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Here Today, Gone Tomorrow:

Observations of an Interim Academic Library Director

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It was never my intention to be an “interim” anything, but I find that two times I have more or less accidentally served as an interim library director, first at a community college and again at a university.

A colleague, who was about to retire, recently asked me how he might find interim work. I didn’t have any good suggestions because interim positions are not common and are rarely advertised. Many interim directors are appointed from within the staff when the director leaves. In my case, though, I was a newcomer to both institutions.

The first job was advertised on a local jobline after a search for a permanent director had failed. It happened to be located in the town where I already owned a house, bought in anticipation of upcoming retirement; so I applied. The search was very abbreviated—just a couple phone calls, a brief visit with the VP for Academic Affairs, an hour-long meeting with the library staff, and a talk with the head of HR.

The second time around I had already retired and received a phone call from the current interim who had just accepted a job elsewhere. Again, the hiring process was rapid and informal; I e-mailed a resume with the names of references and had brief meetings with the Provost, the outgoing Interim University Librarian, and the library leadership team.

One might be tempted to think that an interim position would be an easy gig: attend some meetings, turn in the paperwork on time, monitor the budget, attend ceremonial functions, meet important donors, and enjoy watching the library run while the powers that be recruit a new director. I’m glad I wasn’t tempted by such notions because serving as an interim at both institutions has proven to be very challenging work. The information landscape is changing much too fast for even one year to pass without confronting decisions that will have far-reaching, long-term effects. These challenges are, of course, exacerbated by the budgetary pressures that impinge on all academic libraries. I find myself agreeing with Gail Munde, author of one of the few articles on the interim academic library director position: “The interim director never sleeps” (Munde, pp 416–7). Or at least not much!

The goal for any interim academic library director is to bring a measure of stability to the library during a time of transition and organizational change. This needs to happen even though the interim is always on the steep end of the learning curve. There isn’t a lot of time to get up to speed. Every scrap of previous experience and knowledge is useful and the more the better. Although each library presents unique challenges, there are commonalities that ease the transition to a new institution.


An interim recruited from outside who has already been an academic library director may have some advantages. Experience working with academic vice presidents, fellow deans, faculty library committees, development officers, and donors makes it easier to assume the role as principal advocate and spokesperson from the library to the academic community and its supporters. Familiarity with budgeting, academic personnel administration, recruiting, faculty governance, promotion and tenure procedures, accreditation, and institutional administrative structures helps with the rapid uptake of new responsibilities.



On the other hand, an interim appointed from within to a new leadership role has the advantage of familiarity with the functioning of that particular library and the idiosyncrasies of local campus procedures and personalities that are necessary to be effective. In either case, a sound understanding of the rapidly changing academic library environment is important for the interim director. In our region, the Orbis Cascade Alliance academic library consortium plays an important role in supporting core academic library functions. Previous experience with the Alliance at other member libraries helped ease my own transition in both interim assignments.

The interim period must be a time for progress, yet the interim must also be mindful that permanent leadership is imminent and try to preserve maximum flexibility for the incoming director. It's a balancing act to know when decisive decision-making is required and when decisions can safely be deferred. If key positions are vacant, library administration may be operating at less than full strength during the interim period in order to let the new director have input into building a new leadership team.

One experience that every interim encounters is the process of recruiting a new library director. Many interims, especially those promoted from within the library, may be interested in the permanent appointment. Others plan only to serve until a new librarian is hired. It is important that the library staff and university administration are clear about the interim's intentions when it comes time to do the search. Institutions vary on the role of the interim in the search process. Although I did not seek a permanent appointment at either library, I was asked to chair the search committee at one place and not appointed to the search committee at the other. In every case, the interim can provide a unique perspective for the candidates during the interview process. After the hire is made, the interim will likely begin to include the incoming director in decision-making in anticipation of her/his arrival. Perhaps one of the most important responsibilities of the interim is to be sure that plenty of institutional knowledge is passed on to the new director. Finally, as the interim heads for the door, it should be with a sense of satisfaction that the enterprise has made progress and is well positioned to chart a new course under new leadership.

Unanticipated as they were, I have immensely enjoyed my two stints as an interim academic library director. For me, the real pleasures of the interim assignment are the chance to understand the cultural differences among libraries, to observe the academic library mission through a different institutional lens, and to work with a new cohort of library and institutional colleagues. Organizational structures and communication patterns vary widely and an administrative strategy that works well at one place may backfire at another. Adapting to a new environment—and quickly—is a challenge. The interim appointment is lifelong learning in action! 

References

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