

**PANEL TITLE:** Narrowing the Scope: Transitioning from general librarianship to specialized subject liaisons

**PAPER TITLE:** Managing Career Changes: Moving from Generalist Staff to Subject Tenure-Track Faculty

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### **Abstract**

The variety of work one can do as a librarian is nearly boundless, though this is often not understood by those entering the profession. Often, librarianship is broken into the segments that can be seen in our trade associations, such as academic, public, school, medical, and law. These designations, however, barely scratch the surface of the various sub-groups within the broader categories that one could choose to pursue. It is impossible for a library school to adequately prepare students for the very specific work they could end up doing once out in the profession. It is up to us, as librarians, to figure out the nuances of our specific jobs once we are working them.

This paper will discuss one academic librarian's journey moving from a very broad based generalist and practitioner position, to a very subject specific and research-based position. Content will include pros and cons of being staff vs. faculty, as well as a discussion of the differences in practicing librarianship and researching for tenure-track librarianship. Specific strategies for success will be discussed that will be applicable to other librarians who find themselves in the same situation, moving from one type of librarianship to another and having to learn the ropes all over again.

**Keywords:** subject librarian, academic libraries, career transition

### **Introduction**

As librarians, the type of work we can do is almost limitless, including career paths such as academic, public, corporate, law, medical, cataloging, instruction, archives, and more. Due to the varied nature of our profession, it is impossible for LIS programs to adequately prepare new libraries for all possibilities, instead often focusing on the generalities of librarianship.

Prior to becoming an academic librarian, I worked as a restaurant manager, steelworker, advertising account manager, and property manager. To say that I am adept at changing paths and learning new skills is an understatement. In 2011, I made the decision to start my journey towards librarianship, starting graduate school at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Though I had no prior library experience, I did not let this deter me, and landed an internship in the archives and special collections at Butler University. I loved working in the archives, processing collections and working on special digital projects. I was sure this was going to be the library path I would tread - that is, until I started looking at the number of archivists compared to the number of academic librarians. Ultimately, practicality won out, and in December, 2013, I began working at the Access Services Supervisor for the same library. This position gave me an excellent overview of how an academic library functions, and also allowed me to work on several special projects at both a library and a consortium level. All in all, it was a great way to learn the practical aspects of being a librarian who actually works in the library.

After graduating in May, 2014, I began looking for jobs with "librarian" in the title, as my position as Access Services Supervisor was considered non-librarian staff. Many of the job applications I saw at the time were very specialized, requiring experience in a specific subject, none of which I had. In May, 2015 I

finally found a position and started as the Information Services Librarian at Trine University. This was a staff librarian position, where I was officially the liaison to business and engineering. However, with only three librarians (including the director), functionally we were all generalists and worked with students from all areas of the university. Additionally, I was responsible for emerging technology, e-resources, systems administrator for the ILS and the website, library marketing, and much more. All three of us were regularly overwhelmed, with little time to focus on any one liaison area. Trine also was a teaching school, not a research school, so even the needs of engineering and business students were often general, rather than discipline specific. After this, I ended up in my current position as an Assistant Professor of Library Science and Business Information Specialist at Purdue University. This job varies in two primary ways from the other library positions I've held. One, I am very specifically a business librarian in this role, and two, I am tenure-track faculty, rather than staff. Both of these were big adjustments coming from a generalist staff position.

The faculty system at Purdue almost completely divorces the librarians from the library. While this is beneficial in giving the librarians the necessary time to pursue tenure, it is a very different type of librarianship from what I had been doing previously. The expectations of tenure include teaching, researching and publishing, performing engagement work, and mentoring undergraduate students. The librarianship pieces that we still perform are grouped together with teaching, in my case this is primarily collection development.

## **Making the Transition**

### *Reading*

To tackle becoming a subject specialist, I first took the time to understand the business resources. Though I had technically been liaison to business at my prior institutions, our resources were extremely limited, so arriving at Purdue I was overwhelmed by the available databases. Taking time to systematically familiarize myself with all of the databases helped me understand the scope of business research. Celia Ross' *Making Sense of Business Reference: A Guide for Librarians and Research Professionals* was also invaluable to me during this time. There are many American Library Association, and otherwise, published books on specific types of librarianship that can help anyone looking to deepen 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 me to learn the research and publication process.

### *Mentorship*

The biggest challenge in this role has been learning to be a researcher, as well as a librarian. At Purdue, librarians do very little with the day-to-day running of the library, all of which is handled by support staff. Instead, we focus time on teaching, including credit courses, scholarship and publication, engagement, such as committee work, and mentoring undergraduates. Though I had some experience teaching, research was not something I had done beyond assisting with one paper in graduate school. Ample research has been done on the benefit of mentoring to academic libraries (Culpepper, 2000; Ross, 2013), and I have found this to be a successful strategy for integrating into this very different and highly specific model of librarianship. This has included other tenure track faculty, my 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 (Miller & Benefiel, 1998; Cirasella & Smale, 2011). The pre-tenure library faculty in the Purdue Libraries have an informal group that meets monthly to discuss projects we are working on, challenges we may be having, and to find collaborators. Faculty receiving tenure will also often share their tenure documents with the group. The most important piece has been to find collaborators for researching and publishing. Though I

had taken one course on qualitative research during my MLS, and co-authored a paper with a professor, I had no experience actually doing this on my own. Finding more experienced collaborators really helped me learn the process. I'm also very fortunate in my position in that I am not the only business librarian. My colleagues have been very generous with their time, helping me with both onboarding at Purdue, and also learning more about business research. Shadowing another business librarian in her instruction was an excellent way to learn the resources she was recommending for different courses and projects, as well as how to adapt content for a semester long course.

### *Associations and Conferences*

Trade associations and conferences can be an excellent way to meet others in your area and learn about trending topics. As a business librarian, I have found the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) of the American Library Association (ALA) extremely helpful. Through this group, I have been exposed to upcoming trends and ideas in business librarianship, a group specifically for new business librarians, as well as a listserv where business librarians ask one another for help. Watching the questions and answers in the emails has taught me quite a bit about unexpected places to find information, and it has also been a great place to go for help when I hit a wall. One of my liaison areas is also Agricultural Economics, so I also joined the United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN), which has been a great research for agriculture information, with which I have no experience. I have also recently joined the Business & Finance section of the Special Libraries Association. Whatever type of librarianship you go into, there is likely an association with a section for you (if not an entire association).

### **Conclusion**

There are many paths a librarian can take in their journey. While my career has led me to become a tenure-track subject specialist, the tools and strategies outlined in this paper can be helpful for librarians moving from one type of librarianship to another, not just those who end up in this small niche. Librarians, on the whole, go into the field because of a love of lifelong learning. Rather than being intimidated by a change in positions or responsibilities, it can be far more productive to remember we can learn these new skills just as we can any other – it just may take some intentional work.

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