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The Adventures of a Part-Time Librarian

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When I first meet someone, the question I dread the most is not “What do you do?” because I’m always happy to tell people I’m a librarian. Rather it’s their next question—“Where do you work?”—that is more difficult for me to answer because I have not one, not two, not three but four library-related jobs at three different organizations! So, how do I answer the dreaded question? Well, I take a deep breath and then quickly say: I work as a part-time/on-call reference librarian at Portland Community College Libraries and I also work as a part-time reference librarian at Clark College’s Cannell Library in Vancouver, Washington. In addition, I’m the Assistant Director of the Emporia State University’s School of Library and Information Management MLS program in Portland, Oregon, which involves marketing and coordinating their MLS program and advising MLS students. Finally, I’m an adjunct faculty member for ESU SLIM, teaching two classes online: Project Management and Technology Skills. Phew!

As you see, it’s not the simple answer most people would expect. Welcome to the life of a part-time librarian. Yes, there are days when I wake up and think, “What day is it and where am I supposed to be?” but overall, I enjoy the multiple work hats I wear, as each provides unique challenges and opportunities. Being a part-time librarian may not be for everyone, but hopefully, I’ll be able to show you why it can be a fun and considerable option for many librarians seeking employment in the library profession.

There are many reasons why part-time work is an attractive option for me. They include: gaining experience, flexibility in schedule, staying in the local area, variety of duties, and networking.

Gaining experience

When I graduated from library school, I had very little library experience, which is a typical situation for many newly-minted librarians. Approximately 51 percent of LIS graduates chose librarianship as a second career, thus, many come with a specialized skill set they must translate to potential library employers—a task that has proved to be difficult to accomplish for new MLIS graduates searching for librarian positions (Maatta 2007). I, too, choose librarianship as a second career; with an undergraduate degree in business, I worked in the corporate world for my first career. I had many business skills and abilities that were transferable to library work and I endeavored to translate those business skills into library lingo on my resume and cover letters to potential library employers. However, I still found it difficult to find a full-time job as a librarian with little actual library experience. But eventually, I found that libraries were willing to take a chance and hire me to work on-call or part-time. This proved to be extremely beneficial to me, because working at my various part-time jobs has provided me with the opportunity to gain the library experience that I was lacking on my resume.

Flexibility

One of the best aspects to working part-time is I’m not locked into a set 40-hour a week schedule, so I can choose when I want to work and when I want time to spend with my family or time to pursue my personal interests and hobbies. For those part-time librarians who want full-time positions, having a flexible schedule also allows you to have time to search and apply for full-time positions. As job seekers will tell you, job hunting can take a great deal of





Areas with growth potential in librarianship

For all the information that is available through existing library resources (catalogs, databases, etc.) and even the increasing amount of information available on the Web through various digitization projects, there is a great deal of information that has not been digitized, or even “uncovered” in many areas. I think there is tremendous growth potential for librarianship in these areas, and it is long overdue.

We have spent several decades focusing on making the same information available in a variety of formats (and with countless localized twists to the same data), but have not tapped into a wealth of information in a wide range of categories. Coupled with this is still the need for assisting those who are seeking this information to understand the nature of the information so they can better mine the resources that are becoming available. I continue to see this as an important role of librarianship.

—JIM KOPP
Director,
Watzek Library,
Lewis & Clark College

time and effort. The 2007 Library Journal survey of new graduates found that many new professionals choose to take temporary or part-time work while searching for the “perfect” job (Maatta 2007).

Staying in the local area

Again, according to the 2007 Library Journal survey, only 16 percent of new MLIS graduates in 2006 reported moving out of their home region (Maatta 2007)—a number that indicates that not many librarians are willing or able to move for employment. I, too, was geographically bound to the Portland area when I first graduated from library school. My husband had been recently promoted at his organization, we had recently purchased a home in Portland, and we really wanted to stay close to most of our family and friends who live in and around the Portland area. By taking a part-time position with SLIM, I was able to work in the library field, while remaining in the Portland area. Taking a part-time position can often “buy” you time by enabling you to stay in a specific geographic area, while waiting for a full-time position to become available.

Variety

Each of my library-related positions are different. The staff, procedures, technology, and especially the patrons vary. Being exposed to varied communities provides me with a well-rounded perspective of librarianship and allows me to develop different skill sets. In addition to providing reference, I have had the opportunity to do collection development, information literacy instruction, participate on work committees, liaison with faculty, teach online courses and work on library Web pages—all great skills to have on a resume! I would not have had the opportunity to develop and hone these skills without working part-time in a variety of library environments along

with a willing attitude to take on whatever tasks are given to me. I am constantly learning new things from the mixture of duties which expose me to the different ways that librarians serve their patrons and communities. I also find that I can be a resource to the various organizations that I work for because I can offer input on how things are done at the other organizations, which can help to provide anecdotal evidence for decision-making. Finally, working in different organizations lets you “test out” different environments (Johnston 2004). As you explore different aspects of librarianship and types of organizations, this can help you focus future job searches on the areas of most interest to you and the environments best suited for your personality.

Networking

By working in different libraries, I’ve had the wonderful opportunity to meet and work with different librarians, which has helped me to develop a great network of colleagues. Having this network of colleagues is really invaluable to me, as I am able to observe, collaborate and learn from them. Additionally, different colleagues get to know your abilities and skills, which can often lead to other job opportunities both within and outside their organization.

While there are many benefits to working part-time, there are also some challenges to know about when considering part-time employment. The biggest ones are unpredictable hours, uncertain earnings, limited or no benefits, and feelings of disconnectedness.

Unpredictable hours = uncertain earnings

I work for two community colleges where hours are determined term by term, so trying to develop a schedule beyond the eleven-week span of the term can be difficult.



And obviously, the nature of on-call work is such that you're never sure when you might get a call to work. So it can be hard to know your long-term schedule, which can affect the flexibility of your schedule. I mentioned the benefits of a flexible schedule above, but it is a fine balance between being available and unavailable for work; you don't want to be too unavailable to work, because then you likely won't get any scheduled hours. Additionally, part-time hours are often available during the less desirable times such as evenings and weekends. This can be difficult to juggle when you have family members whose schedules revolve around a more traditional Monday–Friday, 8–5 work or school schedule. Another downside to unpredictable hours is it can be hard to plan financially because you cannot always rely on consistent hours week-to-week (if you're on-call) or term-to-term, as hours are determined by the needs and budget of the library. This can be especially difficult if you need to rely on a steady income for living expenses.

No (or very limited) benefits

In general, part-time work is hourly work only, which means no benefits. So, while some part-timers may be able to cobble together enough part-time hours at a variety of libraries to work 40 hours a week, you likely will not have the health insurance, retirement plans, vacation/sick leave and other benefits that typically accompany a single, full-time job. Some part-time jobs that are at least 20 hours a week may offer limited or reduced benefits, but you frequently have to be scheduled at least 20 hours a week a significant portion of the year to earn those benefits which can be difficult to maintain, since consistent part-time hours are typically not guaranteed. Additionally, many organizations do not provide professional development funds to part-time workers or compensate part-tim-

ers for time spent attending professional conferences or workshops (Johnston 2004), which can make it harder to participate in professional activities.

Feeling disconnected

Being a part-time or on-call librarian means that you don't always get the "memo" on new procedures, technologies and issues going on in the library because you're not always there when decisions are made or implemented. While this allows you to become adept at quickly assimilating to your environment and becoming very nimble at figuring things out on the fly, it can also lead to feelings of disconnectedness because you don't always have the larger picture of what goes on within the organization. Overall, the libraries and librarians I work with are very communicative, collaborative and inclusive—I really can't emphasize this enough. However, communication efforts still fall through the cracks once in a while, as it does in all organizations, and such situations can leave a part-time librarian feeling detached from the organization. These feelings of detachment can be exacerbated if you work during weekend and evening hours when regular staff are not around. It is essential to maintain contact with the other librarians to mitigate these feelings (Collins & Brungard 2006).

In a nutshell, being a part-time worker in the library field can provide great opportunities, including gaining valuable experience, flexible schedules and networking with knowledgeable colleagues. Due to some of the challenges of part-time work, it can be helpful to have a spouse or partner who has a job that provides income stability and benefits. It also helps if you like to take on a variety of tasks and you are willing to embrace ambiguity.

Overall, I really enjoy my part-time positions and I do think it's a viable op-



Advice for new librarians

Be flexible and keep learning. Your job in 2 years will be different than it is today. Focus on the library user's needs. Think about all the users and potential users—what are their needs? How can the library help them? Remember to listen. Librarians are great at finding answers but first must hear the question.

—PETER LEONARD
Executive Director,
Cedar Mill Community
Library Association



with trends in the community the manager can help guide the direction of the collection to best meet the community's expectations. Designing programs and developing projects that reflect the community interests also can be a gratifying aspect of a manager's duties.

Facilities and technology often fall into management's bailiwick. Keeping yourself educated about the technology and facilities you manage helps operations run smoothly. It's possible that you may be part of a building project—expanding, renovating, or constructing a library can be extremely rewarding. Determining future space needs; designing a facility and working with consultants, architects, and construction crews are all areas that library managers may find themselves.

As managers we have to remember to tend to ourselves. Not by taking advantage of our "lofty status" by taking privileges but by always thinking about ways to reenergize ourselves and our energy for our careers. Sometimes the satisfaction of seeing a project succeed, a staff person blossom or a new

program prosper is more than enough to keep us excited about our work.

Beta Phi Mu, the library and information studies honor society selected the motto, *Aliis inserviando consumidor*, meaning "Consumed in the service of others" to honor the dedication of librarians to the service of others. Once you attain a management position in libraries you don't have to lose that dedication—you have the opportunity to create and manage a culture of service to others in your library.

Management is not all about paperwork and problems—rather it offers the ability for us to have a positive impact on our library and its collection and services, the staff, the community, and ourselves. By taking on a management role in your library we give back to the profession and influence the future of libraries and librarians. 

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tion for librarians who want a job (or jobs) that offers variety and flexibility. And if you ever meet me, you'll understand why I may cringe a bit when you ask me where I work, but that won't stop me from encouraging you to try part-time work—I can honestly say it's been a lot of fun and a worthwhile adventure for me. 

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The future of librarianship and how to keep up

We need to stop trying to turn our patrons into mini-librarians and provide tools and services that make sense to them, not ones that only make sense to us.

—AARON SCHMIDT
Director,
North Plains Public Library