

Introduction

“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.”

—Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)

People find careers in academic libraries in many ways. You may have gone right from undergraduate school to library school and straight to a university library career. You may have had many other jobs or careers before choosing libraries, or worked as a library paraprofessional before deciding to go for a master’s degree in Library Science. You may even have professional library experience in special or public libraries but are new to academia. Regardless of your background, if you are heading for a career as an academic librarian there are many things you need to know. This book will give you a head start.

Libraries have been part of higher education for hundreds of years. European universities began in the twelfth century, but their book collections were small. As printing grew and more books became available in the sixteenth century, these libraries began to expand. In the United States, the earliest college librarians were instructors or tutors at their institutions, with care of the library tacked on to their jobs. During the nineteenth century, professors or college administrators often did double duty running the library. However, it is notable that having a library was considered essential for an institution of higher education. Toward the end of that century, the profession of librarianship emerged: In 1876, the American Library Association was founded, and in 1887 Melvil Dewey started the School of Library Economy at Columbia College in New York City. As the profession developed, so did college libraries. Collection size, number of staff members, and services provided increased throughout the twentieth century. The growth of graduate study and faculty research after World War II put new demands on library resources. Currently, librarians are a valued part of the campus community, managing access to electronic resources and teaching Internet research while still providing more traditional services.

As you begin work in higher education, think of constructing your career as a process, like building a house. You need to do many things along the way to complete the house. Your academic preparation,

including undergraduate and graduate education, is the solid foundation on which all is based. You frame out the structure with your particular skills, perhaps specializing in reference or in cataloging. Over time, you put up the walls as you flesh out your career experience with different tasks and jobs. You link to your colleagues on and off campus, just as the house links to water, electricity, and other utilities. As the structure grows and takes shape, you add features like windows and doors, just as you add publications and service to your librarianship activities. Of course, you will not finish building your career for many years. It will grow and change as you do. As your interests change, you may take new directions in your career, like building an addition to your house as a family grows. Your goal is to end up with a comfortable and successful home (or career).

I was inspired to write this book by my desire to help academic librarians build flourishing careers while reducing the stresses inherent in our profession. I knew that many of my colleagues could share valuable advice, so after creating an outline I asked other academic librarians to contribute chapters. The authors work at many institutions of higher education, from community colleges to research universities. They are recent graduates and librarians with decades of experience. They work and live in different regions of the U.S. and Canada. Here they have a common goal: to help other academic librarians succeed. Each has thought long and hard about their chosen topic, and they sincerely hope to help you be a better academic librarian. Many also want to help you avoid pitfalls and problems they have encountered in their careers and to point out shortcuts to academic prosperity.

As with any book made up of contributed pieces, there are differences in style between the chapters. Several authors interviewed other librarians and include quotes in their chapters. Other authors take a more scholarly approach to their topics, with descriptions of research and extensive bibliographies. You may even find disagreement among the authors on some academic library issues. This is a reflection of the diversity of the profession; we all have our own ideas and opinions—all of them valid and, as I hope you'll agree, worthwhile hearing.

The Successful Academic Librarian is arranged into three major parts, with each chapter covering a different aspect of the work of the academic librarian. The first part, "The Basics—Getting Off to a Good Start," will help you understand the pieces of an academic library job.

It includes a discussion of faculty status for librarians as well as chapters on accomplishing your job responsibilities, working with faculty, getting published, and performing service. The second part gives you “Things to Think About—Getting and Keeping a Great Job.” Here you will find tips on interviewing, having mentors, dealing with unions, receiving continuing education, and documenting your work. In the third part, “Tales from the Trenches—Academic Librarians Share Their Stories,” experienced librarians tell you about their careers. You hear from a nontenure-track librarian, a faculty librarian, and a librarian who joined academia after working in other types of libraries for many years. Finally, a library director shares his thoughts on the qualities an academic librarian needs to succeed.

This is not meant to be a research study of academic librarianship, but rather a readable guidebook. As your colleagues, we want you to succeed.

Welcome to academia!

Works Cited

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