The Ambidextrous Librarian, or "You *Can* Teach a Middle-Aged Dog Some New Tricks!"

Mitchell J. Fontenot,
Guest Columnist

*Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Judith M. Nixon**, Head, Humanities, Social Sciences and Education Library, 504 W. State St. STEW, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907; e-mail: jnixon@ purdue.edu.*

***Mitchell J. Fontenot** is Information Literacy and Outreach Services Librarian, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.*

Sometimes a great reference librarian's performance begins to fall below expectations. Although the job of reference librarian is one of the best, burnout does happen. What do you do as head of reference when a good reference librarian runs smack into the face of real-live burnout? What do you do when he or she is just simply tired of looking for information, tired of teaching research skills, and showing this stress to users and coworkers? Although we have all felt moments of frustration ("If I get asked just one more time for . . ."), when the thought becomes a daily or hourly one, the time has come for the head of reference to begin the discussion about job or career changes. Understanding the long road ahead to finding a new match within the library or the profession will help reference managers. In this column, Mitchell Fontenot describes his journey down the path of finding a good match for himself. His personal story brings that to light while also showing how new learning challenges brought new energy. This is of timely interest to administrators and managers because within the next few years a large number of librarians will retire, opening up many higher level positions. Mid-career librarians will be in the prime position to apply for these jobs, if they are willing to make some career changes.

I am always on the lookout for ideas for future columns. Ideas on the drawing board include outreach services and new software for developing tutorials that can be put on the library's webpage. If you have experiences with any of these or other practical ideas for providing reference service, please e-mail me.—*Editor*

Many librarians are currently entering mid-career, a time often fraught with burnout and thoughts of career change. Simultaneously, many librarians from the baby boom generation will be retiring.[1] There is also a shortage of young people entering the profession, and recruitment is aggressive.[2] Although this is a concern for the profession there is a positive aspect to this shortage also. These openings will create many career-change opportunities for those in their mid-career. I offer my own personal experience of switching from law librarianship to general academic reference/instruction librarianship (and subsequently outreach services after two years) as an example of the reasons and benefits of such a career change. The intent of this article is to encourage both mid-career librarians and their supervisors or mentors to think seriously about the benefits of career changes.

There are not many articles written on career changes for librarians, so although it may not be a new idea or experience for librarians, thinking, talking, and writing about it is

relatively rare. Dougherty's article on a post-retirement career is an excellent example of how a librarian can do other things after years of experience in the profession and how best to effect change.[3] Our field lends itself to alternative endeavors not necessarily within the confines of a traditional library position, but by virtue of experience in management, budgeting, supervision, and so on. On the other end of the career spectrum, Newhouse and Spisak's article (beautifully entitled "Fixing the First Job") expounds about the challenges and opportunities for new professionals who rethink their original career goals after the first year or two on the job.[4] In a very entertaining article, Johnson writes about the mid-career change of a librarian to a archivist and from a small college to a large university library.[5] Albanese's article on librarians' power to recognize change and actively create new career paths shows how we can form our own career destiny outside of the traditional library position.[6] Couple this with the imminent surge in retirements of librarians and the paucity of "middle" aged and "middle" experienced librarians in an article by Curran, these articles detail the almost limitless possibilities for professional growth and movement at any time in one's career.[7] The Spring 2002 issue of *Library Trends*, "Midlife Career Decisions of Librarians," does an excellent job of covering many different aspects of change for mid-career librarians.[8]

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

After a fifteen-year career in law librarianship, half in reference and half in middle management, and approaching the age of forty, I decided that it was time for a change. I took a one-year temporary position at the main university library doing reference and instruction. This temporary position afforded me the opportunity to experience a career change and to work with undergraduates as a reference/instruction librarian. I enjoyed it immensely. Another very unique temporary library situation arose when a combined community college and public library hired me as a reference/instruction librarian for nine months. Edward's article on moving from academic to public librarianship can be very helpful for guidance through this kind of transition.[9] By the time this position had come to an end, I was offered and accepted a tenure-track reference/instruction position at Louisiana State University. It was time to begin all over again in the field of librarianship.

THE CHANGES, THE CHALLENGES, THE SHIFTING OF GEARS

Shifting from a very specialized aspect of librarianship to a broader field—law librarian to reference librarian—was a major change. I embraced the massive amount of new knowledge that came along with dealing with a variety of subjects, as opposed to a single subject. The change from serving a primary clientele of law students to a larger variety of patrons was a refreshing one. I found undergraduates to be more pliable and open to new knowledge. To get more in touch with this community, I queried my teenaged nieces and nephews to find out what they and their fellow students were interested in and how they approached learning. I spoke to undergraduates at the reference desk, in the quadrangle, at the union, and other places to ascertain their vision of college life and learning. I started listening to the college radio station to hear what these students were discussing. I read the student newspaper to get a feel for what was going on in their world. While both law libraries I had worked for were open to the public, I felt the interaction of public patrons more keenly at a main university library. I always try to welcome public patrons who feel that the library is exclusively open to the students and let them know that we are open to the public. I constantly remind myself that a patron may be touching a computer for the first time and might not have ever searched a database, or, for that matter, even truly know what one is. I constantly draw upon the knowledge of my coworkers and public library colleagues to best ascertain how to serve my ever-expanding clientele. Now I am able to learn something new every day and I love it. The added bonus of teaching was a godsend. As of the writing of this article, I am preparing to teach my first online course after teaching "live" for the past three years. I resisted it at first, not wanting to give up the face-to-face interaction with students that I enjoy. In working with and looking at my new lesson plans, I realize that this new assignment is changing my way of thinking and researching. It is also making me rethink how to approach teaching to Generation Y and that online teaching may not necessarily lack for student interaction. I look forward to reporting and writing on this subject in a future paper. Lewis and Scarth have each written an excellent article on technology and the mid-career and mid-life librarian.[10]

The biggest challenge I faced was learning how to write a research paper, since the responsibility of professional publishing comes with a tenure-track position. I started by writing about a topic near and dear to my heart. The paper was rejected. I went into my first academic research paper with the attitude that since I was an English literature major (albeit from twenty years earlier), writing a research paper for a peer-reviewed, refereed, professional journal would be a snap. Unfortunately, I could not have been more wrong. I had not fully prepared myself or truly begun learning how to write a research paper. I did not prevail upon the expertise of coworkers who had published because I believed I already knew how to do this.

How did I begin to fix this first disaster? First and foremost, I practiced humility. My recommendation for those new to the research process: Ask questions of your colleagues. While some may be younger and have less experience in librarianship, they may have more experience in publishing. I also recommend reading a book such as Rachel Singer Gordon's *The Librarian's Guide to Writing for Publication*, and taking a class (formal or informal) on scholarly and professional publishing.[11] Another recommendation for those new to writing is to do your research. When you begin going through journals for possible submissions, read and reread their sections on instructions for authors. Accept your mistakes, and

if you are given the opportunity to rewrite the article, swallow your pride and do it. My second rejected paper was easier. The editors did not feel it was appropriate for their publication, so I went back to the drawing board. A colleague passing by the reference desk suggested a publication that I would have never considered, and my paper is being given strong consideration from this publication as we speak. As a follow up to all of this, the third and fourth times were the charm, and I was published in our state organization publication for librarians the past winter and will be published in a national publication in the fall.

What has helped immeasurably over the past two years has been the support of colleagues and the opportunity for new educational opportunities. If one is not flexible enough to embrace new ways of thought and learning, a career change from one aspect of librarianship to another may be very difficult. If the librarian has an "I know it all" or "I've done my time" attitude, then it may be pointless to change career paths. I have learned a great deal from my colleagues, neighbors, and undergraduate students in my classes over the past three years. Their knowledge of and exposure to technology has far exceeded mine due to their individual experiences. I have learned greatly from their discussions of computer hardware and software, iPods, Blackberrys, video games, cell phones, etc. How students and faculty approach research and technology at various ages and stages in their career (generational thought or research as I refer to it) is the study of another article I am writing and hopefully, a future book. We undervalue ourselves greatly as a profession and perhaps spend too much time trying to bolster our image as opposed to showing by example.

WHAT TO DO, WHAT TO DO?

Read and keep up with the literature. Harhai has written an excellent article on popular self-help books.[12] An article by Zamon explains how librarians' mid-life career choices are not that much different from other professions.[13] In the first three years of my new profession I have learned to hit the ground running, selecting those journals and ideas that interest me. I talk to my colleagues, mentors, and supervisors. I also take courses offered through my employer to learn new techniques and ways of approaching teaching as well as learning. I attend seminars, webinars, conferences, and workshops, and I am active on local, state, and national committees. I talk and interact with the systems staff and learn about the intricacies of technology, whether I use it directly or not. As librarians and professionals, we have the power to effect change within our organizations as well as within ourselves. We should not undervalue what we can contribute to society as well as what we can contribute to ourselves in the way of professional growth, challenge, and change. We have the power to remold and reinvigorate our careers and the profession itself at any stage if we choose to do so. As of the writing of this article, I have become the outreach services librarian and have learned that a new position can also do a great deal toward invigorating a career. Be flexible about job rotation if it is the right thing and job for you, and read Malinski's article on the subject.[14] Approach ambidexterity and reinvigoration of a career with open mindedness and flexibility as well as intelligent planning. As librarians and professionals, we are capable of both.

References

1. Rebecca T. Lenzini and Carolyn Lipscomb, "The Graying of the Library Profession: A Survey of Our Professional Association and Their Responses," *Searcher* 10, no. 7 (July/Aug. 2002): 88–97.
2. Norman Oder, "IMLS: $21M to Recruit Librarians," *Library Journal* 130, no. 14 (Sept. 1, 2005): 17.
3. Richard M. Dougherty, "Being Successful (Nimble and Agile) in the Current Turbulent Environment," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27, no. 4 (July 2001): 263–67.
4. Ria Newhouse and April Spisak, "Fixing the First Job," *Library Journal* 129, 13 (Aug. 2004), 44–46.
5. Timothy J. Johnson, "Making it to the Major Leagues: Career Movement between Library and Archival Professions and from Small College to Large University Libraries," *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 614–30.
6. Andrew Richard Albanese, "Opportunity in the Air: Facing Sweeping Change Informational Professionals Blaze New Career Paths," *Library Journal* 128, no. 12 (July 2002): 36–38.
7. William M. Curran, "Succession: The Next Ones at Bat," *College & Research Libraries* 64, no. 2 (Mar. 2002): 134–40.
8. "Midlife Career Decisions of Librarians," themed issue, *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002). This column references several articles contained in this issue.
9. Ronald G. Edwards, "Migrating to Public Librarianship; Depart on Time to Ensure a Smooth Flight," *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 631–39.
10. Marilyn P. Lewis, "The Effects of Technology on Midcareer Librarians," *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 717–24; Linda Loos Scarth, "Are We There Yet?: Facing the Never-Ending Speed and Change of Technology in Midlife," *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 681–86.
11. Rachel Singer Gordon, *The Librarian's Guide to Writing for Publication* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2004).
12. Marilyn Kay Harhai, "Maybe It's Not Too Late to Join the Circus: Books for Midlife Career Management," *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 640–50.
13. Candy Bogar Zamon, "Midlife Career Choices: How Are They Different from Other Career Choices?" *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 665–72.
14. Richard M. Malinski, "Job Rotation in an Academic Library: Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't," *Library Trends* 50, no.4 (Spring 2002): 673–80.