
Making the Leap

One Librarian's Experience

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Libraries have long attracted staff, interns, and other individuals who seek careers in the information professions. As environments, they afford exceptional opportunities as training grounds in many areas of endeavor. But the library setting is only half the equation—the interest, initiative, and creativity of the individual is what can ultimately tip the balance and make a paraprofessional experience into something much more. In this column, Michelle Guittar shares the approach she took to manage her early career development. Guittar offers a compelling perspective and good advice to aspiring librarians and others about how to maximize a semiprofessional experience.—Editor

MAKING THE LEAP: ONE LIBRARIAN'S EXPERIENCE

In a *Library Journal* article in 2008, Anne Woodsworth stated, “there is virtually no career path for [a library assistant]”—the only way to advance one’s professional career within the library would be to pursue the master’s degree.¹ The same opinion appears in a comic strip from *Unshelved* author Bill Barnes, in which a woman sitting behind a library reference desk confesses to a friend she is thinking about enrolling in library school. Her friend says to her, “What do you mean? Aren’t you already a librarian?” She replies, “What? No, I just work here! Librarians have master’s degrees!”² In the world of the comic strip, library assistants are those who “just work” at the library and librarians are the careered professionals, shouldered with the benefit and burden of being part of the broader profession.

While traditionally the great divide between librarians and paraprofessionals has been the attainment of a master’s degree in library science, this distinction can no longer be taken for granted. Data from the 2010–11 *Occupational Outlook Handbook* suggests that while job prospects are generally favorable for librarians given the number of workers that will retire in the upcoming years, “Jobseekers may face strong competition for jobs, especially early in the decade, as many people with master’s degrees in library science compete for a limited number of available positions.”³ For this reason, although library school students or recent graduates may have received the necessary educational qualifications for professional positions, what they often lack is the job experience to distinguish themselves as good candidates for those positions. Paraprofessional positions can serve as an excellent way to acquire the skills necessary to eventually attain a professional

position, but in occupying them, library assistants become liminal figures: not quite “just” paraprofessionals; not yet librarians.

I was one of these paraprofessionals. I started working as a library assistant when I entered library school, and I remained a library assistant for nearly two years after I finished my degree. Working in an academic library, while also taking courses that focused on academic librarianship, enriched both my position and my coursework. Because I received my master of science in library and information science through a distance-learning program, I was able to attend school part-time while I continued working full-time. Although my job description included secretarial work and office tasks, I also was required to provide departmental reference service, maintain a current serials collection, open shipments from vendors, and serve as the “PC liaison” for my department. I chose to take courses in reference, cataloging, collection development, and digital libraries, all areas that broadened my understanding of my immediate job duties and gave me a glimpse into how those duties differed from those of professional librarians. I also was able to work on class projects that were related to my work at an academic research library, which helped me directly or tangentially apply what I learned in classes to my real-world work experience. While I did take a few courses that weren’t directly related to my position, I chose them strategically, with an eye toward the kinds of professional positions I might think about applying for after graduation. Because of this informal coordination between my coursework and job experience, I used graduate school to enrich my job experience as a paraprofessional, while also building the necessary educational qualifications I would need to pursue professional librarian positions.

Given that librarianship was my chosen field, even as a paraprofessional, I never thought of my position as a job—it was the start of a career. My position provided me the opportunity to grow professionally: to cultivate broad expertise in different areas, collaborate on a range of projects across the library, and become familiar with the particulars of the organizational culture of academic and research libraries. I started doing reference at a departmental service desk, but eventually also worked at the library’s central Information Commons and Reference desks. While my job duties included some participation in student orientation events on a departmental level, I volunteered to assist with student orientation tours and events that fell outside my department as well. Participating in such service initiatives made me more familiar not only with the library but also to other staff and librarians, and that led me to serve on the library’s staff association and be invited to participate in the work of task forces and committees. In every part of my job description, I actively tried to grow my experience beyond what was initially required.

When pursuing these educational and service opportunities, I also focused on broadening my own skills. When I first participated in an outreach event, I began to learn how events are planned and executed. When I sat at the reference desk, I focused on improving my reference skills in a

variety of disciplines. When my job duties required me to be the PC liaison, I pursued projects and learning opportunities in the Digital Collections department to become more familiar with software, hardware, and projects to which I had not previously been exposed. Serving on committees, and eventually becoming chair of a major cross-divisional committee, helped me to learn how to manage projects and gain a broader understanding of how an academic library functions administratively. I considered myself involved in an informal apprenticeship, and as a library school graduate new to the field, I committed to learning everything I could about academic librarianship, even if I had to go outside my job duties to do it. I viewed my position as a launching pad from which I could actively consider options for my future career as a professional librarian.

While I would recommend that any hopeful academic librarian eagerly volunteer for opportunities that interest them, it is not all about unbridled enthusiasm. Attitude counts. Although I was not a librarian, I always tried to behave like a professional. While seeking to improve upon my work and broaden my understanding of the library and of academic librarianship, I also tried to maintain a professional, positive attitude. I took my position seriously and tried to act like a professional librarian. Among my colleagues, I strove to be open, honest, and trustworthy, and bring people together rather than keep them apart. It is worth mentioning here that, like the friend in Barnes’ comic strip, library patrons are not usually aware of any difference in status between paraprofessional staff and librarians. Patrons believe that because you work at a library, you know about the library and its resources. Working at a reference or service desk implies that you will be able to provide professional service and answer questions—or, if it is required, to be able to direct the patron to an expert. By providing any good service, you demonstrate to your library’s patrons (and to your supervisors) that you are a valuable, credible employee, regardless of your professional status within an institution. If you act professionally, library patrons will respect you as an authority, and know to come back to you again when they need more assistance.

Supervisors and administrators have a great opportunity to encourage pre-librarian semi-paraprofessionals to be engaged with the field by encouraging them to seek out connections to broaden their experience and skills and treat them as resources to be cultivated. I found mentorship from such colleagues to be invaluable, as a young proto-librarian, to help me find my way at one institution as well as in the profession as a whole. When I began job searching, I set up lunches and coffee with the librarians I knew to talk with them about their work and professional experience and to listen to their suggestions about what I could be doing better or more of to improve my career prospects. There’s a place for peer mentorship as well. I was not alone at my institution as a “semiprofessional,” and I saw colleagues who attended library school get promoted, move on to other libraries (academic or other), or change fields entirely. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* notes, “Even though people with a master’s in library science

may have trouble finding a job as a librarian, their research and analytical skills are valuable for jobs in a variety of other fields, such as market researchers or computer and information systems managers.”⁴ While many of those colleagues (like me) may have started out thinking they wanted to go into a specific library or field within librarianship, the job climate asked them to be enterprising, to take stock of their background and skills, and to seek out a better fit for themselves. These colleagues were great support for me during my job search because they encouraged me to be similarly creative and avoid becoming too narrowly focused on any one kind of librarian position. These mentors—be they supervisors, colleagues, administrators, or fellow students—all helped me broaden my view of the field outside of my position and department and encouraged my personal development as a professional librarian.

While enthusiastic semiprofessional library assistants may have much to offer their place of employment, there is of course a flipside to all that professional development: they are gaining experience that prepares them to become librarians and vacate their paraprofessional positions. I was grateful that I had a supportive supervisor who encouraged me to work on projects in the library and pursue professional development opportunities, all the while knowing that doing so would eventually lead me to outgrow my position. However, even though I found a job outside of the institution where I started my career, my former colleagues haven’t gone away—we’re still exchanging emails, meeting up socially, and talking about our work—and trying to build each other up, all the while thinking about opportunities to collaborate and expand the reach of our own work. For all librarians, new and seasoned, encouraging library assistants to be engaged in the profession is equivalent to asking them to consider

the bigger picture, to ponder where the profession has been and where it’s headed, and to desire to be a part of that—in short, to encourage them to fall in love with librarianship as a profession—and to eventually become not simply librarians, but better librarians. Regardless of where they end up working, they will be a part of librarianship, and librarianship will benefit from their presence.

What can liminal, semiprofessional paraprofessionals do to distinguish themselves? Working earnestly, striving to understand how the position fits into the library as a whole, and seeking out professional development opportunities will allow you to maximize a semiprofessional experience. If you are eligible for leave time or other professional development support, or if tuition benefits are available to you, do not wait until you are a librarian to attend conferences or take courses. If you have an idea worth writing about, try to get published or pursue projects outside the narrow scope of your job duties, perhaps working with a collaborator from your institution or elsewhere. Simply by virtue of your employment in the library, you have the opportunity to contribute to your workplace and to the broader profession. Do not let yourself be pigeonholed as a paraprofessional—after all, you *are* a librarian, even if you are not a professional one yet!

References

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