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# From Reference Librarian to Interim Dean

## *A Journey of Comparisons and Contrasts*

**Mark Stover,**  
Guest Columnist

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The path to becoming an academic library dean is not prescriptive nor necessarily linear. Each ascends to that post in a unique way; all come from different backgrounds and experiences. For some, such a position is a goal from the start of their careers; they lay careful groundwork and make strategic choices to chart their course. In other cases, the decision to move into management evolves as the career unfolds, making it seem logical or even necessary to consider moving on to an administrative opportunity. For many, taking on a senior leadership role is more accidental or incidental—being in the right place at the right time; being recognized for past work and tapped from within; being asked to step in to fill a need in the organization. In the following article, Mark Stover shares an account of his particular progression, with observations recalled along the way. He cites the importance of recognizing opportunities, cultivating support, and having a good mentor. Like many, Stover came to senior management from the public services side of the house and includes an interesting comparison and contrast between being a reference librarian and a dean.—*Editor*

**A**s a reference librarian for the first twenty years of my career, I never thought that I would become a library dean by 2011. My primary objective was to work directly with students, either one-to-one at the reference desk, one-to-one in research consultations, or one-to-many in library instruction. Information literacy for the students was my goal, and I did not (and perhaps could not) see myself as an administrator for a large university library. It seemed unrelated to and disconnected from the “real world” of librarianship, which to me meant working in close proximity to students who needed my help and who gave me that wonderful sense of immediate gratification when they thanked me, sometimes profusely, for the assistance that I provided.

All of that started to change in early 2005 when I was approached by the associate dean of the library at San Diego State University to take over the reins of the reference division from the retiring head of reference. My first reaction was to turn down the offer. After all, I enjoyed what I was doing, had been promoted to the highest rank that library faculty could achieve at my university, and did not sense the “calling” of library leadership. Perhaps more importantly, I wasn’t sure I could do the job. My predecessor once told me that supervising fifteen or so unionized and tenured librarians would be akin to herding cats. In addition, there were some thorny personnel issues that had gone unresolved for years. On the other hand, who could blame those around me for thinking that I might be interested in management? I had worked as

the library director of a very small academic institution for a few years and was none the worse for it. I had earned a doctorate in the 1990s, which does communicate to some people that a librarian might have aspirations beyond the reference desk. I had even published articles and given presentations on various facets of running a library, including a book entitled *Leading the Wired Organization*.

I relented and accepted the position of head of reference in 2005. The transition was an easy one to make, given that I had the support of my colleagues, encouragement from library administration, and a job description that, along with serving as head of reference, included much of my former work in reference, instruction, and collection development. Being head of reference, at least at my university, involved a fair amount of logistical juggling and running meetings but not much in the way of long-term strategic planning. I worked with campus human resources, the staff employees' union, and other library managers to address the staff problems that existed. However, I found that there were few hard decisions to make, since most questions of substance could be answered through group consensus at reference meetings or through finessing the problem in smaller subcommittees. During this time I began to serve on the dean's advisory council, along with other heads of departments in the library. I enjoyed my two year stint as head of reference, and I learned a great deal, but in the deep recesses of my mind I realized that I might be ready for more challenges in the near future.

Those challenges came in 2007 when the dean of the library asked me to become the Assistant University Librarian for Research Services, a new position that was a hodge-podge of responsibilities including government grants, special collections, collection development, and facilities. Along with these duties, the position required that I leave my faculty position and join the upper echelons of management. While I would have retreat rights to the librarian ranks, I would need to leave the collective bargaining comfort of the faculty union and serve at the pleasure of the university president. In other words, as many of my colleagues jokingly reminded me, I would be going over to the dark side.

While some of the same fears and insecurities about management still plagued me, I chose to accept the offer and move into the new AUL role. I was sorry to leave the collegiality of the library faculty but was excited about learning the mysteries of library administration. While some academic library administrators continue to work a few hours at the reference desk, I decided not to do so based on advice from several mentors. There are advantages and disadvantages to an administrator "working in the trenches," but with a busy schedule and increased responsibilities, it seemed prudent to withdraw from my previous librarian duties. There was another reason, too. In my library there is a sharp distinction between faculty and administration. Part of this chasm stems from contractual issues, but much of it comes from a long tradition of mistrust and skepticism on both sides. Thus, while some librarians were disappointed that I chose not to work any hours on the reference desk, others were resentful when

I would occasionally give my opinion on collection development decisions. Divisions like this are difficult to heal, but time and good faith efforts do tend to bring about incremental increases in trust among members of a divided community. While working at the reference desk as an administrator might have been one way to build this trust, I chose to find other ways to repair the breach.

After one year as an AUL, my dean unexpectedly left to take another position. As often happens in these situations, the associate dean was promoted to interim dean, and I was thrust into the job of interim associate dean, where I remained for over two years. Given that I had a positive working relationship with the new interim dean, and given that I was hoping for other challenges and responsibilities, I welcomed the new role. I continued to perform some of the same jobs I had in the AUL position, but I was also given a multitude of new responsibilities. These included many more direct and indirect reports, oversight of the library faculty tenure and promotion process, and even some fundraising assignments. When I was hired as an AUL, strategic planning was placed in my portfolio, and this mandate continued to be a priority.

One of the most challenging facets of my tenure as interim associate dean was managing change. As a reference librarian, and even as head of reference, I tended to view long-term change as something that evolved on its own and incrementally. Short-term change was something that librarians could more easily control, but long-term change was unpredictable. As a library administrator, I still think that there is no crystal ball and that speculative predictions of the future library will be inexact at best. However, I also came to believe that long range planning is vital to the library enterprise. Perhaps the most difficult part of the strategic planning process is convincing others that paradigmatic change for libraries in the twenty-first century is absolutely necessary, and that if we do not plan for it, it will happen anyway, and it will occur with more negative consequences than we might imagine. Persuasion is a slippery tool. If we try to win over others with over-the-top rhetoric and bombast, we run the risk of overstating our case. If we unilaterally dictate change ("my way or the highway"), we lose goodwill and trust from those who will need to implement the change, and we ultimately will fail in our attempts to effect successful transformation. If we try to persuade through sly remarks and coy conversations, we appear to be Machiavellian, and we again lose credibility. While I believe that subtlety has its place, the most powerful tool in my bag of persuasive tricks is sustained, straightforward conversations (preferably over coffee) with key stakeholders. These informal discussions will build bonds of trust that will later pay off when emotional issues arise over painful changes that ultimately must take place. This is not to say that there is no place for town hall meetings, teams, committees, or small groups, for these too are vital components of bringing about progress. However, I would posit that the cornerstone of persuading library staff of the necessity for transformative change is the one-on-one conversation in an informal setting.

In late 2010, I became interim dean, and my purview

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of responsibilities changed yet again. Thankfully I had been mentored well by the two previous deans, so the inscrutable nature of library administration was less mystifying than it might otherwise have been. A bigger office, a larger salary, and the power to make independent decisions—were these amenities worth the stress that came with the new position? Each new dean or director must answer that question for himself or herself, but for me, especially since my own journey has been so steep and fast, the jury is still out. Still, I can say that my passion for leadership has only grown during my path from reference librarian to library dean. It certainly helped to have supportive co-laborers, not only in my own institution but also in my modest network of professional colleagues cobbled together over the years. It also eased my transition to have recent experiences on the front lines of reference work. There is nothing better for an administrator than to remember how it feels to be in the sensible shoes of a reference librarian. On the other hand, there is nothing worse than having a manager who lacks empathy due to his or her distance from or lack of experience with day-to-day library work.

I'll end this column by sketching out some comparisons and contrasts between my work as a reference librarian and my work as a dean. In terms of similarities, both the librarian and the dean need people skills, even though the reasons these skills are vital vary greatly from one position to the other. Both the reference librarian and the library dean must deal well with change, the librarian from a tactical, day-to-day vantage point and the dean from a strategic, long-range perspective. Both the librarian and the dean must know how to communicate well. Navigating the reference interview, which is good communication at its essence is a critical skill whether at the reference desk, online during the reference chat, or in the librarian's office during a research consultation.

The refined communication skills of a reference librarian have served me well as an administrator, whether I was clarifying the expectations of the provost, cultivating a donor, or sharing my strategic vision with library staff.

But there are differences as well between a reference librarian and a library director. Some are obvious, like fundraising, public relations, and interactions with campus executives. The typical reference librarian generally doesn't have to work with donors or the university president, especially on a large campus. Some differences, however, are more subtle. For example, most front line librarians rarely think about the strategic aspects of long-range planning, and, if I may generalize from my own experience, they often have little respect for such processes. As a young reference librarian, and even later as a more experienced head of reference, I was concerned about the tactical, day-to-day work of the reference desk, learning new database interfaces and keeping abreast of the latest reference sources so that I could better serve students. I didn't have time to worry about what the library might look like in ten years, much less plan for different scenarios. I was too busy keeping my head above water. As a library administrator, my role has been reversed. Strategic planning is a crucial part of my job, and much as I might wish otherwise, I must delegate tactical implementation to others.

In the final analysis, the work of a reference librarian prepared me well for library management. Some requirements for administrators demand on-the-job training and cannot be acquired at the reference desk. On the other hand, multiple competencies, including clear communication and interpersonal skills, are all transferable from one domain to the other. If my case is any indication, reference librarians who seek to become library leaders will encounter some challenges but will also find many opportunities for advancement.