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Jumping into the Deep: Imposter Syndrome, Defining Success, and the New Librarian

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Abstract

This article is adapted from a presentation given at the Ontario Library Association Super Conference, held in Toronto, Ontario, February 1-4, 2017. This presentation brought together 80+ participants, ranging from students to early- and mid-career professionals. The goals of this presentation were to recognize and build a shared understanding of how library and information professionals experience imposter syndrome. Through personal experience and research, ideas of imposter syndrome are explored through the lens of new librarians. This discussion included competition in the job market, burnout rates, and social media. Through experience and research, we aimed to share tips and tools for managing and examining imposter syndrome.

Keywords

Imposter syndrome, Ontario Library Association Super Conference, new librarians

What is Imposter Syndrome?

Have you ever felt like a fraud? That you didn't have enough experience or knowledge to successfully do your job? Feelings of imposter syndrome (IS) are not uncommon in the modern workplace, including in libraries and other information settings. We want to

explore some ways that we as a profession can better support each other and ourselves in recognizing IS and coming up with strategies to cope.

The existence of IS has been well documented in the literature from multiple and intersectional perspectives. Research can be seen for academics in general (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Hutchins, 2015), minorities (Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Earle Reybold & Alamia, 2008; Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011; Farrel, Alabi, Whaley, & Jenda, 2017), mature students (Chapman, 2017; Johnson, 2004), and undergraduate and graduate students (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996; Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011). These examples work in conjunction with other variables, but demonstrate that librarianship is not unique in terms of experiences of IS. Despite this, there are some overarching themes that can identify how and why IS plays out in librarianship the way it does.

People with IS often feel and experience success as external and failure as internal (Faulkner, 2015; Lane, 2015; Parkman, 2016; Gallagher, 2016). As a group, librarians set high goals for themselves, which, when overworked, are not easily achieved. This leads to further feelings of doubt regarding one's abilities, and amplifies the feeling of IS in our roles (Clark, Vardeman, & Barba, 2014; Faulkner, 2015; Parkman, 2016).

IS often originates in library school. As has been found by Faulkner (2015), while IS is not unique to new or younger librarians, it is greatly felt by this group in particular (Clark, Vardeman, & Barba, 2014). There are many reasons for this. First, library school provides little guidance on how to transition to the workforce. Transitional challenges including successfully navigating the unique culture and politics of different organizations. This may also include learning the norms and procedures related to job tasks in collections, instruction, and outreach. In addition, the sometimes complex and varied systems for human resources and other administrative task take time to learn (Faulkner, 2015; Gordon, 2003). Second, new librarians often experience the 'let me show you to your desk' approach where very little orientation or mentoring is provided (Faulkner, 2015). The isolation and pressure to succeed can be demoralizing (Clark, Vardeman, & Barba, 2014; Parkman, 2016; Murphy, 2016).

A third reason is the lack of clarity in the scope of one's position. As anyone who has worked in librarianship knows, we often have multiple aspects to our work. For example, a Community Outreach Librarian may also be responsible for circulation, room bookings, and assessment. An Instructional Librarian will often cover a broad range of departments such as History, English, Business, and Economics. Understanding and defining what success and accomplishment means in those roles is challenging (Gordon, 2003; Murphy, 2016). We know that the "appearance of intelligence is vital to success" (Kets de Vries, 2005, para. 10), which puts a great deal of pressure on new graduates. Striving to demonstrate this intelligence can add significantly to the feelings of IS, especially in the academic library context.

We know that collegial support, encouragement, constructive feedback, and formal and informal mentorship opportunities can go a long way to combat IS, which is what we attempted to explore in this session.

Sajni Confronts Imposter Syndrome

My IS has come primarily through the uncertainty of contract work, and the intense culture of academic librarianship. The uncertainty of always searching for a new job has caused great fluctuations in my IS. I am also often the newest (and youngest) librarian wherever I am, which has led me to feel underqualified and too young for the roles I am in. This has always put me on alert to prove myself and to produce something of value in a relatively short time. It has meant adapting to various academic cultures that have been structured in a variety of ways, and occasionally unlearning some things which had been obtained at previous institutions a few short months before. Tied in with this, I have found the professional culture of academic librarianship to be intense, competitive, demanding, and hierarchical.

This has affected me in a variety of ways. My IS has produced panic attacks, anxiety, and low self-esteem at various times and at various levels of intensity, especially during transitions between contracts. This anxiety also fluctuates depending on the somewhat arbitrary nature of how I think I am doing in my current role. It has led me to put in more hours than needed on a given project, neglect my own self-care in terms of eating and sleeping, and not make an effort to make friends in new places due to the expectation of moving again in a few months.

Interviews also often trigger feelings of IS as I battle self-doubt throughout the interview process. I have interviewed for jobs that have seemed way above my actual knowledge and skill set, which has made me feel like a fraud throughout the process. Each institution provides varying degrees of information in advance, and it's hard to know what to expect. Some provide lots of information in advance, including the interview questions, the names of the people on the hiring committee, and even links to literature relevant to the position. Other organizations provide almost no information in advance.

Once on the job, there is great pressure to make professional contributions and to conduct academic research. I have found it hard to make my way into conversations happening in journals, conferences, and social media and to carve out my own space in those conversations. I am constantly worried about appearing ignorant or naive, or about having trivial interests.

This has played a significant role in how I function in day-to-day work, as I can spiral into IS—particularly after being on Twitter for too long. The discussions happening there, or the responses to a recent article, can often lead me to worry about where I fit into the conversations, and what being a researcher means at an academic level.

A few strategies have helped with my IS, in order to keep a healthy perspective on academic culture. I have worked hard to develop and maintain relationships with library workers and academics who inspire me to focus on what I love about this work. Now

that I am finally no longer in contract work, I see the importance I should have put on achieving a work-life balance. I now make sure I leave work at a reasonable hour, take time at lunch to go outside, and chat with people at work about non-work related things.

Additionally, I try to engage with social media in small doses. While I'm eager to see what conversations are happening, I often leave "Library Land" Twitter feeling uneducated and incapable of meaningful contribution. As a result, I try to only check it once a day during the workweek, and focus on using it as a platform to lead to other sources of information rather than engaging with the conversations that are happening.

For me IS is something that sits at the back of my mind almost every day. I have days where it feels overwhelming and unmanageable, and other days where I feel in control. While I expect I will continue to experience IS even now that I'm in a permanent role, I have the above-mentioned strategies to manage it, and I know now that I don't have to do everything at once.

Melanie Confronts Imposter Syndrome

My own experiences of IS stems from a combination of lack of experience and feeling like I didn't always fit the "mold" of what a librarian should be. I have felt shame that perhaps my interests in fashion, young adult fiction, and pop culture are frivolous and not "academic" enough. In my first job at an Ontario college I worked in a para-professional position. Though not a librarian position, I did all the things a liaison librarian did, including collections, teaching, and reference. When I moved into a librarian position in a university environment three years later, some of my new colleagues hinted that my previous work didn't count as "real" librarian experience. This had led to moments of doubt in the value of my past experience and the value of my input.

Another key contribution to my experiences of IS is the expectation to conduct research. I have struggled with what it means to be a librarian doing research in higher education. What really makes someone a researcher? I know that there are varying levels of confidence in the research skills of librarians, and I feel a sense of being unsure and uncertain of my own skills. Participating in the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Librarians' Research Institute allowed me to build relationships with librarians who were experiencing similar feelings of doubt, while building confidence and exploring practical ways to develop my skills as a researcher.

To manage feelings of IS, I have built a trusted network of librarians that I can be open with, and have developed an online identity that is true to who I am. I have also created the blog "[what the librarian wore](#)" as an opportunity to share something I love (fashion) and combine it with another area of interest (the idea of what it means to be a librarian). This brings me joy, and the act of doing something I love and being true to myself in such a diverse profession has helped me to build confidence.

Participating in association work also helps me develop my sense of self and purpose within the profession. I have been taking on increasing levels of leadership within the

Ontario Library Association, first through the Mentoring Committee, and more recently becoming Vice-President/President Elect of the Ontario College and University Librarian Association (OCULA). By taking on increasing levels of leadership I'm able to develop skills, build a network of like-minded colleagues and participate in rewarding experiences that allow me to feel that I am contributing to the profession.

I still have days when I do not feel so sure of myself. But there are also days when I feel that I'm starting to figure it out!

Confronting Imposter Syndrome through Guided Activities

In our conference session, we facilitated several activities to help participants reflect on their own experiences with IS. We explored both the triggers and the solutions, and how combatting IS may require different strategies for each person. Finally, we showed how participants could develop a plan, and celebrate their successes. (See appendices for a complete description of each activity).

Several themes emerged from the participants in the conference session. A key theme highlighted by participants included being new to the profession, and many participants indicated that being the youngest librarian at their institution was a contributing factor in their IS. The intersection of both age and time in the profession contributed to and influenced the feelings, experiences, and challenges faced on the job itself and in one's ability to navigate workplace dynamics.

To further this point, workplace dynamics and communities of practice affect one's ability to develop collegial and meaningful relationships with colleagues. For example, workplace norms such as work-life balance were highlighted as an area of discord for new librarians. Several participants commented on being told not to do so much as it sets a bad precedent, and makes others look bad. This is an example of how important socialization is for new librarians from graduate school into the workplace. The importance of socialization into academic libraries in particular is supported by Oud (2008) and is further supported by Farrel, Alabi, Whaley, and Jenda (2017), who found in their analysis of the literature the importance of social factors and integration into the workplace culture in order for new librarians to feel valued and relevant.

Participants also described a lack of consistent and constructive feedback in their new professional careers. Clark and Barba (2014) found the importance of getting support for professional development in a librarian's success, and can be tied in with getting constructive feedback and support for furthering understanding and accomplishments within librarianship. There is a wide range of expectations in this field in terms of what professional contributions mean, based on the the institution or organization, stream of librarianship, or individual priorities. The research component of this profession therefore plays a role in how librarians feel about themselves as contributors to the field. Participants noted the related challenge of finding and reaching out to people to collaborate with in the field.

Academic workplaces also have differing priorities in relation to students, faculty, and individual research. One of the challenges in IS is concretely defining what success means to each individual. While there are some concrete measures of success in library work (such as achieving tenure in an academic library), it is important for individuals to reflect upon what success looks like in their own career trajectory. Participants in our session came up with a variety of ideas such as mentorship, completing projects, setting goals, and developing relationships as markers for success. Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) and Hutchins (2015) show that coping mechanisms such as social support (mentors for example), validation of successes, positive affirmations, and self-talk (for example, encouraging and motivating oneself using phrases or mantras to influence one's internal dialogue) are common features of coping mechanisms for IS in academic faculty and apply to the strategies found by our participants.

Overall, these anecdotal findings tie in with the existing literature indicating that IS is damaging for both the individual who experiences it and their places of work, especially for those new to the profession (Clark and Barba, 2014). Hutchins (2015) even found that higher rates of IS thoughts in academic faculty were tied to lower ratings in job performance. As was summarized by Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) and Hutchins (2015), research finds that IS thoughts correlate with anxiety, burnout, psychological distress, fatigue, and emotional and cognitive distance from work, which again leads to poorer work outcomes in satisfaction and performance.

Strategies for Moving Forward

When facing the challenges of IS, visualization and body exercises can be useful. For an easy, accessible example of this, check out Amy Cuddy's TED Talk "[Your body language shapes who you are](#)". Cuddy explains how embodying a confident posture (think Superman or Wonder Woman) can improve your confidence. For another example, check out the article by Carney, Cuddy, and Yap (2010). It may feel silly or unnatural to step into a "power pose," but what have you got to lose in trying?

Developing a supportive network with others who share experiences of IS can be very helpful. While IS may never completely subside, it is key to create an environment in which one feels safe and has the opportunity to be open about experiences. Individuals should also reflect when possible and think carefully about what success looks like to them. This can be done by looking at both short and long term goals, to break things down into smaller, more achievable steps (See Appendix D).

It is important to acknowledge that most of us, if not all, have experienced feeling like an imposter in some setting. We, as a profession, need to do better at onboarding new colleagues and reaching out to them through formal and informal mentoring programs. We can improve the interview day for new librarians by offering information in advance (such as the names of the people on the hiring or interview committee and a complete schedule with the names of people who are being met with), asking candidates if they have any questions before the interview, assigning a contact person, and providing campus or building maps showing where the candidate will need to go.

Here are some practical tips for dealing with imposter syndrome:

- Write down your goals. What are some flexible short and long term goals that are achievable?
- Determine the steps necessary to achieve your goals.
- Reach out to people. Others have gone through this.
- Understand that it is okay to feel down. We are all human.

In addition, it is important to recognize our successes and return to them when we lose confidence. Using a success log, tracking compliments, and recognizing achievements are important in tackling feelings of IS (see Appendix E). As colleagues and employers we can help new colleagues through mentorship, addressing gaps in onboarding processes, identifying the signs of IS in others, and developing a workplace culture that addresses issues of IS through critical awareness and providing a space to discuss the challenges.

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Appendix-Imposter Syndrome Survival Kit

Appendix A: Positive Affirmations

- I have the talents and qualities to be successful
- I acknowledge my own self worth
- Mistakes and setback are stepping stones to my success because I learn from them
- I feel successful with my life right now, even as I work toward future success
- I trust myself and can use my own
- I am focused and engaged with my goals going forward
- I am fully present in my relationships and work
- I observe my thoughts and actions without judging them
- There is a benefit and an opportunity in every experience I have
- I learn and grow from every experience
- I have the power right now to decide what I want to do
- I have the power to change my thoughts
- I have the ability and power to try new things outside of my comfort zone
- I have the capacity to learn new skills that support my success
- I accept that there will be challenges when pursuing my goal and I have the knowledge and ability to overcome them
- I choose to be proud of myself
- I have the power to change myself
- There is a benefit and an opportunity in every experience I have
- I am a better person due to the challenges I've faced
- I am open to opportunities
- I deserve to be successful

Appendix B:

Appendix C:

HELLO
MY NAME IS

Imposter

What has helped you feel better?

What has made you feel worse?

Imposter
Syndrome

Activity #2

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Appendix D:

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**Imposter
Syndrome**
Activity #3

Appendix E:

the master plan

what are your big goals? Think Big!

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES?

Set Goals

	TASK	WANT IT DONE BY:	COMPLETION DATE:
☐			
☐			
☐			
☐			
☐			
☐			

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Imposter
Syndrome
Activity #4

Appendix F:

Success Log

what's working? What isn't?

LIST YOUR SUCCESSES. BIG AND SMALL.

<i>What are you learning from your challenges?</i>	When I'm feeling like an imposter, I will tell myself . . .
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