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Entering Academic Librarianship: Tips for Library School Students

Brent D. Singleton

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Recent graduates of Library and Information Studies programs often have difficulty landing their first academic librarian position. Competition with other recent graduates, new librarians (with less than 3 years experience) and those relocating to the region can be fierce and lead to frustration. All of these factors may be compounded for those seeking positions in highly competitive urban areas. To complicate matters even further, colleagues pursuing public library positions are frequently hired prior to completing their degrees or soon thereafter, leaving potential academic librarians baffled about their prospects and bewildered by the lengthy academic hiring process. For a coherent description of the academic hiring process see Philip C. Howze's "New librarians and job hunting: patience is a virtue" (*C&RL News*, June 2001, vol. 62 no. 6, pp. 596-600). The purpose of this article is to give students a rudimentary understanding of the activities in which academic librarians are expected to engage in order to progress in their careers, and expose students to some of the activities they may pursue in order to prepare for an academic position. The advice given in this article may help future graduates convince an academic library that they are not only capable of, but are already performing some of the professional duties and activities expected of them for employment and advancement.

How are academic librarians evaluated and what can a student do to show aptitude or interest in these areas prized by academic libraries? A recent graduate must possess relevant skills and experiences to expound upon in their cover letter, resume, and

eventually an interview, in order to be offered a position. In preparing for a career in academic librarianship it is a case of the sooner the better with regards to assimilating knowledge of professional expectations. Whether it is tenure, peer review, or some other term applied to the process of evaluating academic librarians, the net expectations are generally the same. There are of course distinct differences between these methods of evaluation, and this article is not intended to expose these differences, but rather to stress the commonalities of the various evaluation processes.

A commonly held belief among academic librarians and students is that the evaluation criteria for tenure-track faculty librarian positions differs greatly from non-faculty librarian positions. Don't believe the hype! If you work in an academic library, any academic library, you will be expected to provide evidence of quality work and participation in three broad areas to be defined later: professional assignment; service to the university, profession or community; and professional development. Names of these areas, the degree to which each is stressed, and the nature of the requisite activities for each may be unique to an institution. Nonetheless, these three areas broadly represent the central evaluation criteria for most academic librarians.

The following tips are not meant to be an exhaustive list or even a prescriptive guide. They may be of use in helping students relate their activities in library school to their future career goals and expectations as academic librarians. Along with reading about the profession students should establish strong mentor relationships with professionals that work at institutions and perform tasks similar to those that the student desires. At the very least students are well advised to establish a network of academic librarians that they can occasionally question concerning the profession.

Professional Assignment

Professional assignment encompasses those activities that are integral to the job description, or what most students innocently think is going to be their sole function in the library. This may include any combination of the following types of areas and their corresponding duties: reference or public service, instruction, bibliographic control, collection development, outreach, systems or automation, administration or management, etc.

How the Student Can Prepare for Professional Assignment

- 1) *Coursework*: students should complete all core and allied courses related to their chosen emphasis. It may be the only experience they gain in some areas.
- 2) *Employment*: full or part-time positions in an academic library, performing duties closely related to future professional aspirations is optimal. However, any relevant academic library employment will help.
- 3) *Internship*: students should take advantage of these unique opportunities for exploring, learning, and mentoring. Internships inside and outside of a chosen emphasis can be beneficial in creating a well-rounded view of librarianship.
- 4) *Volunteer*: if employment or internships are unfeasible, volunteer at an academic library to gain core skills needed for a particular emphasis.
- 5) *Gain/enhance technological skills*: no matter the chosen emphasis, solid technological skills are a must for beginning academic librarians.
- 6) *Self-develop skills*: catalog a small book collection, create Web guides on a favorite subject, teach a class even if it is not library related, read library literature, and attend workshops and lectures. Experience is experience. Make sure to have professionals critically evaluate your self-developed skills and materials by presenting them to a librarian or faculty member.

Professional Development

These activities help the academic librarian learn new skills and grow personally and professionally. Professional development activities include but are not restricted to attending workshops, seminars, and conferences as well as taking formal college courses

or degree programs. Furthermore, professional development may encompass scholarly activities such as research, publishing (articles, books, electronic media, etc), presenting papers or poster sessions at conferences, writing grants, and applying for fellowships.

How the Student Can Prepare for Professional Development

- 1) *Conferences*: attending local and/or national library, technology, scholarly or other relevant conferences is a simple way to begin amassing a record of professional development and also is an excellent opportunity for networking.
- 2) *Workshops and seminars*: these venues help in acquiring new skills and gaining exposure to current information in the field.
- 3) *Independent study*: work with a faculty member on an extensive research project and try to parlay the result into something suitable for publication, such as an article, presentation, poster session, or Web site.
- 4) *Publish*: try to get published in a peer-reviewed forum. Otherwise, get published anywhere possible.
- 5) *Conference papers, presentations and poster sessions*: heed calls for participation at conferences. Many are specifically geared for student entries.
- 6) *Apply for funding*: writing grants and applying for scholarships and fellowships aids not only projects, but also development of research and writing skills.
- 7) *Additional degree(s)*: consider a joint degree program or attaining a second degree in the future. If additional degree(s) have already been obtained, be sure to remain current with the issues in the field(s).

Service to the University, Profession or Community

Service activities help academic institutions and community organizations to function with a wider spectrum of input. For academic librarians, service to the university may involve serving on library committees, university-wide committees, and participating in campus associations or activities. Service to the profession may include memberships in professional or scholarly organizations as well as participation in association activities and committees. Service to the community is a broad category

containing such activities as teaching classes, volunteering, involvement with non-profit organizations, etc.

How the Student Can Prepare for Service Activities

- 1) *Join associations*: have a stake in the profession by joining local, state, and national associations. Student membership fees are generally very reasonable and a subscription to an association publication is often included in the price.
- 2) *Student groups*: join/start and participate in various student groups on campus. State and national library associations often have student branches.
- 3) *Committee work*: look for opportunities to join student committees, committees at a place of employment, or with associations.
- 4) *Volunteer*: locate community groups that support interesting causes and volunteer time and services to them.
- 5) *Fund raising*: help groups on campus or in the community raise money for their general fund or for specific projects.
- 6) *Advocate*: speak and recruit for the profession in general or for a specific library school program.