

Veronica Arellano Douglas

# Becoming a more thoughtful library job seeker

Look beyond the bullet points

**M**ost job advice written for aspiring librarians includes some variation on the following: gain professional experience, network, and join a professional organization. These very practical suggestions are the baseline for any job search, but this kind of advice often does a disservice to those hoping to join the profession. What we are inadvertently telling job seekers is that when you do this, you will get a job, when rarely does such a cause-and-effect relationship exist. What we really should be telling aspiring librarians is that we want to hire motivated, thoughtful, intelligent people who bring new perspectives and ideas to our libraries.

Job seekers, we hope that by actively participating in a library association you are gaining leadership skills that will help you improve our library. We want to hear that your part-time job at a university library isn't just resume padding, but that you've actually learned something about what libraries do and don't do well.

Because you volunteer at your local public library, we want to assume that you really are passionate about serving our community. We care about your motivations and professional insight, and we want your activities to demonstrate your excitement about librarianship.

## Where's the professional development in shelf-reading?

That being said, I realize that much of the volunteer and part-time work involved in

libraries is not intellectually stimulating. It all seems to center around moving books and other essential, but mundane, tasks. The real value of a volunteer or part-time job experience is in immersing yourself in the culture of a library. Beyond the call numbers and book tape are librarians reaching out to their local community, and patrons excited about new services and programs. You have access to this activity by virtue of just being there and asking questions.

After moving across the country with my husband at the start of his academic career, I went through a two-year period of un- and under-employment. I cobbled together a way to keep myself occupied every week: part-time work at an independent bookstore and a college library's circulation desk, as well as volunteer hours at my public library and an elementary school media center. Coming from a full-time academic librarian position, it was, professionally speaking, a big step backward. But it was a way for me to stay connected to librarianship and gain some much needed professional perspective.

## Expand your professional bubble

My first and only library job was as a reference and instruction librarian at a university library. I was aware of general trends

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in librarianship, but I had a very specific professional bubble: public services in academic libraries. Working in circulation at a college library and volunteering at my local public and school library was a way for me to connect with aspects of librarianship that I'd previously ignored. The differences between my former academic library and the libraries where I worked and volunteered were quite pronounced. I couldn't fathom being the only professional in a library, but the school media specialist at the charter school was a one-woman library show. I was constantly impressed by public librarians who were carefully developing collections and programs for toddlers, older adults, and everyone in between.

This shifting frame of reference is why volunteer and work experience matters. You are learning about trends, practices, and values in different areas of librarianship. The successful services you see in one library could potentially offer insight or a better solution to challenges in another library. You should be able to discuss how your experiences might help you improve the organization you are hoping to join.

There is a real possibility that the people who are interviewing you are not intimately familiar with current trends outside of their niche within librarianship. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to share some of your recently acquired knowledge with them?

## Membership blues

As you go about your volunteer or part-time work in libraries, you may encounter librarians urging you to join a professional organization. In much the same way that we mistakenly encourage prospective librarians to gain volunteer or work experience because that's what employers want to see, we also tend to push library association memberships as networking opportunities or essential CV credits.

But we leave out one crucial point: A membership in a professional association is not the same as being involved in professional service.

Joining ALA puts you in good company, but what you do with that membership is what makes you unique. Your professional association is filled with interesting, innovative librarians who are eager to toss around ideas and share their perspectives on library-related issues. Out of these relationships could come a coauthor on a paper, a project collaborator, or simply a friend in libraryland.

Taking an active role in your professional organization is also a way to cultivate leadership skills you can't gain from volunteer or part-time work. In the six years that I've been a member of ALA, I've had the opportunity to facilitate mentoring programs, plan a conference program, and chair an interest group. I was able to practice the kind of creative thinking and planning that often goes into project creation in libraries. The work you do in professional organizations not only demonstrates your commitment to the profession, it highlights your professional potential, as well.

## Career advice revisited

Advice to job seekers is often given in bullet points and pithy phrases: Network. Gain experience. Be professional. Rather than doling out these generic action plans, we should instead focus on the qualities we want to cultivate in the next generation of librarians.

We all want colleagues who are thoughtful, knowledgeable, and excited about librarianship. Our advice should match our expectations. That being said, prospective librarians, take notice: If you are not excited about this profession, it will show. All of your volunteer hours, part-time work, and memberships won't be enough to hide the fact that you haven't thought a lot about what it means to be a librarian.

Focus your attentions less on building a resume and more on improving libraries. You'll be a more thoughtful, engaging job candidate, and you'll remind yourself why you decided to join this amazing profession in the first place. *ZZ*