

New academic library leader discussion series

Part one

Amanda Clay Powers (ACP), Martin Garnar (MG), and Dustin Fife (DF) are all relatively new library deans or directors. This series is their attempt to discuss the process of moving to a new library and becoming more than just a new manager, but truly a leader. This will be broken into three parts, looking mostly at their first year. The first article will focus on how Powers, Garnar, and Fife ended up where they are now. It

will talk about the process of applying for the job, being interviewed, and interviewing their prospective employers at the same time. The second part will



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focus on getting started, working with a new team, and adjusting to a new institution. The third part will be the most introspective. The authors will discuss obstacles, mistakes, failures, and successes. They believe this open and honest conversation is essential to help prepare future library deans, directors, and leaders.

DF: I just finished my first year as an academic library director, and I am starting to think about what has gone well and what I would really rather not talk about, but probably should. Luckily, Martin and Amanda have been going through the same process, and I am excited to discuss these new adventures together. Two questions come to my mind. Why were we interested in these particular jobs? What was the selection process like?

Coming to Western State fulfilled many of my personal needs, though the transition and

application process was not ideal. My partner found the announcement for this particular job and sent it to me the day it was going into review. I called Martin, somewhat frantically, because he was already a Colorado library leader in order to ask him a few questions. I had no time to spare, so I spent about six hours that night constructing a personal statement, a leadership philosophy document, cleaning up my

CV, and making sure people were willing to be my references. At first glance, this particular job was perfect for me. I was interested in moving to a smaller univer-

sity, in a smaller town, and wanted to be in this particular part of the country. It could not have lined up better, other than my application ostensibly being a day late and my wife being eight months pregnant.

I will address question two in a moment, but what intrigued you all about your new(ish) positions?

ACP: The position intrigued me in part because of my own personal history with

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Mississippi University for Women (MUW). My mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother all graduated from this school (plus aunts, great-aunts, cousins, etc.), which was the first public university for women in the United States. After having lived away from Mississippi most of my adult life, I loved the idea of contributing to something so meaningful to my family and community. The university is co-ed as of 1982, but there is still a strong commitment to fostering women's leadership. I went to a women's college myself, and this still resonates with me.

More than anything though, I love a challenge, and I was ready for a new one in my career. The MUW library was in the middle of some remarkable transitions when I applied, which were compelling. The university was about to start the third and final phase of an \$18 million renovation, which included the state's first automated storage and retrieval system. On day five, I found out that in order to move forward with construction, the entire circulating collection and largely uncataloged bound journal collection still needed to be moved into the nonexistent robot. I definitely got the challenge I was looking for in this position.

Martin, what piqued your interest?

MG: I had been at my previous institution for over 18 years. I was enjoying my role as a senior faculty member and head of the research and instruction department, as I had great latitude to try new things while still indulging my love of working on the front line and in the classroom. I thought I was going to be a lifer, so I was not even looking at positions at other institutions. Then, a colleague who was retiring suggested that I apply for her job at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs (UCCS). I was intrigued by a number of things: taking the leap from middle management to full-time administration and whether I could still find time to be a practicing librarian; working with a new staff after having hand-picked four of the five librarians in my former department; and moving to an institution that, in many respects, was like my undergraduate university, as they were similar in characteristics (size, age, public affiliation) and that made me think it would feel

like home. Once I started the interview process, I was excited by the people with whom I would be working and realized just how ready I was for a new challenge.

DF: It seems clear that the worst thing you can do when you see an interesting job opportunity is not apply. You and I, Martin, were not even looking for new jobs, but the right opportunity appeared, and we took the leap. Amanda, I do not know if you were generally looking for a new job, but all of your ancestors might have risen up if you had not applied. My experience is similar to Martin's, in that, once I was on campus and got to meet the hiring committee, library team, students, the academic affairs team, and even the university president casually in the hall, I knew that these were people I wanted to work with. I knew that this was a challenge that would motivate me. The best thing that happened to me during the interview process was meeting all of these stakeholders. In one day, I knew that the provost and head of academic affairs would be supportive, that my future boss was a trusted member of the campus ecosystem, and that faculty, students, and staff believed that the library was an essential part of university life. These people convinced me that my answer would be yes, if I was lucky enough to be offered a job.

I find it interesting that the idea of a challenge appears in all of our personal narratives. None of us has mentioned wanting more money, which I am sure we all enjoy, or just wanting to be in charge, which I think is a lot of fun. We were motivated by personal and professional challenges and by an opportunity, or institution, that fit our professional values. What were you specifically looking for during your interview process that helped you understand that your new job would be the right challenge and fit for you?

ACP: So many great questions! MUW is only 20 minutes from Mississippi State University, where I had been working. I had been encouraged to apply by several of MUW's faculty, who expressed concerns about library closures for

many years due to construction and the library's lack of faculty for research support and instruction services. During my interview, I was trying to imagine myself as part of their community, but I was also questioning whether the kind of change that the faculty wanted was possible. I focused on talking to the staff and faculty in the library, primarily, but I also needed to understand what kind of support the administration would provide for these necessary changes.

As part of my application process, I wrote an essay on the integration of technology into traditional library services. The library is undergoing a top to bottom renovation that includes a two-story automated storage and retrieval system (we have named her Athena). From looking at the library website, it was clear that services had not kept up with the rest of the library community. For example, the only online reference was the email address of the one reference librarian. The only tutorial was a PowerPoint slideshow filled with what not to do in the library. There was an obvious need for a major shift in public services.

What I wanted to know from the library staff was whether they were willing to go through the kind of change that the administration seemed to want. What I found was a staff and faculty eager for professional development and ready to be connected to the wider library world and campus communities. With those assurances, I felt the challenges the library faced were surmountable, if there was support from the administration. During my discussions with the provost and the president, it was clear that they would support the sort of seismic shift that would be necessary to create the kind of library the university needed.

MG: When I think back to my interview, there were three main concerns I wanted to address: 1) whether I would want to work for my supervisor, 2) if I wanted to work with this library's staff, and 3) what the staff wanted from me as a leader.

I had chosen not to apply for the library dean position at my previous university because I did not want to work for that position's supervisor, so I was pleased to discover that my future

boss at UCCS, the provost, was someone with whom I wanted to work, as I felt we had good communication from the start. I was also excited about her energy and commitment to her own research agenda, as it signaled that I would have support for continuing to practice at least some aspects of my professional life as a librarian. Unfortunately, due to family responsibilities, the provost went on leave six weeks after I started and never returned to the position.

The chair of my search committee, who had also been assigned to mentor me as a new dean, was named the interim provost, so I had the good fortune to work with her for the next 20 months while a new provost was identified. As I write this, my first regular monthly meeting with the new provost is this afternoon, and having gotten to know him during the search process and over the last few months, (he was an internal candidate), I think I'll be just as happy this time around. Bottom line: I learned that it has to be more than the supervisor to make me consider a position, as there is no guarantee how long people will be there.

The next question of whether I would want to work with this library's staff was answered quickly, as I knew by the end of the interview process that I would be joining a dedicated team that really cares about the students and faculty we serve. This led to the final question of what they wanted from me. The previous dean was retiring on a positive note, having added some positions to keep up with the university's enrollment growth. What I heard from the staff during the interview is that they were looking to continue the library's positive trajectory and that there were not any long-standing problems (other than the perennial budget challenges) that needed to be addressed.

This was both exciting and off-putting: exciting in that I would be walking into a good environment, but off-putting that there were no obvious problems to fix, thus leaving me (with the help of the team) to figure out what was next for the library. Having not been at this level of leadership before, this was going to be the biggest challenge for me, but I decided that having a good boss and staff was enough to make me want to take the plunge.

DF: I know that there are many reasons to take a new job. Sometimes you simply need out of a bad or boring situation. Sometimes you need more money or a bigger challenge. Regardless of why you are looking for your next opportunity, our experiences seem to share two very important themes. First, we were all excited by a new challenge, something that would drive each of us and help us grow personally. Second, we all interviewed our potential employers as much as they interviewed us. We had questions that needed answers, at least perfunctorily, and we had benchmarks that we were looking for. Though I would generally encourage self-confidence and making that humbling leap into leadership, it is important to ask yourself questions. Is this the right time? Is

this the right position? Is this the right institution? An interview is not a one-way street, and becoming a leader, not just a manager, director, or dean, is not either. Being a leader is about lifting up your team, not yourself, so it is important that you know what you are getting yourself into from the start.

Conclusion

This is part one in a three-part series. In part two, Powers, Garnar, and Fife will address integrating themselves into new organizations and teams. They will focus on the essential nature of humility for new leaders, asking questions, identifying stakeholders, and accepting that you can still lead, while admitting that you do not know everything. ♪

(“Strategic open data preservation,” continues from page 484)

We wanted to make sure the open data community members we worked with were a part of this larger community, called the Libraries+ Network, because there was so much these individual communities could learn from each other. The details are laid out in the recently released report⁹ from the workshop.

To quote Danielle Robinson, “Usually academia does not hack! We form subcommittees.” In the open data community, one sees a lot of hacking, which for this purpose we are using the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “providing a quick or inelegant solution to a particular problem.”

Hacking has its benefits. These events were successful because event hosts could work quickly to put them together without having to wait for central coordination and committees to agree upon standards. It also has its drawbacks: a greater possibility of duplication of effort or needing to revisit work that was done to “clean it up.” Neither of these workflows is right or wrong, but each has valuable components that can help the other. Our next steps are to take the lessons and viewpoints learned from these events and the Libraries+ Network and think bigger about what we can accomplish together.

Notes

1. Libraries Plus Network, “Libraries Plus

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3. Big Ten Academic Alliance, “Big Ten Academic Alliance Geoportal,” accessed August 13, 2017, <https://geo.btaa.org/>.

4. Mozilla, “Mozilla Network,” *Mozilla Network*, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://network.mofoprod.net/>.

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8. Danielle Robinson, *Data-Rescue-PDX: Volunteer Guide, and Other Materials for DATA RESCUE PDX, 2017*, <https://github.com/daniellecrobinson/Data-Rescue-PDX>.

9. The Grove, “Libraries+ Network Meeting Report,” May 8, 2017, <https://libraries.network/s/may-meeting-report.pdf>. ♪