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The Mentor: Landing That First Job Without Library Experience

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The Mentor: Landing that First Job without Library Experience

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Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection and professional growth.

So you have a brand new MLS/MLIS or you're working on one. You've started looking at position ads and most require library experience. You don't have library experience. *How can you get your first library job if no one will hire you before you have library experience?*

This is a challenge that many face when new to the field of librarianship. Finding, hiring and training employees is expensive and people like me want to do it right the first time. As Brian Kenney puts it (2013), "I am keenly interested in knowing whether you've worked in a library—either as a part-timer, intern, or volunteer—and what you've made of those experiences... libraries have their own distinct culture, and I would be loath to hire a new grad who had never worked in a library for fear that she'd head for the hills in three months".

Before we get to some of the things you can do to get some relevant experience, here are some tips that will help overall.

How Did You Become Interested in Librarianship?

If your answer to this question is "I like to read", you might want to reconsider this even if it is true. Very few library jobs allow people to read all day. This answer might signal that you really don't understand what it's like to work in a library. Instead, try to relate other experiences or interests in your life to library work.

Make Past Experiences Work for You

All of us come into librarianship with some prior life experience, even if we went straight from an undergraduate degree to graduate school. Plunder that experience for nuggets that relate to library positions. For example:

- Did you work in a retail job dealing with customers daily? Most library jobs require some sort of customer service.
- Do you have supervisory experience? Supervising people may be different in nuanced ways from institution to institution, but your experience is valuable.
- Did you do research for a friend to help them successfully complete a project?
- Do you serve as an informal Readers Advisor for friends and family?
- Do you like to do Heraldry for the Society of Creative Anachronism as a hobby?
- Have you been a leader in your child's PTA, Scouts or 4-H?

Find someone to help you identify and extrapolate skills that will transfer into your chosen career. An advisor, career counselor, librarian or a good friend can help you see your experience in a new light. Don't wait for the perfect job ad to do this, practice in advance. Look at job ads and try to find something in your background that relates to every required and preferred area.

Treat Unpaid Volunteer Activities as Paid Positions or Job Interviews

As you look for ways to get involved in the profession and gain library experience, treat every activity as if you are working for a paycheck. As Sean O'Brien writes (2013), "There aren't many things more embarrassing than getting fired from a job where they aren't even paying you in the first place". Your goal is not only to get experience, but to do it so well that you'll earn excellent recommendations or an invitation to a paid position.

Here are some ways to gain valuable experience and network toward that first big job:

Volunteer in a library

This is an excellent way to gain some experience and give library staff a chance to get to know you and your work. If you can arrange a volunteer position in the library in which you would like to work, all the better! Although volunteer tasks may seem trivial, the work is critical for the libraries that rely on volunteers and will sometimes lead to a paid part-time or temporary position.

Apply for Part-time or Temporary Library Positions

This type of work translates into experience and in some libraries, are the first step toward a full time position. Don't skimp on the time you take to fill out the application. Treat it as seriously as you would a full-time permanent position.

Join a Library Association and Get Involved

Volunteer for a committee or taskforce, or run for an office in a section or division. This is a great way to build name recognition and demonstrate what you can do. Build a network by attending conferences. Sit with people you don't know and get to know them. Do some research beforehand on the libraries in which you'd like to work and look for attendees from those libraries.

Consider an Internship, Practicum or Independent Study

Even a short stint in a position like this can illustrate your skills and knowledge to potential employers and may translate into paid part-time or temporary work. If you choose this route, consult with library faculty and librarians in your area on how to approach a library and how to develop a project or experience that is worthwhile to both you and the library in question.

Look for Leadership Opportunities beyond Libraries

There many, many more experiences that may extrapolate into library positions or get your foot in the door for other positions.

Apply for jobs in a larger umbrella group such as the school district, municipality or university. Volunteer for other nonprofit, civic, sports or humanitarian groups, or hold an office in your neighborhood association. These groups face similar challenges as libraries do in finding funding and engaging patrons.

Help plan a local festival or event to extend your network, particularly if the event is sponsored or co-sponsored by a library.

Attend a citizen leadership academy or civic training session. What better way to understand how a municipality works for a future public library director?

Want to share your experience finding or preparing to find your first job? Write us at pqeditors@gmail.com!

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Tracy Bicknell-Holmes has more than 25 years of experience working in academic libraries in positions with progressively greater responsibility. She currently serves as Dean of Albertsons Library at Boise State University. She has been an active member of the Library Leadership Advisory Committee (LiLAC), a collaborative effort between the Idaho Commission for Libraries and the Idaho Library Association that has been appointed and charged with developing a framework for leadership development for all members of the Idaho library community. Her current work in this area involves mentoring.