Academic? Corporate? Public? All of the Above!
A Preliminary Look at Librarianship Career Path Movement

Tina P. Franks, MLS
Head, Architecture Library / The Ohio State University Libraries

Abstract

Whether Dewey or Library of Congress, librarians excel at classification. We often label our librarianship by the type of library we work within – academic, corporate or public. The knowledge gained through a Master of Library Science (MLS) program prepares librarians to work in a variety of library environments since the foundations of librarianship offer universal application.

While some librarians spend their librarianship career in one type of library, others may travel between library environments to gain a wider range of experiences. Librarianship diversification can be a key factor in developing a robust professional portfolio and building personal job sustainability.

Introduction

How diversified is your librarianship portfolio? For this pilot study, librarians at The Ohio State University (OSU) were classified as having worked solely in an academic library environment or having worked in other library environments. The analysis helps to identify movement between library types in these librarians’ career paths.

While there has been discussion throughout the years within the library field regarding librarians moving among library environments there is often a lack of robust quantitative results tracking such movement. The discussion of librarian mobility and the interest in librarianship diversification includes the prevalent use of using the library environment to define the work librarians perform.
Paul Burnam, a former librarian working in a public library who moved into an academic environment, wrote, “If librarians make a sincere and thoughtful effort to consider one another’s value to the profession as a whole and not solely on the basis of the type of library they serve, then we can dispense with assigning a pejorative meaning to the words: “academic,” “public,” “school,” and “special” (Burnam 1991, 12).

There are articles addressing librarian movement from public to academic libraries (e.g. Hall 2003, 154), however, there is often a lack of discussion regarding other possible movements among library environments. Rimland and Masuchika (Rimland 2008, 321) co-authored an article discussing the transition to corporate librarianship.

I have moved between libraries which have included public, corporate and now academic environments. Upon my current academic appointment, some colleagues pointed out that I was “different” because I was not an academic librarian. This inspired me to seek out whether I was a rare or unique case among my fellow colleagues or were there others who also had prior librarianship experience outside of academia.

**Methods**

Publicly available information about librarians at OSU was collected in December 2014 from self-reporting websites. The websites included LinkedIn, Research in View and *News Notes*, a newsletter for employees of the OSU Libraries.

Collected data was used to categorize 62 faculty librarians to identify those who worked only in academic libraries and those who had prior non-academic library experience. Ten librarians were excluded from analysis due to the lack of an MLS, equivalent librarianship degree or non-participation in the self-reporting websites.

Data for the remaining 52 faculty librarians was collected and placed into an Excel spreadsheet which included year of MLS granted, years of academic librarianship, years of public librarianship and years of special/corporate librarianship. The years of experience was calculated as the difference between the year in which the MLS degree was granted and 2014. Each MLS job position or appointment was then reviewed and categorized as academic, special/corporate,
public or non-MLS. The results provide a glimpse into the diversification of MLS librarianship at OSU.

**Research**

An MLS profile was developed through the collected data. Although the 52 faculty librarians average 16 years of post-MLS professional experience, longevity within librarianship spanned four decades. The 52 librarians included 38 female librarians and 14 male librarians.

The newest librarian earned an MLS in 2011 and had only three years of MLS experience, in stark contrast to the most senior librarian, who earned an MLS in 1973 and had 41 years of librarianship.

The most common years for earning MLS degrees were 1989 and 2001, which again provided a span of double-digit experience (13-25) years of experience in librarianship.

A librarianship environment profile (Figure 1) was developed through the collected data. The 52 librarians had a total of 877 years of MLS librarianship. The 52 librarians had a combined total of 833 years of academic library experience. Non-MLS experience or employment gaps resulted in 133 reported years.

![Environment Profile](image)

**Figure 1: Environment Profile**
There were 20 librarians who reported continuous academic librarianship which represents 38% of the total librarians. This group of librarians included 13 females or approximately 34% of the total females. Within the same group of librarians, seven male librarians, representing 50 of the total males, reported continuous academic librarianship.

A diversified librarianship profile (Figure 2) was developed from the collected data. Eight librarians reported prior experience outside of academic librarianship which accounts for 15.4% of the 52 librarians. Seven of the eight librarians with diversified portfolios were female.

![Diversified Librarianship Profile](image)

Five of the 52 librarians reported a total of 27 years of experience working in special/corporate libraries. Three of the 52 librarians claimed a total of 17 years of work experience in public libraries. Although the library environments often represent stark contrasts, the number of years these librarians reported working within them were very similar. The maximum number of years reported by librarians working in special/corporate librarianship was 11 years. Librarians working in public libraries reported a maximum of eight years of experience.
The five librarians reporting they had special/corporate library experience prior to their current academic appointment made up 9.6% of the total librarians. Only 3.8% of the total (two librarians) reported they had previous public library experience prior to their academic librarianship appointment. I was the only librarian who reported librarianship experience in special/corporate and public library environments prior to an academic appointment.

Perhaps more surprising, is five of the eight librarians (62.5%) with diversified librarianship experience were in managerial or administrative positions. Two librarians held associate director appointments and three served as department heads.

Librarians at OSU are tenure-track faculty. The collected data revealed the eight librarians with diversified portfolios included two tenured professors, three tenured associate professors and three untenured assistant professors.

**Discussion**

As this study reports, the majority of OSU librarians (84.6%) have worked solely in an academic library environment throughout their careers. This pilot study does not delve into the reasons for selecting academic librarianship nor reasons they have remained in academic librarianship.

This study also identified current academic librarians with previous librarianship experience working in corporate/special and public library environments. While this study reviewed only library environments that fit within the categories of academic, corporate/special and public, there are other types of library environments not included in the analysis such as K-12 librarianship.

There can be a variety of factors that can trigger mobility and they include situations within or outside the librarian’s control. Some librarians may seek out different library environments for better opportunities which could include better lifestyle offerings such as employment benefits, increased salary and promotions.

A need for new challenges, different clientele, different technology or an opportunity to better utilize subject expertise and knowledge may lead some librarians to seek out different library environments. Others may be forced to find
alternative library environments due to workforce reductions, job elimination or forced relocation (e.g. spousal transfers).

When librarians decide to move into a new library environment they may experience barriers which may be self-imposed or imposed by the hiring library. In an article co-authored by Saunders and Jordan, the authors noted that “…library students are often encouraged to choose a career path … that focuses on one setting, and professional librarians may encounter resistance when they try to move from one setting after several years of experience in the other.” (Saunders 2013, 216).

Some librarians may feel their MLS coursework did not prepare them to work in a different environment. For example, a children’s librarian may have focused her coursework on public libraries and youth services. She may choose to impose a self-barrier by not applying for corporate or academic library vacancies since she has only worked in public libraries with children.

Hiring libraries may also impose barriers within the job vacancy announcements requiring years of experience within their type of library therefore excluding candidates with other librarianship experience. The children’s librarian in the previous example would not meet a requirement for academic library experience and may not make it through the initial screening conducted by the human relations department or the search committee members.

There are some best practices to use when seeking a job in a library environment that is different than your current position. When applying for vacancies, use the hiring library’s vocabulary (ex. continuations vs standing orders) to describe your librarianship experience. Drawing parallels from previous work to the new position and explaining how your experience will provide for a smooth transition may be beneficial throughout the hiring process.

Librarians seeking to transition into a different library environment may find it beneficial to connect the dots for search committee members or human resources staff who don’t know what “other” librarians do. Once the interview process is underway, it may be helpful to identify which responses during the screening phase triggered an invitation to advance to the next level of interviews.

There are best practices to help ensure candidates experience a smooth transition into a new library environment. Within the new library environment, identify colleagues who successfully transitioned from a similar type of library
environment. These types of coworkers can provide helpful insight and assistance for successfully navigating through the orientation process. Connecting with a mentor can also provide support throughout the transition phase.

One method to introduce your previous librarianship skill set and experience to your new coworkers would be to schedule informal meetings with key colleagues. For example, I scheduled “Tenure Tips for Tina” coffee and lunch meetings with several librarian colleagues upon arrival at my new library environment since navigating the tenure process was a new component to my librarianship responsibilities.

Sharing past experiences with colleagues offers opportunities to propose new solutions to current issues in the new library environment. All library environments face similar issues regarding funding, access, virtual services – and creative problem solving and innovative ideas are not tied to only one type of library environment.

Many library cultures nurture collaborative solutions through committee work. Participating as a committee member provides librarians transitioning to a new library environment a forum for sharing previous experience and networking with colleagues.

Conclusions

Within our profession, we label our librarianship by the type of library we work within – academic, corporate or public. The knowledge gained through an MLS program prepares librarians to work in a variety of library environments since the foundations of librarianship offer universal application.

While some librarians spend their career in one type of library, others may travel between library environments to gain a wider range of experiences to develop a robust portfolio and build job sustainability. For librarianship to remain viable, libraries can nurture a culture willing to consider applicants across all library environments as viable job candidates.

This case study provided insight into librarian mobility between library environments at only one academic institution. Librarians who travel between different library environments do exist. Librarians with diversified experience may represent a smaller percentage of the total librarians regardless of library
environment. Perhaps more surprising, is the few librarians with diversified experience were often in managerial or administrative positions.

The results from this pilot study led to a secondary research project that launched a nationally distributed survey in January 2016 to collect data to pinpoint mobility across library environments beyond OSU. The survey data analysis is currently underway and expected to be reported by the end of 2016.

Endnotes


