

Elise Silva

Reflections of an academic librarian

Month one

The day I submitted this essay to *C&RL News* this spring, I'd been a librarian for one short month. You read that right, a mere 31 days. Because I am working on my MLS, yet carry the title "assistant librarian" I inhabit a strange, liminal space that affords me both a growing familiarity with academic libraries and the objective eye of an outsider.

These liminal spaces can be difficult to occupy—awkward and bumbling. ("Sorry guys! I accidentally sent that email to the whole library listserv! Don't mind me!") Yet I'd like to think that it affords me a fresh enough perspective on the academic library to have something worth saying. I should disclose that I've worked in academia before, teaching literature and writing courses as a full-time faculty member at my current university for several years. Since my switch to the library, however, I've noticed several things that I find intriguing, surprising, and even confusing about my new field. I've recorded these observations here and wonder if you seasoned readers will agree with my forming opinions.

I've been observing the workings of the academic library (as opposed to my native English department) for 31 days now and have noted the following areas as intriguing, surprising, or confusing. I wonder if you seasoned librarians will agree with my observations.

Librarians break stereotypes

I suppose this shouldn't come as a shock,

but the diversity found within the walls of the library is astounding. The library is made up of all sorts—not only are the faculty as diverse as their fields, the administration, IT folk, instructors, archivists, and catalogers bring a breadth to the library experience that has been eye opening (in a good way). The multifaceted experiences of each member of the library body speaks volumes to the important work that happens here. It also further shows the importance of the ability of the library space to bring us all together, and significance of librarianship in creating a cultural and intellectual community, as well as a shared vocabulary. This is especially important with such varied personalities, job types, and skill sets all working together.

Academic libraries are...academic

With academia comes competition, bureaucracy, and assessment. These things are not new to me, having come from another area of campus, but I find they are just as prevalent here in the library. Though the structures of libraries vary from institution to institution. I have noticed that there are a lot of hoops to jump through to get things done, and many items to check off the list before moving forward with a project. And that takes time. So if academic librarians are worried about fitting in with their profes-

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social peers, they shouldn't be. If you're having a hard time connecting to a faculty member, I'd suggest bringing up issues your experience with organization and bureaucracy in the library. Chances are the same issues will exist in the faculty member's department, too (though terminology may differ). And shared woes can help spark a conversation that could end up changing things for the better—or at the very least communicating in a way that your library services are highlighted. No way to make friends better than by complaining together, right?

Collaboration is encouraged

I've been most impressed with the prevalence of collaboration in the library. This might be specific to my institution, however, it should lend itself nicely to other academic libraries, as well. Because the library is an interdisciplinary space by nature, it would follow that library professionals would work together to solve complex problems, publish, and tackle day-to-day issues.

In my previous academic experiences collaboration happened when forced, but wasn't as natural as it seems in my new library setting. I find this encouraging in a world that seems to be more and more categorized and narrow. Finding shared areas of interest promotes productive dialogue and mutual understanding. Collaboration is desperately needed in academia, and society, at large. Libraries seem like the ideal place to do this.

Culture of protectiveness

I find that librarians and library staff are very protective of the library. Library space is fought over tooth-and-nail, and those who work within the library are protective of, and revere, the materials they work with. What surprised me most was that this is true of people, as well—hiring someone without an MLS (like I was) can be quite a challenge because those of us not possessing an MLS when applying may

be seen as opportunists, a forever outsider, or not truly cut out for librarianship. Like I said, this varies from person to person, and institution to institution, but I think most would agree that the feeling exists.

Remaining relevant is a concern

This was both confusing and surprising to me—and here I'll show my cards. A new MLS student not immersed in the world of academic libraries for long, relevancy never crossed my mind. Of course the library is relevant, I thought. Of course libraries will always be around. Of course research matters. Of course librarianship as a profession is an integral part of the university. Having talked with librarians here at my institution, as well as immersing myself in studying and reading up in these areas in the field, I see the numbers and understand where the anxiety comes in.

If librarians are anxious about remaining relevant themselves, I'd say, from a newbie prospective, to make yourself relevant. Building relationships with faculty (and yes, you are peers—don't feel like you aren't—even if you don't have faculty status) will be one of the most important areas of outreach and relevancy you can attain. Because when you reach out to peers, you reach students, too.

Closing thoughts

I imagine those of you who are still reading this article may have differing views from mine—that is to be expected given your experience in the library and maturation as a professional. I wonder how your perspective differs, but I wonder even more, how it overlaps. Do my observations make sense? Will they change as I, too, grow into the librarian I hope to become?

Perhaps my thoughts can help some of you as you mentor and help newer staff and faculty within the library. Correct our misconceptions, but also listen to our ideas. A fresh, objective view might do more to create innovative programs than you might realize. *~*