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Pathways to Becoming an Academic Subject Specialist: Insights from Three Librarians

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Abstract

Subject librarianship has been a research topic for many years, but there is limited professional literature providing professional advice and practical examples of pursuing this area of librarianship. This article examines pathways to becoming a subject librarian, particularly in an academic setting. Using case studies from three subject librarians with different backgrounds as examples, the article finds common themes and best practices for both obtaining these types of positions and achieving success as a subject librarian. The roles of education, professional development and networks, and leveraging experience are discussed as means for librarians to move from working in a broad role as a generalist to transition into a subject specialist. This article approaches the subject from a practical, “getting the job” professional development perspective, aimed at librarians who are interested in making a career transition.

Keywords

Subject librarianship, professional development, academic librarianship

Introduction

What is the path to becoming an academic subject librarian? While there is broad coverage of the responsibilities, roles, and daily work of subject librarians (Corrall, 2015; Hardy & Corrall, 2007; Pinfield, 2001), the paths of education, experience, and opportunity that lead librarians into these discipline-focused positions remain obscured in the professional literature. Academic librarians commonly undertake a path of general librarianship while pursuing their MLS and within their early careers, particularly those seeking positions in public services and instruction. Librarians are exposed to and develop skills across a broad spectrum within the discipline and practical work of librarianship. What are some of the pathways that generalist librarians follow to obtain a specialized position as their career develops? This article, written for the professional development of library practitioners, conducted three case studies that explore the professional transformation of three librarians from generalist to subject specialist positions within three separate academic institutions.

In the following case studies, the authors reflect on how education, non-library work experience, and professional development have guided career transitions from general to subject librarianship. While each of these three librarians followed a different track to becoming subject specialists, common threads emerged, including “re-learning” librarianship in new contexts, dealing with imposter syndrome, and participating in professional development activities. The cases also describe the authors’ experiences of becoming faculty and engaging in scholarship and professional service, for those wishing to (re)focus their careers toward a specialist position.

Case Studies

Case A

Wendy Girven Pothier is Business Librarian at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), the flagship research institution for the state. Prior to this position, Pothier was Director of Library Services at the Maine Maritime Academy (MMA) and Public Services Librarian at the University of Alaska Southeast, both positions requiring generalist knowledge on many subjects due to the nature and size of the libraries. She also worked at Penn State University in a staff position while earning her MLS. She holds undergraduate degrees in Comparative Literature and Japanese. Her current job is a tenure-track faculty position. Librarians at UNH require an advanced subject degree in addition to the MLS to achieve tenure and to progress in academic rank.

Because of her experience as a librarian at MMA (coupled with a rural location and a last-minute retirement), she was recruited to adjunct for the Loeb Sullivan School of Business for two graduate-level research methods courses. This was her first foray into the world of business research and information. She felt underqualified at first, but

received mentorship from other business faculty members. Working with the graduate students on their research projects was rewarding and Pothier enjoyed interacting with business students and faculty in her daily work. After teaching for several semesters, she decided that subject librarianship was a path that truly interested her and she began to explore career options to become a business librarian full-time. Pothier's experiences on hiring committees and her survey of advertisements for subject librarian jobs aided her understanding of pathways to this new focus. She knew she needed some business librarian experience to help her resume get more attention from a search committee for a subject librarian position.

Without any direct business library experience during her ten-year professional career, Pothier thought of other ways she could aid her career transition. She decided the most approachable way would be to pursue an MS in International Logistics Management through her employer, MMA, due to the discounted tuition. This was ideal for Pothier because it gave her educational experience that could be substituted for work experience when she was ready to look for business librarian positions.

When planning the transition to subject librarianship, a review of recent job advertisements helped Pothier understand cases where an additional degree requirement is present at some institutions for granting tenure. She inferred that having the advanced degree would likely aid in the selection process for those job search committees. Therefore, the advanced degree would not only give her experience needed to make the career transition, but also enable her to achieve progress towards tenure. As mentioned above, Pothier eventually took a position at UNH where the advanced degree was required for tenure.

Career transitions can expose librarians to unfamiliar territory, sometimes resulting in imposter syndrome, and this was no different for Pothier once she began working as a solo subject specialist for business at the University of New Hampshire. A few things aided Pothier in the career transition and helped her overcome the imposter syndrome she felt on occasion as she entered this next phase in her career. First, she read a lot of literature written by other business librarians to learn how to navigate issues specific to the discipline, including *Business Librarianship and Entrepreneurial Outreach* by MacDonald and Kirkwood (2014). She also consulted literature on business school curricula and became familiar with current topics. Secondly, she joined the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) of the American Library Association, which connected her to other librarians focused in her subject area. This group's conversations and its opportunities for service aided her greatly as she began her new position.

Though it was a challenge to obtain an advanced subject degree to aid in transforming her career to subject librarian, Pothier felt it was a necessary step based on her prior professional experience and the preference stated in many job advertisements. In a 2016 study of job advertisements, Ferguson noted that 236 of the 800 total job ads surveyed "either required or preferred a second advanced degree or advanced subject knowledge" (2016, p. 728). Of those 236, only 53 required a second degree while the remainder stated it as a preference. Of the 263 positions that required or preferred a

second advanced degree, the most frequent functional areas asking for advanced subject knowledge were subject specialists (89 positions), which equates to 34% of the positions (Ferguson, 2016, p. 728). A second degree in the subject area can be helpful in crafting your resume to get a subject specialist position and, in some cases, it may be a requirement for the job.

Case B

Paul Campbell is currently a social science librarian at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Although he did not start his career in this position, this case study outlines how he learned to capitalize on his experiences after starting his career in a small library with the ultimate goal of securing a specialized librarian position. The journey taken to achieve career goals is often indirect, and success lies in learning from experiences and being as flexible as possible.

Because of coursework and an internship during library school, Campbell knew he wanted to be an academic librarian in a larger institution. Prior to graduation, Campbell started his job search within specific regions and library types but grew frustrated by the limited job market within those parameters. This frustration made him alter his job search by widening the geographical net and including any academic library, realizing that it was more important to start a career than to continue waiting for the perfect position.

Upon graduating with his MLIS, Campbell's first position was the Reference & Instruction Librarian at a small liberal arts college in New Hampshire. This position had Campbell focus primarily on providing library instruction for undergraduates, allowing him to develop as an instructor. Campbell had to quickly learn the foundations of teaching information literacy in courses ranging from freshman library orientation to fourth-year subject-specific courses. Pedagogy was something that, while never covered in his MLIS program, quickly became a significant part of his career.

Campbell was one of four librarians at this small institution, resulting in opportunities to participate in a wide variety of library functions that helped him develop a holistic understanding of library operations. The small staff necessitated that Campbell also contribute to library functions outside of his portfolio. It is unlikely that these opportunities would have arisen within a larger library.

Campbell joined several state and regional organizations to further develop as a professional. This provided him with a network of colleagues from other institutions to learn from and share ideas with. Having this network of colleagues made him feel less isolated and introduced him to the ideas of reflective practice, active learning, and instructional design. Professional service expanded his horizons on what was possible within his first position and helped shape what his future could look like.

Not being able to specialize within a subject area created anxiety for Campbell, who believed it would be difficult to market himself for a specialist position. The process of self-reflection alleviated this anxiety, because he soon realized having generalized

teaching and library experience was more important at the start of a career than having extensive subject knowledge. Unlike some librarians who earn second degrees in their liaison areas later in their careers, Campbell later chose to get a second degree in instructional technology.

When Campbell started interviewing for liaison positions, it became clear that his experiences in teaching, professional development, and other library functions laid the foundations for his growth. These foundations were essential in helping Campbell articulate how he effectively communicates with faculty, promotes library services, develops lesson plans, and delivers instruction that goes beyond simple demonstrations. These foundations were the basis for what he does as a subject specialist in his current position, only now focusing on a narrowed group of faculty and students.

Campbell's largest challenges in transitioning to a subject specialty were imposter syndrome, stemming from being a confident generalist, then switching to a specialist role, and feeling like he needed to relearn librarianship. Returning to the above foundational experiences allowed him to recognize that the basic principles of librarianship are constant, regardless of being a generalist or specialist. He may not have wanted to start out in a generalist position but it was in that position where he built the foundations on which his career continues to develop and grow.

Case C

Prior to becoming an academic librarian, Heather Howard obtained her BS in Organizational Leadership & Supervision from Purdue University and worked for almost ten years in the business world. In 2011, she made the decision to change careers and pursue her MLS at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. In 2012, she took an internship in the archives and special collections at Butler University. Though this was work she loved, the job prospects in archives are far fewer than in academic librarianship, and in 2013 she began working as the Access Services Supervisor for the same library while finishing up her MLS.

In May 2014, Howard graduated with her MLS and began looking for librarian jobs, and in 2015 she found a position as Information Services Librarian at Trine University. This was a staff librarian position, where she liaised with business and engineering. However, with only three librarians, functionally all were generalists and worked with students from all disciplines. Additionally, Howard's responsibilities included emerging technology, e-resources, systems administrator for the ILS and the website, and library marketing. All three librarians were overwhelmed, with little time to focus on any one particular liaison area. After this, Howard landed her current position as an Assistant Professor of Library Science / Business Information Specialist at Purdue University, which was an excellent fit with her business background. This job varies in two primary ways from the other library positions she's held: it is a subject specific business librarian role and is a tenure-track faculty position.

After starting at Purdue, Howard took time to systematically familiarize herself with all of the business databases in order to gain an understanding of the scope of business research. Books, such as Celia Ross's *Making Sense of Business Reference: A Guide for Librarians and Research Professionals*, were also invaluable. There are many books on specific types of librarianship that can help anyone looking to develop their skills in a particular subset of librarianship. Additionally, reading books and articles on research methodologies, as well as reading more deeply in the academic library literature, helped Howard to learn the research and publication process.

At Purdue, librarians do very little with the day-to-day running of the library. Instead, they focus time on teaching, including credit courses, scholarship and publication, engagement such as committee work, and mentoring undergraduates. Though Howard had some experience teaching, she was not an experienced researcher. Ample research has been done on the benefit of mentoring to academic libraries (Culpepper, 2000; Ross, 2013), and she found this to be useful for integrating into this very different and highly specific model of librarianship. Her mentors have included other tenure-track faculty, her supervisor, full professors, and faculty in other departments on campus.

In addition to mentorship, peer-support groups can be very helpful to the tenure-track librarian (Cirasella & Smale, 2011; Miller & Benefiel, 1998). The pre-tenured faculty in the Purdue Libraries have an informal group that meets monthly to discuss projects and challenges, and to find collaborators. Faculty receiving tenure also share their tenure documents with the group. Howard found that the most important piece has been to find collaborators for researching and publishing, to help learn the process. Shadowing another business librarian in their instruction was also an excellent way to learn the resources for different courses and projects, as well as how to adapt content for a semester-long course.

Trade associations and conferences were found to be an excellent way to meet others in a subject area and learn about trending topics. As a business librarian, Howard found the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) of the American Library Association (ALA) extremely helpful. Through this group, she has been exposed to upcoming trends and ideas, a group specifically for new business librarians, and a listserv where business librarians ask one another for help. Howard also liaises to Agricultural Economics and joined the United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN), a great resource for agriculture information. Whatever type of librarianship one chooses, there is likely an association with a section for that subject, if not an entire association.

Discussion of Cases

There is no one distinct path to take to begin a career as a subject specialist librarian, but each case highlights common issues and resources utilized to help with both obtaining and succeeding in these positions. Each librarian became a subject specialist at different points in their careers. For example, Howard worked outside of librarianship in the business world and used that experience to leverage a transition into subject librarianship, while Pothier worked as a librarian for a decade before acquiring an

advanced degree; both women moved into similar positions as business librarians with faculty rank. While there are many different paths individuals follow to achieve a similar outcome, several themes emerged that aided these three librarians in their development into subject specialists, including leveraging experience, engaging with professional networks, and the role of education.

Leveraging experience

In each case, the subject specialist position was not the first library position each librarian held. All three librarians started working in smaller libraries that exposed them to the many facets of librarianship and gave them a broad understanding of library instruction, collections, and working with patrons from many academic backgrounds.

This experience is valuable for several reasons. First, it exposed the librarians to many facets of librarianship before they chose a niche direction for their career. Secondly, this experience helped them develop foundational and practical skills and experience in librarianship, particularly instruction, which built a solid core for the type of work done as a subject librarian. When opportunities arose to dive into specialist positions, each librarian had already developed the needed skills that would be paramount to their success as subject specialists. Finally, work experience adds an enhancement to the MLS degree, as course work doesn't always exist to cover some of the practical aspects of librarianship, such as instruction. Generalist librarians can market themselves towards subject specialist positions through the development of these skill sets.

Leveraging experience isn't limited to the experiences gained through working in libraries, but when seeking a specialist position, librarians can also utilize experiences to market themselves for those jobs. Howard and Pothier both used experience outside the library to help them qualify for specialist jobs. Howard leveraged her work experience in business and Pothier used her business teaching experience, both of which helped them obtain specialist librarian positions. Alternatively, Campbell leveraged his pedagogical experience gained from his first position to increase his marketability for subject librarian positions.

Engaging with professional networks

Conference experiences and professional organizations provide specific pathways of support and development opportunities for subject librarians. As mentioned by Campbell, networking at conferences helps immensely with making connections, particularly to others working in similar positions at other institutions. This aided Campbell especially while working at smaller institutions, where he was semi-isolated from other colleagues who did similar work. In Howard's case, she points to the professional organizations that helped her obtain knowledge in areas related to her position where she had less experience. Professional organizations provide opportunities for the subject librarian to get involved with service, attend conferences and programs, and network in a discipline-focused way. Engaging with these groups would be an excellent strategy for someone considering moving their career to subject librarianship, particularly if they felt they lacked the experience or education for the role.

There are many opportunities for service within these organizations where a new-to-the-discipline librarian could get hands-on experience that would translate well to their resume.

Role of Education

Education can play a role in preparing for a career in subject librarianship, as well as being a tool for re-learning parts of the trade after beginning a position. Howard and Pothier both utilized educational experience to obtain their current subject librarian positions. In some instances, an advanced subject degree would not only be useful, but might be a requirement for the position, as at Pothier's institution. In other cases, an undergraduate degree in the subject area would be sufficient educational background. Other formal education can be a good conduit to making the shift as well, such as a degree in higher education, teaching, or another related field. For example, Campbell decided not to get an advanced degree in his subject area but rather a second degree in instructional design. Education can be obtained after the subject position has started, as well, to grow and develop skills needed for a long and successful career.

Dealing with imposter syndrome

Entering a new phase in a career can offer wonderful opportunities to grow professionally and develop personally as well. There are some major challenges that face librarians as they enter subject librarian positions. Each of the three librarians touch on the issue of feeling imposter syndrome in their new role. Imposter syndrome has been discussed in the library literature (Clark, Vardeman, & Barba, 2017; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017) and has been a professional development and conference topic in the past few years. For subject librarians, the reality of being labeled an "expert" by having a discipline listed in the job title can be daunting, especially without a degree in the discipline. This can be further compounded when the job is a faculty position and other faculty have PhDs. Serving as a liaison to experienced faculty as a new subject librarian can be a challenge, so it is important to remember that one can grow and develop into one's role over time, particularly by utilizing the means mentioned in the sections above. It is important to remember that everyone starts at different places and with different experiences that they bring to their role as a subject liaison.

Conclusion

Each of the three librarians in these cases are currently working as subject specialists in academic libraries. There are different nuances to their positions, such as faculty status and degree requirements. There is no one-size-fits-all way to become a subject librarian, nor will the job be the same at each institution. However, there are some threads that can be woven together to help interested librarians both qualify for and obtain these types of positions. The combination of building foundational skills, finding opportunities of interest for professional development, and seeking growth through education and experience will aid success on the path to subject librarianship.

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