Migrating to Public Librarianship: Depart on Time to Ensure a Smooth Flight

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ABSTRACT
CAREER CHANGE CAN BE A DIFFICULT, TIME-CONSUMING, and anxiety-laden process for anyone contemplating this important decision. The challenges faced by librarians considering the move from academic to public librarianship can be equally and significantly demanding. To most outsiders, at least on the surface, it may appear to be a quick and easy transition to make, but some professional librarians recognize the distinct differences between these areas of librarianship. Although the ubiquitous nature of technology has brought the various work responsibilities of academic and public librarians closer together during the last decade, there remain key differences in job-related duties and the work environments. These dissimilarities pose meaningful hurdles to leap for academic librarians wishing to migrate to the public sector. By examining the variations between academic and public librarianship, academic librarians may find the transition to public librarianship less intimidating.

Public libraries have a long history of educational and cultural involvement with the communities they serve. In the earliest days, and even well into the twentieth century, many public libraries were constructed with private funds on the condition that library services were provided to the general public at no cost to the library user. Educators, business professionals, politicians, and other civic leaders firmly believed that there was a direct correlation between the provision of free library services and a literate populace and a free society (Kemp, 1999, p. 116). This philosophy is still adhered to today and serves as the foundation for many services provided by public libraries, especially small to medium-sized facilities.

In order to better comprehend what is involved in pursuing a career
in public librarianship, an understanding of public library in comparison to academic library organization is essential. Although various public service initiatives offered in public libraries are similar to those prevalent in academic libraries, distinct variations exist which affect the overall organizational structure and operations. Likewise, internal and external issues confronting public libraries are noticeably different when compared to the academic environment. These unique characteristics of organizational design are evident throughout public libraries. Considered collectively these individual features help to define public libraries in general and distinguish them from academic organizations.

Public libraries reflect, to a large degree, the communities they serve. They are usually established as a result of public law and are empowered through various legislation. Although most public libraries operate somewhat independently of other government agencies, they are administered by library boards which are normally appointed or elected to serve the surrounding community. Maintained primarily by local or property taxes, public libraries also rely on a combination of state and federal funding. Theoretically, public libraries provide open access to all library users, but in actuality certain municipalities alter this practice based on individual economic needs and other fiscal considerations.

**Political Atmosphere of Public Libraries**

The political climate of a public library plays a major role in its stability, development, and success as an institution. Despite the fact that public library directors and library boards bear the brunt of political pressures, frontline librarians also feel the effects of such pressures since public policy and major decisions cross all boundaries. Because public libraries are dependent on local and state funding, and since board members are usually appointed by the same political figures responsible for this financial support, the political character of public librarianship often mirrors its trustees. The variety of individuals and groups serviced by public libraries is so diverse that managing the political agenda becomes a tremendous task. Educational institutions, governmental agencies, civic groups, private citizens, and the business community must all be tended to and handled with care. Each constituent requires its own politically correct response.

Academic libraries, on the other hand, exist to meet the educational and research needs of a fairly limited variety of clientele. Primarily, these constituents are composed of students and faculty throughout the campus community. Nontraditional students and the expansion of distance education have changed the complexion and increased the average age of students across the curriculum in the United States, but the majority of library users at academic institutions are still in the 18–35 age bracket. The function of the academic library is connected to the overall function of the college or university it serves. It also provides services and resources to the
college or university administration and staff, but to a lesser extent. Organizational goals and objectives are developed specifically in response to these types of library users, although the community at large is factored into this equation regarding various outreach initiatives. The political pressure that is extremely visible in public libraries is less conspicuous from outside sources in the community and is certainly nonexistent from library boards regarding academic libraries.

**Library Boards**

The library board is probably what makes the public library so unique and different from the academic library. Academic libraries often have an advisory committee that represents various departments throughout campus, acts as liaison with the campus community, and serves as an advocacy body regarding library policies and procedures. The academic library administration is also accountable to the university administration concerning budgetary issues, recruitment and hiring, and basic library practices. But academic libraries are basically autonomous entities existing within the environment of higher education, acting independently from any dominant group of individuals such as a public library board.

In contrast, public library boards wield an enormous amount of power and control in relation to the vast majority of essential library policies and other duties required by law. Whereas most academic libraries determine policy for themselves, public library boards adopt policies. These policies provide the foundation upon which the public library is structured. Library directors and their respective staffs are accountable for the daily operations of each library, but library boards set the pace concerning how these operational initiatives are implemented. The magnitude to which library boards, directors, and staff come to realize the reasons behind the policies set, and the interrelationship that exists between all constituents, largely determines how effective library management is in achieving its goals and objectives.

Theoretically, library trustees possess qualifications which enable them to assume their duties and responsibilities, with the welfare of the public library being paramount. A genuine interest in the library’s future, a concern for the library as a community information center, a belief in intellectual freedom, and knowledge of effective planning and sound management are usually key qualifications of library board members.

**Organizational Goals**

The organizational goals of public libraries are broad and reach a diverse clientele. Whereas academic libraries focus most of their attention on the educational and research needs of their library users, public libraries tend to emphasize the recreational, social, and cultural needs of the whole community they serve. In effect, the public library becomes the focal point for an array of community-oriented activities, meetings, and other servic-
es. Not only does the public library assist library users of all ages, it basically serves as a clearinghouse for current information on community organizations, issues, and services. In essence, the public library becomes a place where the community at large comes together. Library users are comprised of individuals from preschoolers to the elderly. This wide range of individuals is reflected in the multitude of services provided.

**COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT**

The collection development initiatives undertaken by academic libraries normally match the research and teaching agendas emphasized by the faculty at these respective institutions. Within this framework different types of academic libraries concentrate on different kinds of collections. While larger universities may focus on the needs of graduate degree programs and research faculty requirements, smaller liberal arts colleges tend to collect materials which support the undergraduate student curriculum. Although the size of collections may vary from one academic library to another, they almost always include current research journals, related monographs, theses and/or dissertations, and often special collections of rare books or historical information of prime importance to local history professionals or genealogical societies.

Public libraries, on the other hand, tend to react more to current, high-demand materials regarding their collection development initiatives. Although public libraries assist students and scholars of all ages achieve their educational objectives, the policies maintained by public libraries do not focus on the research components or historical emphasis prevalent in most academic library collection-development policies. Product mix is the main operational method employed by public libraries. Books, videos, films, compact discs, art prints, pamphlets, cassettes, and mainstream periodicals are all required to satisfy specific segments of the general public. To some extent, all of these resources provide an answer to customer demand.

Because of the variety of community needs, changes in socioeconomic structure, and emerging technologies, public libraries are finding themselves in a constant state of assessment concerning the types of materials acquired in response to public demand. Even though medium- to large-sized public libraries may own special collections, the majority of these collections tend to change as societal demands shift. As opposed to academic libraries, public libraries place less emphasis on preserving significant portions of the collection for research or historical purposes. Public libraries responsible for collection development thus deal with collection-building in a more transitory manner than do academic libraries.

**CENSORSHIP**

Censorship has always been an issue that public libraries have experienced with more regularity than academic libraries. Over the years, censor-
ship complaints have concentrated on a variety of individual works—especially in children's and young adult literature—that library board members, irate citizens, or any number of community groups have leveled objections against. Currently, challenges that examine public library policies and collection development initiatives are becoming more prevalent. Internet filtering is a prime example of a related issue that has surfaced during the last few years. Public libraries are now managing public Internet use by developing policies and guidelines that preselect Internet sites considered acceptable for library patrons to access (Estabrook & Lakner, 2000, p. 60). Librarians who work in public libraries have always been more reactive to public policy and legislation. Consequently, the policies established by public libraries reflect the areas of public concern that have been the focus of recent discussion and federal bills related to the installation of filtering devices (p. 60). As access to the Internet has increased, and various issues regarding intellectual freedom are being added to the equation, public librarians continue to respond to an array of challenges.

DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Librarianship in general has always experienced difficulty in providing public services to diverse populations. Historically, public libraries have not been extremely successful in this respect regarding multicultural library users. Many roadblocks exist which have hampered efforts to expand services to the various ethnic groups served by public libraries. Reasons that explain this dilemma include lack of sensitivity to diversity issues, inadequate funding, racial barriers, and improper training of library staff. Attempts to reverse this situation have been severely hindered by the fact that many public libraries still do not have a sufficiently multicultural staff to address these issues. Although attempts have been made by many public library administrations throughout the nation to increase minority staff representation, using ineffective methods to recruit minority librarians remains the norm. Very little emphasis has been placed on targeting minority groups, providing staff development opportunities that encourage minority recruitment, or marketing the library in ways which will attract minority candidates. Library schools have been somewhat successful in recruiting teachers to their programs, but statistics still reflect a dearth of minority librarians employed at many large metropolitan public libraries, and especially at small- to medium-sized public libraries across most of the United States.

EMPLOYMENT PROCESS

Obtaining employment in public libraries is distinctly different from applying for a job in the academic arena. The normal rule of thumb regarding the application process for academic library positions is fairly straightforward. A second master's degree, subject expertise, a significant amount of experience in computer technology, excellent presentation skills, library
instruction experience, and knowledge in providing reference service in an electronic environment are standard. In addition to a formal application, transcripts, and letters of reference, academic library positions often require an extensive curriculum vitae outlining an applicant's list of publications, presentations, previous committee involvement, and possible teaching experience.

When applying for public library positions, the application process is considerably different. A formal application, letters of reference, and transcripts may be required as they are for academic positions, but other credentials—such as a resume reflecting scholarly or service activities—are not usually required. Less importance is placed on publications, presentations, and service or committee involvement. Public library positions often reflect the need for individuals who are generalists and not subject specialists. In many cases, applicants possessing expertise in certain areas are overlooked because of the generalist mentality that exists in the public sector. Whether done intentionally or not, public library advertisements often require public library experience as a condition of employment, thereby restricting the potential pool of excellent candidates who may have been employed, up to this point, in academic libraries.

Public library jobs usually fall under civil service guidelines. Certification requirements often vary from state to state so it is difficult to project which requirements might exist. These civil service regulations on a local, county, or state level can add additional steps to the overall job search. Written and possible oral examinations may be required as part of the application process. Because candidates are usually placed on a candidate list as a result of these examinations, and thereby ranked accordingly, applicants may not be able to accurately determine how long the search process will take. The written examination fulfills its duty by initially screening a potentially lengthy list of applicants, but it also results in one major disadvantage because of the nature and content of the testing process. Examinations are very often not updated for years at a time, and in many cases, do not examine areas relevant to the position applied for. Candidates who may have expertise in areas such as computer programming, management skills, human resource issues, Web development techniques, or matters related to diversity are not properly screened because examinations lack appropriate questions that could reveal these attributes. Consequently, this strict ranking system based on numerical test scores results in an ineffective process of evaluation. The bottom line is that all too frequently examinations administered by municipalities do not reflect current trends in librarianship.

**Public Libraries and Their Future**

Public libraries have not been immune to the forces of change which have affected most institutions during the last decade as a result of increased
technology. Add to these technological innovations a potpourri of social, economic, and political pressures, and you have a public library environment drastically different than it was just a few years ago. In response to these immense challenges, public libraries need to, more than ever, reposition themselves to remain legitimate contenders in the information field for the twenty-first century (Crisman, 1998, p. xxi). Since public libraries have traditionally lagged behind academic institutions in this regard, it has become vitally important that this reengineering occur at a faster pace.

Public libraries are basically reflections of the communities they serve. If economic conditions are deteriorating or populations dwindling, public libraries will probably be struggling to keep afloat providing basic public services. Likewise, technological needs and adequate staff will present much greater challenges. In contrast, if the economy is thriving and businesses are booming, public libraries will also be in a much better position to enhance their respective technology infrastructures and to provide the level of staffing required to undertake these objectives. The end result is that the majority of library systems are somewhere in the middle, adjusting their budgets and settling for an adequate increase in technology and staffing.

The programs developed and the services provided by public libraries must be in direct response and proportion to the needs of the community of library users. If the library is going to be successful in meeting the needs of its constituents, it will have to become an active player in the political, social, and cultural arena. In the past, public libraries possessed a fairly narrow vision regarding the clientele they served. Libraries must now assume a broader vision if they are going to continue to be supported. Children, young adults, the physically challenged, adults, and all ethnicities must be included in program-planning and services provided. Library directors and boards need to reexamine their missions if objectives are to be achieved.

The hierarchical organizational structure that exists in so many public libraries has not allowed for as much growth as is needed today. Public libraries must start to take a team approach to problem-solving and the decision-making process. The complexity of working in a dynamic environment such as a public library demands no less. The public library of today must involve all staff in its daily operational planning if it is going to succeed. Individuals and support groups, representing the diverse clientele served by public libraries, must work in tandem with the library administration and professional staff to ensure the provision of public and technical services. The library’s image is in drastic need of a cosmetic lift.

**Public Library Image**

One crucial area public libraries must address is image. Throughout the past few decades public libraries have come under increased scrutiny regarding what policies are implemented, how information access is pro-
vided, and what library staff do in the performance of their duties. A rec-
recurring theme in the literature indicates that the public maintains an in-
complete or distorted image of libraries and how they function (Raber &
Budd, 1999, p. 180). Academic librarians seeking to change from higher
education to the public library sector must realize this situation. This ques-
tionable image is especially prominent for public librarianship (p. 180).

Although some of these negative images are a result of the way librar-
ians have been depicted in film, television, and literature, many of these
responses are a direct result of the way the community perceives the pub-
lic library with regard to information technology. With information so readi-
ly available on demand, many people see the public library as obsolete
(Raber & Budd, 1999, p. 182). No longer do library users need to consult
public librarians for information retrieval. Questions can now be answered
online without this intermediary process once so essential to the majority
of library users.

CONCLUSION

One advantage that academic librarians may have in seeking employ-
ment in the public sector is that many prognosticators believe the library
profession is suffering from a lack of qualified professionals. Some main-
tain that librarianship is in such dire straits that a crisis is looming. Job
openings are plentiful, but the supply of new librarians is inadequate to
handle the demand (St. Lifer, 2000, p. 38). Thus, not only are new librari-
ans extremely marketable, but those possessing experience in a variety of
areas are especially sought after.

On the flip side, though, public library positions have traditionally paid
less than academic library positions. Likewise, many positions open to pro-
spective librarians are in smaller cities where salaries are generally even
lower. Thus, academic librarians who decide to make the switch to the public
sector should be advised that salaries may not compensate enough for this
shift to be worthwhile in the long run.

The shift to public librarianship is a major decision. It involves not only
the time and effort expended with the application process, but a commit-
tment to working in an environment quite different from academic librar-
ianship. Librarians migrating to most public libraries will still experience an
institution with a hierarchical organizational structure. Public libraries
exhibit a division of labor unique to the library as an organization (Webb,
1989, p. 20). Unlike many academic libraries, public libraries retain a strong
sense of departmentalization. The flatter and more participative organiza-
tional structure prevalent in academic libraries will not be exhibited in most
public libraries.

In the final analysis, making the shift to public librarianship should not
be based on any overnight decision. Although similarities exist between
academic and public librarianship, distinct differences exist which require
investigation and planning. If a smooth transition is going to occur, the prospective candidate must take the search process seriously and be willing to expend the amount of time necessary to reach an informed decision. The final decision must be made not only because of the need to change working environments, but also because of the desire to meet and accept new challenges and opportunities.

REFERENCES