

**Panel Title:**

Narrowing the scope: Transitioning from general librarianship to specialized subject liaisons.

As presented at CAPAL 2018

University of Regina

May 29-31, 2018

**Individual Presentation Title:**

Teaching as a pathway to subject librarianship.

**Author:**

Paul C. Campbell, MLIS

Ohio University Libraries

Athens, Ohio 45701

[campbep1@ohio.edu](mailto:campbep1@ohio.edu)

**Abstract:**

Starting a career in a smaller academic library can be the best option for academic librarians starting out. Even though many librarians start and end their careers in smaller libraries, some wish to delve deeper within specific subject areas and/or aspects of librarianship. However, smaller libraries are a great training ground to provide newer librarians time to develop skill sets and gain more experience within the profession. The smaller library allows librarians to gain experience and broad understanding in multiple areas of library operations that would not otherwise be possible when starting in large library.

In any library setting, frustrations can that set in after a librarian gets acclimated into a position. In the small library, these frustrations largely originate from the lack time and resources to delve deeply into a narrowed area of librarianship. Librarians in smaller institutions will have to wear many hats in order to keep the library functioning; whereas, larger libraries will have multiple librarians to perform these same functions. Some librarians working in these smaller libraries can face negative stigmas about their expertise and ability to thrive in a larger library setting.

These frustrations can eventually lead to burn out and feeling like they are unable to make any progress in updating library services and collections up to date. This often translates to librarians investigating how to make the transition to from generalized librarianship to a subject librarian position at a much larger institution. Falsely believing a subject liaison position at a larger institution will offer more time and resources.

Learning how to harness the library skills and experience developed in this small library is a tool that can be carried into many other avenues of professional development. In making this transition to larger institutions, these librarians are better positioned to cope with the changes involved in learning about

different subset of academic librarianship. Perhaps starting in a smaller library and gaining a broad understanding of all aspects of academic librarianship, better prepares future subject liaisons adapting to the constantly changing environment of academic librarianship as a whole.

# Full paper:

## Starting out in a small academic library

Upon graduating with my MLIS in 2012, I accepted my first professional level position in a small liberal arts college in New Hampshire. While there, I was one of four librarians where I was the Reference & Instruction Librarian. I did the bulk of library instruction of undergraduate college students with a great deal of my instruction focused on the first and second year students.

During my library degree program, I did not have instruction in pedagogy in general or, specifically, the instruction of Information Literacy. Basically, I had to jump in the deep end and help develop a first-year library instruction program without any teaching background. Sadly, this resulted in my instruction being heavily focused on the demonstration of library resources rather than the evaluation of information. Although, this is not true Information Literacy, this experience really helped me hone in on my instructional style and confidence.

I feel that starting my professional career in a small college setting may have been the best thing for me to grow and develop as an academic librarian. The small college setting allowed me to familiarize myself with the many different facets of academic librarianship without placing me inside of a specific library niche. Not only did I do a great deal of library instruction, but I also did a little of each of the following: library social media, manage reference collection, scheduling the reference desk, management of periodical and serial collections, and managing and training a student employee.

Since I had faculty-status as a librarian I was able to positively engage with teaching faculty from across campus on faculty committees and was elected to the executive board of the faculty union. These positions helped me understand the inner workings of how faculty operate within the university setting. I was able to see first-hand how new courses are developed and approved, the process for students appealing their academic probation, and how (a unionized) faculty negotiates with administration.

Being the primary instructional librarian, I was able to dabble into many different subject areas. I quickly learned that I really enjoyed teaching within some disciplines over others. Although my teaching did not go deeply into ACRL's Frameworks of Information Literacy, it did set me up to build confidence in my overall teaching skills and classroom management skills. This experience taught me that the basic foundations of being a good teacher are universal to all disciplines.

Eventually, because I was doing so much instruction at such a basic level, I was getting bored with the simple point-and-click instruction. I even found that students were getting bored with my instruction as some were coming in two or three times per semester to hear the same lecture. This experience propelled my curiosity in seeking out how to develop my instruction to be increasingly focused on information evaluation and relying less on lecture while including more active learning.

### **Professional development.**

I sought out professional development opportunities such as local and regional library instruction interest groups and other professional organizations. Networking within these groups connected me with instructional librarians from other institutions for me to bounce ideas off and even compare my progress in pedagogical development.

Attending national conferences such as ACRL and LOEX were mind blowing for me. At these conferences I was able to make my own connections between library instruction and instructional design. After making this connection I was more easily able to apply design thinking into the development of my library instruction lesson plans. This later brought me into the realm of critical pedagogy and critical librarianship.

Although going to state, regional, and national conferences were immensely helpful, just simply watching teaching faculty within the classroom helped me learn to be a better teacher. Some of the teaching faculty I worked with were absolutely masterful in the classroom being able to engage students in different ways and unafraid of when things didn't go as planned. I also learned from the teaching faculty who were not as good in the classroom. Taking mental notes on what they did wrong or executed badly and reflecting on how the situation could have been improved.

### **Limitations of small academic libraries.**

Working as an instructional librarian at a small college meant that all librarians did a little of most functions. Having to perform so many functions of the library only means that each librarian is not able to delve deeply into any single area. A larger library may be able to support an outreach librarian or social media librarian, and subject liaisons, whereas, a small library these jobs will be distributed among the limited staff or simply not be done.

When I was the primary instructional librarian, it was really difficult, if not impossible, for me to delve deeply into some subject areas. Providing library instruction to a wide variety of disciplines at all levels makes it impossible to become a true subject liaison in all disciplines. Instead of being an information expert in a handful of areas, I became an expert in generalized information searching. In many ways, this is a good thing for a new librarian needing to hone in on better searching skills. There were many times at the reference desk students would ask me for research help where I knew very little about the topic but was able to find an abundance of information on the topic.

Working at the primary instructional librarian, I got frustrated that there weren't many avenues for finding an in-house mentor to help me develop and learn as a librarian. I had to find other avenues for finding a mentor. Luckily, I found some librarian mentors through the professional development events and associations I participated in. These mentors were really helpful for me to learn, develop, and progress but being at different institutions slowed my professional development. I also found teaching mentors within the teaching faculty of the college I worked at. These mentors being separate from the library offered me insight into my own pedagogical practice and some even offered suggestions.

### **Clarifying career goals.**

Starting my career as a general practice academic librarian was something of a blessing in disguise because it allowed me to see the many different facets of academic librarianship. Without this experience I likely would not have been exposed to as many areas of librarianship that were not directly related to my position. This exposure has provided me with the opportunity to identify where I wanted my career in academic librarianship to go.

I realized that I really enjoyed teaching, engaging with students and teaching faculty, and participating with research and scholarly communication. Most importantly, I wanted to spend more of my time doing these things within a limited number of subject areas. I felt that I could be more effective as a librarian if I were able to spend more time learning and familiarizing with resources, content, and terminology of these specific areas.

### **Job hunting.**

With as many benefits of starting out in a small academic library, I knew it was not part of my long-term career aspirations. I felt that I would be a better professional fit at a larger institution rather than a smaller one because of the institutional focus and support for scholarly communication. Once I made the decision to make the transition to subject liaison librarianship, I needed to figure out a pathway to make this happen. The journey has been fun to say the least.

I started looking at job postings via the ALA Joblist to compare my skills and experience for posted positions around the country that would meet my criteria. Then, I compared the job posting requirements to my CV and started to find ways in my current position to make up where I was lacking. I needed more professional service on my CV so I ran for regional association office and won. I also needed to add to my scholarship. I found a way to get a column in a peer reviewed journal published and presented a poster on a project I collaborated on.

After not being successful in getting callbacks from interviews, I realized that I needed to rethink my strategy for getting into a larger library. I decided I would go about applying for a job at a branch campus of a larger university so that I could be seen as a semi-internal candidate for jobs that would come up at the main campus. Or, would be seen at other universities as having more experience with the bureaucracy of a larger institution.

Luckily, this worked. I applied for and accepted a position at a branch campus of Ohio University. I knew that I would have to stay in that position for a couple years before being able to begin applying again so that I would not look like I had a difficult time holding a position. While at the branch campus, I kept current with job postings while seeking out ways in which I could build upon my existing experience with scholarly communication, faculty collaboration, and other library projects.

Another benefit of reviewing job postings is that you can see current trends in hiring within the field. There was a considerable amount of positions that either had a second master's degree as a minimum requirement or as a preferred requirement. This made me realize that I needed to pursue another degree in order for my application to be competitive at many larger institutions. It is common for librarians to get the second degree in one of their subject disciplines. However, I chose not to go this route only because I wanted to have faculty within my liaison areas to see me as a peer. Being their student and librarian would make this relationship murky at best. Instead I decided to get a second master's of education in computer education and technology. The pursuit of this degree has been eye opening for me in learning about theoretical and practical applications of educational technology and the instructional design process.

### **Transitioning from a general practice to subject specialty.**

In the summer of 2016 I was finally hired as a social science librarian at the main campus of Ohio University. Specifically, I am the subject liaison to the political science, psychology, and public administration departments. Having been at two other libraries in my career at this point I was a little arrogant in my skill sets and abilities. For the most part, this is the first time I have ever worked with graduate level courses and many of these students need a higher level of support than what the typical college freshman or sophomore would require. I had to quickly get up to speed on what they needed.

With a bachelor's in political science, I was at least familiar with what research in the social sciences entailed but I still needed help in becoming more useful to faculty and upper-level students within my liaison areas. To an extent, I felt that I almost needed to re-learn librarianship in order to be successful in my new position. One of the biggest differences in my new position from previous two is that I am much more focused on providing library instruction for upper-level courses and rarely do library instruction for freshman courses. In fact, I will only provide instruction for freshman courses if they are within my liaison departments and if there is an assignment attached.

After starting in my new position, I interviewed the other subject liaisons I work with on how they went about engaging with their departments. I was a little surprised in how different each subject librarian went about this. These differences seemed to be based upon personality types. Some librarians I work with are very extroverted while I am much more introverted. So some of what I learned from these interviews would be very difficult for me to do, but I certainly could find creative ways in which I could adapt their strategies to fit my introverted personality.

I spent some time going through the departmental biographical pages of the faculty I work with to learn more about what their research areas are. Keep in mind there are hundreds of faculty and teaching assistants so I could never memorize everyone's individual research area. However, getting a general idea of the common areas of research will help me better understand the needs of each department.

Along with getting to know faculty research areas, I sent out departmental emails offering to meet anyone who would be willing to talk about how great the library is. Some faculty members responded and we were able to meet and discuss what we could do in collaboration with each other. I was able to

clarify what my role is at the library and what I can do for each of them. (No, I will not babysit your class when you're out of town.)

### **Professional development (again).**

Keeping up with library literature has been really helpful. Not just the general academic library literature but the library literature that is relevant to my liaison areas. Reading, learning, and adapting what other librarians are doing into my practice has helped me grow in my position. I also look at the literature in the fields I liaise with. I especially search for articles within subject databases with the search terms of "library OR librarian".

In actively participating in scholarly communication myself, I am able to speak to some of the pressures and frustrations in which faculty face. Although I am not a faculty-status librarian, I do value taking part in the conversation within my field. Asking faculty in my liaison areas to do research with me as a co-author has been fruitful in building positive relationships. Not only am I publishing and presenting with faculty but I am also able to experiment with different pedagogies in the library classroom and develop assessments that help me focus my teaching on what is unclear for students.

I have started to attend conferences in my liaison areas to gain a better understanding of the work that they do within their fields. Other subject librarians I work with have had positive experiences in learning more about the culture, research needs, and terminology that their liaison departments are most familiar with.

I continue to serve in multiple areas of the profession and to the University. Being in a large university allows for many more opportunities to serve the community outside of the library; however, it is easier to get frustrated within the bureaucracy of a larger system.

### **Conclusion.**

There are many pathways in going from a small library practicing general librarianship to a more narrowed subject liaison position in a larger library. That path I took is, by no means, the only or even, the best way to achieve this transition. Further, there is no reason to believe that one should make the transition to a larger library if they started out in smaller institution. Have a fulfilling and rewarding career in a small library.

No matter what your career goals are, I strongly recommend that you develop short and long term plans to achieve those goals. Most importantly, be willing to adjust these as circumstances change. Find someone who you trust to help you think through our career goals and block out some time every six months to review and revise your career goals.