage. I needed to make a living wage.

Reilly: I am very similar to both Jordyn and Jennifer. I really tried to experience as many different types of librarianship as I could which included working the Research Commons in the Allen library, doing internships at Seattle Public Library and King County Libraries and working briefly with UW Special Collections. My goal was to get as much "real world" library experience as I could.

When I started library school I thought that I would go work in public libraries. Specifically, I wanted to do outreach with older adults and so that was always kind of my drive but I didn't really know how to navigate that. My experience working in the Research Common was an eye opener that there were opportunities for outreach in lots of different types of libraries. My experience doing workshops and programming opened my mind to the possibility of working in academic libraries. So as graduation was approaching, and I was in full hustle mode, I expanded my job search to both public and academic libraries. At that time, Seattle U had 4 openings, two of which were outreach focused, and I thought it would be a good fit. I was hired as the Outreach Librarian and over the 6 years I worked there I was able to gain experience in outreach, marketing, communications and programming. When I heard about the job opening at Washington Talking Book & Braille Library, and the fact that it was an outreach position focused on older adults, I had to go for it. It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

Poppy: I was just saying I saw that job come up and I thought wow that sounds like such an amazing job—so congratulations and I think that's great.

Reilly: Thank you.

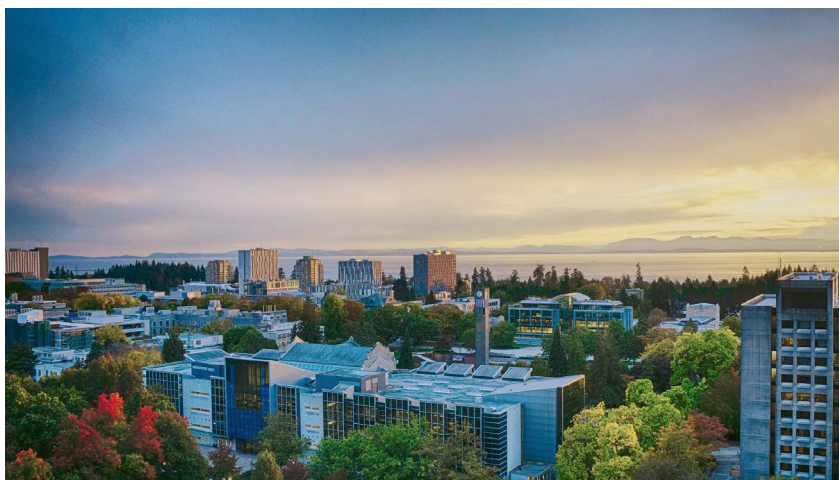**Johanna**: I think it's telling that we all saw the job posting as well,

right? Helene since we haven't heard from you yet. I'm curious when you listen to us, how does this mirror and reflect iSchool student experiences now in terms of the, you know, frantic trying on all the different library hats.

I volunteered at the Seattle Municipal Archives for a full year during graduate school. But there's this—the hustle, right, the word that Reilly used— [which] is exhausting and, quite frankly, terrifying at times; I am still in a temporary position after three years. Job insecurity in our field is horrific, and I think part of the issue that I'm sort of spinning around in my brain is if we could crossover between library types more easily, [...] that flexibility and crossover of skills would help students find employment. So: I'm curious about your take on where things are at right now, Helene.

Perspectives on the State of the Field

Helene: We're overt in our recruiting, curriculum building, and career guidance: we don't want you to come in and say I'm going to be an archivist and all I'm going to do is take archives classes....

> **66 One of the things I'm doing this fall is meeting with industry folks because that's where the jobs are — especially if you're in the Seattle area. Because they need librarians but they don't know it, and if you tell them they need librarians, they just close the door, turn off the zoom or whatever. 99**
>
> **– Helene Williams**

We want students in the program who are going to experiment and take a children's lit class, the adult reader services class, the digital curation class and the digital humanities class, and poke around and see what sticks. All of you, whether you've said it or not, have realized that things from classes that didn't on the face of it apply to what you're doing now totally fit in in terms of outreach programming, figuring out your audience, how you collect materials for these groups, how you manage people. Our goal for all our students is that they do get these transferable skills.

What we need to work on programmatically is getting students to articulate those skills so that, when they go look for jobs and, as Johanna very rightly says, the market is not particularly great right now....

But getting you to articulate, what are the skills that translate and to think outside that box, where else can you fulfill those needs. So like Reilly, when you were talking about what you thought you would be doing versus where you have ended up [doing], you are doing a lot of the things that drove you there. But you would never have thought:

"a special library." And so helping you translate what [you learned] in that children's lit or adult reader services class, what skills you have and what situation you can use them in [is important]. Giving you enough information so you understand what these different situations can be, [...] part of that's on the career services folks.

One of the things I'm doing this fall is meeting with industry folks because that's where the jobs are, especially if you're in the Seattle area. Because they need librarians but they don't know it, and if you tell them they need librarians, they just close the door, turn off the zoom or whatever .... My goal is to figure out what vocabulary they are using; should I just say metadata a lot, or taxonomist instead of cataloger, because those are the skills that Amazon, Tableau, Google, and Facebook need.

What do those jobs look like, and what are those skills, so that we can also make sure we're providing the curriculum. The onus is on all of us, and especially going forward for the students coming into the program, getting them right out of the gate to think in terms of transferable skills.

Transferable Skills

Johanna: So it raises a question for the whole group. Maybe you think about the interviews you went through to get your current position. Or maybe you think about the work that you do on a day-to-day basis: what are those crossover skills that you feel may have made a difference in getting the job.

I mean, I find on the one hand that this is intuitive, right? The ability to communicate, and work in a group, the sort of public-facing interface with [library patrons] and understanding how that work is done, and bringing skills of empathy and socioemotional work. (Emotional labor is something we can use another meeting-slash-conversation for!) But I'm wondering how you see these transferable skills.

Jordyn: I have a lot of thoughts about this actually. I mentioned before that my background is in fine art and so I've been having to do this since I've been in the job market, since the beginning of everything for me.

And so I am a huge believer that everything that you do is building

your skill set; it doesn't matter if it is in retai,l it doesn't matter if it is because you're running a Dungeons and Dragons game or you're working in an academic library [and] want to go into public or the other way around: you're building a lot of skill sets there.

So, like Helene said, it is like picking out what those skill sets are and wording it to apply it to the thing you want. So honestly writing I think is a huge, undervalued skill, so if writing is not like already something that a person feels confident in, taking classes on that and really trying to build up your ability to convey your skills and thoughts into words and customize that, for whatever you're trying to do, I think, is the most important thing honestly.

Poppy: I totally agree with that and I would even say that I will talk about that in interviews: I just love how everything works together, and people really like hearing that. So even if my life experience on paper doesn't necessarily tick all the boxes, the fact that I can recognize that my experiences do or have the potential to, I feel like that's been really well received.

To kind of switch back to what you were saying earlier, Helene, about [the fact that it is] on all of us: I remember in my college [years] where I got into a kind of yelling match with a classmate; it actually wasn't a yelling match, I was the one yelling. But they were complaining and complaining and complaining about certain classes not meeting [their] needs and that they were looking for this and that and—I just lost it. I was like: you know what, I love this program, and you need to make it what you want it to be.

Photo by Georg Eiermann on Unsplash UW Suzzallo Library

And so you know it is on all of us, and I think that's one thing that I came to the program with was this excitement of like: oh, all of these things I have thought I might do means I'm a librarian. I had never worked at a library, but you know, I really believe in granting people access to the information they need to get to where they're going, and once I figured out that's what a librarian is or an information professional is, that's when I knew I'd found my people.

So I think receiving that message for people who don't have that solid feeling when they come into the program is super important. And I think it builds a sort of a gateway from "this sounds exciting" to "this is what I'm going to do to make it fit me." Because it's such a personal journey: yes, here's the curriculum and here are the

instructors but, I have to be committed to bring myself to it and make it into what I need it to be.

Reilly: [...] What really helped me was the fact that I worked before I started grad school. I spent 10 years working in the nonprofit sector and so when I applied to the iSchooI, I had a vision of combining non profit work with librarianship. I also found the practical classes I took like Collection Development and Reference to be hugely impactful. The skills I learned in those classes are skills I still use on a regular basis. So anything that allowed me to get that in-person experience, like internships, was really valuable.

Johanna: I am going to say +1,000 to the practical courses taught by professionals in the field who have recent experience in what it is like to work in various library settings. These were extraordinarily valuable. And for the readers of the article there's nodding in the room. [...]

Jennifer: I will chime in about what Jordyn said about writing. I completely agree and would also like to emphasize how important writing skills are. When I started looking for positions outside of public libraries, I had to ask myself how do I communicate that my skills are relevant to a different type of organization? Being able to communicate that through a cover letter or resume is key, and of course, during an interview as well. You see communication skills listed as required in almost every single job description and it's easy to dismiss that or think of it as a given, but this process highlighted how crucial they are.
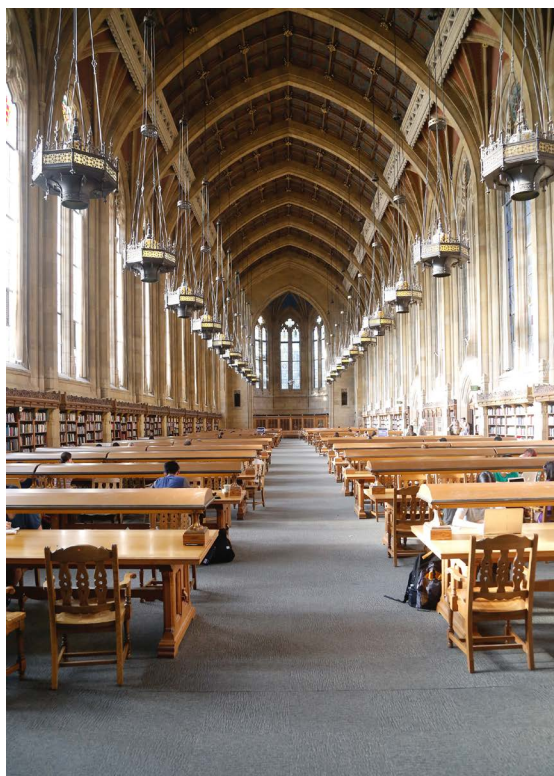
Barriers to Applying and Systemic Issues

Poppy: I also think it's important to just do that every now and then. I don't know if you all have trouble with imposter syndrome. But whenever I feel really down on myself I just apply for a job that might be out of my league, so I can be like "oh. I'm actually smart and I actually have the sort of knowledge that I need to do this job." I really have to sit down and think about all the things I've done and articulate it clearly because it has to be well-written, carefully thought out. And sometimes I submit the application and sometimes I don't. But it always helps to regenerate my commitment to what it is I'm doing and my confidence in that.

Helene: I am so glad you said that because I also wanted to bring up

the issue of gender [vis-a-vis] employment in terms of when women apply versus when men apply for jobs. Men will apply when they meet 60% of the qualifications, women are like, "I've got to meet 110%" before they'll even put in an application." So getting into that mindset of "hey, what am I doing in a school library that would apply to an academic library"—which is just about everything, because a lot of it is about managing people who are toddlers at heart. Being able to articulate that whether you send off that letter or not is huge, because it does help with the imposter syndrome, it does help with the "yeah, I am qualified for these jobs" and so I'm thrilled that you brought that up, and that you do it as kind of a regular exercise.

Johanna: I realized how much I miss being in your classes Helene: this is joyous for me just and listening to you all. What I'm hearing, though, is that a lot of this is an act of translation: it's taking our skills and translating them to meet what another job thinks— right?

At the same time I get [frustrated] really quickly when—and I don't know if this was anybody else's experience—but when prior experiences that Jordyn, for example, mentioned, get discounted because they don't have the label "library." I have a robust academic background and yet that experience is not applicable in the library job market, so I am seen as an early career librarian, and although I've been in academia 20 plus years. [...] You know, Helene has been talking about who the onus is on: employers, for goodness sakes, look at experience that is not cookie cutter, that is not what you expect necessarily. Look at experience so it's not just [...] on us to contort ourselves. [...].

Helene: I would agree, Johanna. You know from my courses, we do things like look at job postings and try to parse what is it they want, does anybody actually do all this, versus what you would actually do in the job. You're right, there's a lot of bureaucracy, not just from whoever is posting the position, but the HR people behind them and then the organization beyond that. By the time that job gets posted, it's unrecognizable to the hiring manager.

Some organizations like the Digital Library Federation really poke

at that and say: "hey, nobody can do all this, do you really need this, and this, and this." And you have to post a salary, which gets absolutely to Jordyn's point of: you need to know before you apply is this worth your time, to do all that translation. If it's not going to be a job that will [...] pay you enough to eat.

So yeah, it absolutely is on the organizations and that's something that we try to poke at. But it's one of those big, oppressive patriarchal systems.You know it's going to take a bunch of us to shift that.

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>
> **– Reilly Curran**

Experience of Switching

Johanna: [...] I am wondering if now's a good time to ask you what the experience was like.

It doesn't have to be an affective experience but—was it hard switching library types or interesting or exciting, or what struggles did you face when you got there.[...]

Jennifer: The experience has been overwhelming and challenging, but very positive. My experience also includes an international move, so it's been a lot to process. I've received a lot of support from colleagues and warm welcomes which has been helpful.

Poppy: I feel polarized. I really loved being in public libraries; I worked with babies and people that were very old and everyone in between, and I loved that. I loved it so much. I loved that every single interaction was completely different. I also loved those — you know every now and then you get a library patron who just really needs a librarian; I loved to be able to be that person.

At the risk of getting emotional, one of my little kids was the kind of kid who people warned me about, because he would just run around and get into everything. I always attach myself to those people, especially if I get warned: I'm like, "Oh good, I know who to really love," because they need to be loved. He always wore a Superman Cape. When I was moving from that library to the school library he gave me a little Superman figurine and said: "I just don't want you to ever forget me." Which of course I wouldn't, right? Because he's got my whole heart, so that figurine is always on my desk and I get to tell

my students about it whenever they ask.

Being in a school, I get to have more solid connections with more people. That's more consistent, but they don't ...those kids don't have the same needs that some kids have at the public library. I am one sort of super dedicated person to them, and they have a whole faculty of super dedicated teachers, which is great. But that's something I really miss about being in public libraries.

And then to add on, being this adjunct faculty member I realized that I get reviews from people who don't really like [my classes]. Most people do like my classes, but then there's one or two that are like, "God she's emotional," or whatever. Like, "I just wanted to stay on task, and she told a good story about a kid with a Superman figurine and I didn't need that." Of course, those are the two comments [...] I just read over and over and over. I love teaching these classes, but I really struggle with trying to navigate that kind of feedback. It's tricky.

All three of these experiences have great pluses and painful minuses. I still don't know where I'll be next, because I'm always looking at other options, and how I can fit all of the different things I've done into one sort of "here's why you want me and then I'll go when you don't."

Jordyn: I went in the other direction—to public libraries. And the actual "being able to do it" was hard up until the point that I found people who were willing to give me a chance when I was coming from another direction.

I found that once you got into the room with people, they were a lot more willing to help you out. But getting through the algorithms was the rough part for me, and transitioning from special libraries to public. But the actual experience of it, I have no minus. Except maybe that you don't always get a consistent nine to five at public libraries [...]. But I have no actual minuses, but I think that has more to do with my personal desires and personal disposition than the nature of the different kinds of jobs. I really like having a bigger

> **❝ I'd like to echo everything said about relationships and having an open mind. [...] That curiosity and relationship building led me to more committee opportunities and eventually I even chaired a committee which gave me leadership experience which helped bring me to the position I have now. So, a huge yes to relationships and learning more about libraries across North America and what your colleagues are up to. ❞**
>
> **– Jennifer Fairchild Simms**

community to work with and that feeling that I'm working more directly with my community than I had in my previous position. And the pace is better.

Reilly: It has been a very different experience. Working in academia, I felt like I was on a treadmill of sorts, always having to look for the next thing and it felt like I couldn't rest. My current library is a different and slower pace. Things don't always feel like they are on fire, which is nice.

Jordyn: I should also say that in my previous work, I was a solo librarian running my library, and now I work with a big team—so for me that was very positive. [...]

Poppy: I want to respond to something you said, Reilly, which is that you're just always on a treadmill and go, go, go, go. I was a barista for a long time, and I think there's so much in common with being a barista and being a librarian.

And I loved it. One thing I miss the most about being a barista—I never went home to figure out how I could pull a nicer shot for the person, the next day—like never.

And every night I think about how I can be a better librarian tomorrow. And that's one thing I love about being a librarian, but it's also so taxing. I don't know how to compartmentalize that from home, you know [...] I definitely don't leave my work at work every day [...]. I almost feel like there could be a course or part of a course that talks about "here's how you compartmentalize your life in order to enhance your success at work" or something along those lines. [...]

Jordyn: Yes, yes I think it's really on employers to bring in our other skill sets. So if your employer does offer professional development, take them up on it—do it.

Poppy: Actually, every time I ask for professional development, they give it to me, and they've paid for certifications and I'm so lucky and so grateful. I actually said to my head of school one time, I'm just so

grateful for this. And he said other heads of school have said things like, "well what if you pay for all this professional development, and they just leave?" and he said, "well, what if you don't and they stay?'" And I just think that's such an insightful way to think about it: first of all I'm grateful and I love this access that I have to professional development, and second of all, I'm clearly dedicated to personal growth and that's what he wants in his faculty. And so I think that's so smart as an employer: "I believe in you and I believe in your strengths and also, I hope you stick around." [...]

Wrapping Up

Johanna: Slow librarianship is a thing, right, Meredith Farkas in Oregon is writing about slow librarianship. This [comes to mind] when you're talking, Reilly, about the barista pace [...]. I can shut the door at night much more easily in this role [as an academic librarian instead of an academic]; I have a little signature in my email saying "my email hours may not be yours, these are the hours I'm available" and it feels fantastic and I love being able to hold those boundaries that I didn't use to be able to.

But [I have] so many thoughts about what the pandemic [did] with the boundaries between home and work looking very different [...].

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>
> **– Helene Williams**

We have talked for nearly an hour [...], so I want to offer up the space for any last thoughts on this, recognizing that we could talk about structural barriers, imposter syndrome, emotional labor, and more for much longer. It clearly feels like there's a lot of overlap in experience but also [a ...] care for community.

Poppy: One thing that comes to mind is wishing there was more emphasis on "networking". So much of it is who you know, but it's not just a buzzword. It is really important to get to know the people out there.

Johanna: Yeah, I would love to reframe it as relationship building.

Jordyn: Yes.

Helene: You're right, the framing is so important. I have a class where I assign people to do informational interviews and I can totally

tell—who did it as a transaction and who did it as a reflective "oh my God the door just opened, and you know I have found this thing I want to explore" assignment.... It's building those relationships and figuring out how to infuse that into the curriculum. And how to show every student in the program that this is important, but it's also on me to make sure I can connect to people who are going to be useful to the students. Which again is why I'm going to Tableau and industry; those relationships are hard to build because they're almost all about transactions, and it's so different in these different information professional settings. So yeah, that's something that 40 years on, I am still working on.

Reilly: Yeah, I'm a big believer in informational interviews. Before I graduated I made a point of doing as many as I could. Funnily enough, I actually did one with my now boss. I remember thinking how cool it would be to work at WTBBL and now 6 years later, here I am. Informational interviews are great because it is really just meeting people, and hearing about people's experiences; It didn't feel high stakes like a job interview but instead I was just having a conversation and asking: "how'd you get to where you are" and "tell me your story."

Helene: But getting industry to get their head around the word library, or MLIS, is right there: like what can they do, they can do everything an MSIM student can do, plus human and values-based stuff.

Jennifer: I'd like to echo everything said about relationships and having an open mind. One of the things that I did back when I was a Teen Librarian was join YALSA and volunteer for committee work. Part of my motivation was to be able to one day serve on a book award committee, but a lot of my motivation in getting involved was to learn more about what my colleagues were doing all around the country. I wanted to know what their libraries were like, their experiences, how they handled challenges, hear more about their programming ideas, etc. That curiosity and relationship building led me to more committee opportunities and eventually I even chaired a committee which gave me leadership experience which helped bring me to the position I have now. So, a huge yes to relationships and learning more about libraries across North America and what your colleagues are up to.

I also just want to put in a little plug for the whole idea of librarians being information professionals. Academic, public, school, and special librarians are all information professionals and don't need to be specialists in a particular field to be a successful information professional and an asset to an organization.

Helene: You are absolutely right Jennifer.

Poppy: We're guardians of information. And usually, when I say that people are like, "oh...."

Jennifer: I remember when I was getting my MLIS one of my fellow students was working at the Engineering Library and didn't have a background in engineering, but they were able to use their skills to successfully serve patrons at that library. So, yeah, we're information professionals.

Helene: Right, we can do this.

Jordyn: [This] was one of the best things I was told in grad school— actually by you Helene: that you don't need to like be an expert on a subject to be a librarian and, knowing that and being able to transfer those skills, I mean that is the only reason I got a job anywhere.

Helene: Not the only.

Jordyn: I don't know if I would have had the confidence to apply to the art museum job even with my background in art: [...] so like people—just apply.

Helene: That's what [...] every current student could take away from this talk: figure out what those transferable skills are, figure out where your skill gaps are, what do you think you want to poke around [in], and build relationships. Build that network and be open.

Especially the last two years it's been really hard for students to do that; how do we get them the appropriate curriculum, how do we get that in the support services so that everybody walks out being able to write a good letter that shows they're employable across a number of areas and that they're excited and engaged.

Johanna: I am so grateful for your time on it. I feel like we could clearly keep talking.

Interested in a conversation? Propose one to us, and we'd love to help you set it up and explore ideas.

Anti-Racism, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Call for Contributors

by the Alki Editorial Committee and Alki Editor

Anti-racism, equity, diversity and inclusion (AEDI) work is a core, guiding principle for Alki and the WLA. In an effort to highlight AEDI, Alki now features a permanent column dedicated to these themes. In creating this column July 2020 and launching it this November, we do not intend to limit the conversation to this space.

We are considering whether a regular columnist, instead of shared contributions, is the way to go; these will be ongoing conversations that we will be transparent about.

Each Alki issue is a dynamic collection of submissions from library workers and students across the state; the content is dependent upon those who choose to share their voices. Due to the justice-focused nature of libraries and library work, AEDI themes may naturally show up in the pieces we receive and believe that it will be reflected across many of the feature articles that are published. However, they are not always guaranteed. We, the Alki Editorial Committee, intend for this column to ensure that justice-focused work and stories are consistently elevated and that conversations are sustained.

We are energized to call on our entire community of library workers—in any role—to submit articles for this column by emailing alkieditor@wla.org. Please include the article in your email and a brief biography. The deadline is rolling, and we will consider all articles that are submitted that address AEDI themes.

Articles can be about, but are not limited to:

- accountability
- equity and social justice
- anti-racism
- dismantling existing structures and examinations of power
- community-led engagement

For examples, check out our November 2020 issue for work by Dr. Michelle Martin, and our current March 2021 issue for an article by dindria barrow.

Questions? Please reach out to the Alki Editor by emailing alkieditor@wla.org. 📖