Don’t Give Up: Case Studies in Navigating The Academic Library Job Market

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Case Studies in Navigating the Academic Library Job Market

By Allison F. Gallaspy, Katie Jones, Jeremiah Paschke-Wood, and Travis H. Williams

Abstract
With changes to both the technology that students, faculty, and librarians work with in university settings and the reality of the economy, hunting for an academic library position can be a difficult and often stressful undertaking. In this article, we present four case studies of academic librarians who have successfully found jobs at a university, college, or community college. Each study details the unique approach a recent job-seeker took to overcome the challenges of the job market and offers advice to those who find themselves stressed by the job search.

Changes in Information Science Curriculum
Librarianship as a general field is predicted to grow by 7 percent over the next 10 years, a lower rate than average. (Occupational Outlook 2013) Part of the reasoning for this number is the assertion that the Internet age has rendered librarians redundant and students and faculty capable of finding information they need without occupying the physical space of a library. (Terzian 2011) There is no doubt that technologically adept librarians are needed, but librarians and libraries are no strangers to technological advancement, with changes to ways of storing information (Remember floppy disks or print indexes?) to changing policies, processes, and procedures of providing information to patrons. (Plutchak 2012) Particularly with colleges and universities experiencing an increase/decline in attendance over the past several years (National Student Clearing House Research Center 2014) and with the relative abundance of new databases and technology, there is at present a shift toward librarians fulfilling more a role of managing information or helping others manage it (Senneyy 2009), as opposed to the traditional “Wait while I grab a book for you” style of librarianship. Librarians must make the effort to update their technological knowledge if they are lacking in that area (Hu 2013). So where does that leave prospective academic librarians? They are left to re-examine the idea of traditional librarianship or the library as a traditional space and what their role in these changes might be. These four case studies focus on librarians who have had to evaluate their approach to job-hunting and the changing library marketplace.

Introduction
Today’s job market has become an uncertain one for library school graduates and job seekers. According to Library Journal (2014), of 4,846 graduates with library degrees, only 1,715 (36 percent) responded to say they were employed. These statistics represent a steep drop over 2013 in both the number of graduates and the number of reported cases of employment, though the percentage actually increased (from 26 percent to 36 percent). Even the most optimistic job placement figures cite a placement rate hovering in the neighborhood of 70 percent. (Library Journal, 2014) These statistics don’t take into account issues of declining salaries or tightened budgets affecting higher education (and libraries at large). Meanwhile, the popular press continues to label librarianship as one of the worst professions in which to get a master’s degree. (Smith 2014; Pfeuffer 2013). In this article, we’re seeking to alleviate some concerns about the prospect of job seeking in the academic library field by highlighting case studies from a number of academic librarians who are new to their position in the state of Louisiana. These four librarians were hired despite the relative lack of opportunity in their state and nationwide, and their experiences and advice are telling and informative for librarians-to-be.

Case Studies
Case Study #1
After a 10-year career as a journalist, I returned to school to get my Master’s degree in library science. Initially I wasn’t sure which field of librarianship I was interested in pursuing, but after some classwork (and general canvassing of the different fields
of librarianship), I decided I was interested in a career as an academic librarian, I started applying to postings roughly two months before graduation. Initially there was not a huge response, but as I applied for jobs, I was able to get more of a sense for both the position I was interested in and how I should apply and modify my resume and cover letter accordingly to fit that position.

Academic librarianship offers a wide range of positions — there is no set “academic librarian” role. These range from standard reference positions to cataloging, collection development, outreach positions, special collections, subject and location-specific librarian roles and everything in between.

Browsing numerous job sites was useful not only to detail the wide range of positions available nationwide, but also because it highlighted that not every job board has the same academic library job postings. Universities often post their positions to specific job boards, and in many cases, they do not have library-specific sites they post job ads to. Sites such as I Need A Library Job (inalj.com), HigherEdJobs.com, the ALA Joblist, Chronicle of Higher Education as well as state government and library association job boards proved very useful.

Two things became immediately obvious in the job hunting process. Firstly, I found that applying for every position under the sun was neither a productive use of my time or that of the search committees. Rather, I tried to streamline my applications to only apply for those that I had both an interest in and at the very least, tangential experience related to. With that in mind, I tried to focus on my past work and life experience and how those experiences were applicable. For example, I explained how my writing and editing experience would allow me to help out with editing and designing library materials and news releases.

Judging from the responses I received to my applications, it also became obvious that fine-tuning my search to reflect my past experiences and interests was important. I received much more response regarding positions that had either a writing component (based on my journalism experience) or an instruction component (based on my interest in teaching as well as past experience as an instructor overseas). With that in mind, I was able to make these such positions the focus of future applications.

Without ties to a specific area, I was also able to spread my net wide and search for jobs all across the United States. Limiting a job search to one location — while certainly necessary in some situations — also narrows the amount of positions that are available. It’s also important to remember that in places that have a library school nearby or are perceived to have a high quality of life might have more competition for these positions, something that is difficult to overcome for young, relatively experienced librarians.

After approximately 50 applications across the United States, I started to receive responses, and ended up with eight phone interviews and eventually four requests for in-person interviews. I was offered my current position in June 2013.

Case Study #2

After obtaining my Bachelor of Music in Education, I decided to explore the field of Library Science. This led me to a large school in the southeast where I began my MLIS. I was already certified to teach K-12 and had a passion for teaching children, so the school librarianship certification seemed like the wisest path.

However, I soon found that having experience in several fields was beneficial to my future job search. I was fortunate to get a Graduate Assistantship with the reference department to help pay my tuition. Besides the financial benefit, this helped me out in ways I couldn’t have imagined. I quickly saw the correlation between the skills needed to be a school librarian and the skills needed to be a good reference librarian. I continued my course work in school librarianship including field experience as well as a course in music libraries to complement my music background. By the time I graduated, I was prepared to apply for jobs in reference services, school libraries and music libraries. This also gave me connections to colleagues in several fields. While it is wonderful to have a specific goal, I do not recommend pigeonholing yourself into only one career path. Knowing what you’re good at and what daily atmospheres you most enjoy will take you much farther and make you happier in the long run. For example, I knew I wanted a job where I worked with the public and where instruction or teaching was involved.
I started looking for jobs early, which is certainly something I would recommend but also proved to be a bit of a hassle. Two of the three jobs I applied and interviewed for inevitably fell through because I was a few months shy of graduation. The third, a community college where I currently work, was able to hold the position for me until I officially graduated. I say all this not to tell you to wait until you graduate to apply for jobs but to warn you that this may be an issue. You will have to sell yourself that much harder.

As far as the act of applying for jobs, I would reiterate the importance of writing well researched cover-letters, tailored to each job. I had a general template for school libraries and academic libraries, but I would definitely tweak those to create a personal touch for each institution. I recommend gaining experience in a few varied fields, making lasting connections with classmates and coworkers, and applying early. You will ultimately have to choose for yourself what factors are most important in a job: location, job field, salary, etc. Focus on those factors as they will make you more fulfilled in your career and happier in the long run.

Case Study #3
As I listened to my fellow classmates introduce themselves during orientation for library school, I was surprised to learn how many of them were already working in a library or had some library experience. I had none. It was that moment I realized that everyone in the room would be graduating with the exact same degree and, therefore, the post-graduation jobs would be going to the people with more experience.

Library school would provide me with a wealth of information about the profession, (and, of course, that degree which opens the pearly gates to employment), but I needed a way to add some bullet points to my résumé under that “professional experience” category. My goal for graduation was to be able to walk into virtually any interview at any information center and be able to make a case, based on my training and experience, of why I would be a successful employee at that institution. I saw library school as a two-year opportunity to fill in the gaps on my résumé.

To begin, I needed an understanding of what employers are looking for. Perusing job ads in one’s chosen areas quickly yields a list of core skills/experiences that every librarian is expected to have. This list became what I would continue to compare my resume with. This was helpful in thinking like an employer rather than a bright-eyed, hopeful, library science graduate.

Next, I went through my résumé to see what aspects of my previous jobs were applicable to the library field and created a new draft of the document to bring out these points. Second, I looked at my curriculum to see what skills would be acquired simply by attending class. I sought out courses that would yield content for the résumé (even if that meant taking a class that was “harder” than other offerings). Furthermore, within these classes I sought out every opportunity to collaborate with, visit, or otherwise network with libraries, museums and archives. Again, the temptation as a busy grad student is to take the easy route with class projects and work with places you know, but the savvy future job-seeker will see this as a chance to meet people.

When asking how other librarians got their job
one frequently hears “I was in the right place at the right time.” To that end, I advise job-seekers to be everywhere all the time. Volunteer, create an internship, obtain a graduate assistantship, work part-time, take directors out for coffee – do anything you can to get not only your foot in the door at the types of places you want to work, but to build the résumé that will show you deserve the job. The life of a graduate student is busy, so adding more to the calendar can seem impossible, but I would argue that making the time in library school will bear sweeter fruit after graduation.

Be sure that you are bringing something to the table and not just looking for a hand out – offer your time on a project you know the director wants done but the staff doesn’t have time for. Don’t be pushy about wanting a job, rather, show enthusiasm for the institution and be up front about your desire to gain experience.

Be on time, do good work, and do everything in your power to make yourself indispensable to the library staff. At best, you will have proven why they should hire you when they can. At worst, you’ve picked up some great training, gotten another item on your resume, and made strong networking connections.

I am fortunate to say that these steps lead me to a student job in a law library (the last place I ever thought I’d end up) which, through a series of “right place, right time” instances, lead to a full-time position for me after graduation.

Case Study #4
When I look back on the phases of my post-grad application process, I think what took the longest for me to really understand was the job search. I knew from undergraduate work-study experience that I wanted to be a technical services librarian when I had my degree, preferably a cataloger, but such was the vague direction I wanted for my career. To put it bluntly, all I really knew for certain when I started job searching was “not public services.” The “dream” at the beginning of the search was a federal library gig or a tech services post for a cultural heritage institution. I also had focused my coursework on gaining technical competencies, so I was also applying to work for vendors and publishing corporations. This might seem a scatterbrained tack to take when searching, but I felt my work history and educational background truly qualified me to consider all of the above arenas areas of possible employment.

Because I took such a broad view in my search, I would consult many different electronic sources regularly. I checked several different online job boards and joined job listservs like LALIBJOBS and FAFLRT’s Careers in Federal Libraries. One tip for job searchers to remember is that what gets sent on the listserv or harvested by an aggregator like indeed.com or ALA Joblist is often an abbreviated version of a more complete job ad. You should always follow links to the full job description or look it up on the hiring institution’s HR website to read the whole list of responsibilities and make sure you understand if you are qualified. Researching and keeping up to date on a variety of job sites felt like a lot of work, but I would remind myself that library school gave me the exact kind of training I needed to find job postings that would make me excited about the existing possibilities on the marketplace. If you are as determined to search out opportunities for your own employment as you would be to find the answer to a vexing reference inquiry, you’ll find advertised opportunities that you never knew existed. And I eventually realized that the same basic principles of searching subscription databases applies to job postings: focus the search terms you use based on what type of library responsibilities you desire, but avoid narrowing them so far that you preempt jobs you might be qualified for that aren’t the “dream job;” also, use creative search terms and look in new places when the normal haunts start to feel stale. Most professional organizations don’t require job seekers to be a member to search their job sites; for technical services minded job searchers, the Association for Information Science & Technology has a job board that helped me think outside of the traditional library career track. Technical services job titles frequently include words like “specialist,” “metadata,” “systems,” and “digital” so I would often search those in conjunction with “library” or “information” because they often yielded different results.

Other practical tips I’d like to impart: Definitely write a cover letter, even if it is not specifically required by the hiring institution. When possible (without misrepresenting work experience) the
applicant should make sure to use the same language, in terms of acronyms and standards, in the résumé and cover letter as appears in the job description in case someone unfamiliar with technical services software, standards and competencies is screening the applications before passing them on to a hiring committee. Your cover letter should detail demonstrative examples of when in your work experience you developed and employed the position’s required skills or transferable skills. When furnishing references, make sure to tailor them to the job as you did the résumé and cover letter. Especially in technical services posts, where different institutions do things differently to achieve the same goal, use references that can speak to your ability to use the hiring institution’s ILS or other standards, software, or hardware as applicable.

Lastly, once I got past the faceless part and into interviewing, it was always comforting to remember that librarians are people too, even in technical services! Networking proved just as important as detailing my technical competencies in getting to the interview stage. Unpaid work like volunteering and internships can lead to paid positions if you are in an environment where doing unpaid work (even as little as one day a week) is feasible. Personally, I reached a point where not doing unpaid work during my extended job search was less productive than taking a volunteer spot that, coupled with my qualifications, helped me land my first full-time librarian job after I received my master’s. Librarians want to hire people they know, and if they can’t do that, they want to hire someone who knows someone they know.

Conclusion
Searching for a job in today’s uncertain climate can be a daunting task, but having the right tools can be the difference between employment and unemployment. Our case studies highlighted the challenges and successes of searching for a job in Louisiana, but these experiences can be applied anywhere. Case Study #1 suggested focusing on jobs that fit your strengths and interests rather than wasting valuable time applying for every job posting available. The second Case Study gained experience in various related fields in order to qualify for a wider range of positions. Case Study #3 found networking and volunteering for special library projects to be helpful in securing a job. The librarian in Case Study #4 implemented online job search postings and professional organizations’ job sites to find positions making sure to use varied search terms based on desired job responsibilities. All of the case study participants recommended focusing on positions where you have the potential to excel. Not only will you be more satisfied in your career, but search committees and interviewers will be more likely to sense your enthusiasm for positions you really want versus positions that are merely available.

References


The Louisiana Library Association honors members by presenting awards for outstanding dedication to library service in Louisiana. The following is a list of awards that will be presented at the 2017 Annual Conference in Lafayette, Louisiana at the Cajundome Convention Center. All nominations can be sent to the LLA office. Deadline for all awards is January 15, 2017 (postmark), or the following business day, unless specified in the award announcement. Please refer to the LLA Manual for further details and qualifications.

LLA Office at Louisiana Library Association, 8550 United Plaza Boulevard, Suite 1001, Baton Rouge, LA 70809, Telephone: (225) 922-4642 or (877) 550-7890; Fax: (225) 408-4422; Email: office@llaonline.org

**Association Awards**

**Essae M. Culver Distinguished Service Award**
The Essae M. Culver Distinguished Service Award honors "a librarian whose professional service and achievements, whose leadership in Louisiana association work, and whose accomplishments in a field of librarianship within the state merit recognition of particular value to Louisiana librarianship." A nominee must hold a MLS, or equivalent degree, or hold library certification; must be a current LLA member who has been active in the association; and must be nominated by an LLA member, although letters of endorsement can come from both members and non-members. Please submit all nominations to the LLA office. All nomination packets must be postmarked by January 15, 2017. E-mail nominations or letters of support are not acceptable.

**LLA Meritorious Service Award**
LLA Meritorious Service Award publicly recognizes an individual who has demonstrated sustained and exemplary leadership and service to further the development, services, visibility and/or policies of LLA. Please submit all nominations to the LLA office by January 15, 2017.

**Louisiana Literary Award**
The purpose of this distinguished award is to promote interest in books related to Louisiana and to encourage their production. Please submit all nominations to the LLA office by January 15, 2017.

**Modisette Awards**
The Modisette award is presented annually to honor libraries for excellence in service in elementary, middle, and junior high/high school libraries.
- Elementary
- Middle/Junior High
- High/Senior High

Modisette awards are also presented to a Public Library every even year and an outstanding Library Trustee each year.