

Narrowing the Scope: Transitioning from general librarianship to specialized subject librarians Paul Campbell (Ohio University); Heather Howard (Purdue University); Wendy Girven (University of New Hampshire)

One of the many challenges that academic librarianship faces is the dichotomy of working environments between librarians who at larger and smaller institutions. Larger academic institutions organize librarians by clearly segmented functions. Subject librarians are then charged with liaison responsibilities for a limited set of programs and disciplines. This, of course, is the complete opposite of academic librarians working in much smaller libraries where they support multiple academic programs in addition to multiple functions that support library operations.

Not all librarians begin their careers in subject liaison positions but, rather, some start in a broad position where they do a little of everything and are never able to truly delve deeply into a single area. This jack-of-all-trades librarianship calls into question the academic status of librarians because of the time it takes away from focusing on cultivating new relationships with teaching faculty and their disciplines. As their careers develop and transition into more specialized positions, new subject librarians can develop feelings of imposter syndrome, and, in effect, feel that they must “re-learn” librarianship. Freshly minted subject liaison librarians must learn a very specific set of skills and resources that go beyond standard or generalized librarianship. These subject specific positions require learning additional skills and developing new relationships to be successful in identifying and promoting relevant data, resources, collections, and other information needs.

This panel will discuss the different journeys taken by three subject liaison librarians who started out in broad scoped librarianship and had to re-learn their craft in order to support their focused patrons. Librarians will discuss the strategies they employed in learning more about their subject specialty and shed some insight in how to successfully transition from a broad scoped to subject librarianship. Questions that panelists will address are: How do academic librarians adapt to the changes in going from a small to a large library? What stigmas and barriers do librarians from smaller institutions face and how do they overcome them? For librarians who wish to make the transition, how can your experience be framed toward a subject librarian position in a larger library?