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# Academic Librarianship and Career Adaptability

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# Chapter One

## Academic Librarianship and Career Adaptability

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We were inspired to write this essay by Barbara Fister's assertion that, in order to support the user's need for information, librarians must embrace functions that have not traditionally been in the academic librarian's portfolio. We shall examine the need for career adaptability in librarianship, and use a case study to illustrate four attributes librarians must develop to ensure career adaptability. The case study involved collaboration between Kansas State University (KSU) Libraries; Dr. Chuck Rice, a KSU agronomy professor; and the Global Research Alliance on Agricultural Greenhouse Gases (an international research group focused on growing food while reducing greenhouse gas emissions), to develop an open access croplands research database. We will draw from vocational psychology to discuss career adaptability, and outline strategies librarians can use to nurture and maintain career concern, career control, career curiosity and career confidence (4 Cs).<sup>i</sup>

### Introduction

All academic librarians made a series of decisions that led to their current position. They attended college; chose an undergraduate major; pursued a graduate degree in library science; and focused on an area within academic librarianship. To make these decisions, they

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likely relied on self-knowledge (e.g., interests, skills, needs, values, supports and challenges from other life roles) and what they understood about a librarian's work (e.g., professional responsibilities, skills, training and educational requirements, rewards and compensation, challenges, influence on lifestyle). They gathered this information from many resources, such as online and print sources; career self-assessments; volunteer and work experience; informational interviews; professional organizations; career counselors and advisors; academic courses; and family, friends, mentors and supervisors. Many likely found academic librarianship to be a good match because the job met their professional needs (e.g., liking and being good at their job duties, interacting with people in ways they enjoy) and personal needs (e.g., work schedules that provide time to spend on hobbies, with friends and family, and engaged in their community).

However, the needs of individuals, and of disciplines and occupations, do change over time. Academic librarians may face more significant changes today than in previous years, in large part because of globalization, shifting demographics, and significant advances in information technology.<sup>ii</sup> Consequently, academic librarians must acquire and use new skills and knowledge, and deploy current skills and knowledge in new ways if the profession is to remain relevant and successfully respond to faculty, students, administrators and other stakeholders. Although this evolution benefits the profession (and many primary responsibilities will remain unchanged) some academic librarians may feel uncertain and anxious, and question their competence and interest in this new environment. Thus, it is important to understand what helps individual academic librarians adapt to new roles and responsibilities, and simultaneously experience meaning and relevance. Furthermore, in the current climate, it is not enough to help people adapt to current shifts in the profession; we also need to understand how to best respond to future changes.

In 2010, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) published "Futures Thinking for Academic Librarians: Higher Education in 2025." Its authors assessed current trends in academia, and developed 26 scenarios that might represent the future in academic librarianship. Then, they surveyed ACRL members on their beliefs about each scenario's probability and impact. Even a casual perusing of the document will convey that academic librarianship is

changing rapidly. One of the scenarios identified by respondents as highly probable with high impact is a bridging of the scholar/practitioner divide. In this scenario, open peer-review will become the norm. This, in turn, will support community-based dialogue, and scholars and practitioners will be able to discuss how research findings apply to practice. One survey respondent wrote,

Libraries will need to reconsider what their relevance is in the research process. We need to start considering what our 'deeper meaning' is to researchers to ensure that we fit into this new model. I feel strongly that we will have a role - it will look different from our role now, and we need to be careful not to cling to past practice for nostalgic reasons.<sup>iii</sup>

Essential to this new model are librarians whose adaptability to changes to the profession will ensure their professional success as individuals, and contribute to enhancing librarianship's value to research.

ACRL has not been alone in predicting changes in academic librarianship. The Taiga Forum, comprised of university library deans from large institutions, prepares librarians for meaningful leadership roles in the field. The Forum is best known for an annual list of "provocative statements" about the future of academic libraries. In 2011, they predicted that a new model of liaison librarianship, focused on institutional content, would emerge in five years. Two years later, this is already happening. Librarians are increasingly focused on collaborations with faculty in teaching and research efforts, and are spending less time answering questions at the reference desk.

Furthermore, the work of liaison librarians is changing, even for those who entered the work force as little as five years ago. There are growing expectations among funders, such as the National Institutes of Health, that research be interdisciplinary, data-intensive, and collaborative, requiring researchers to develop interdisciplinary teams.<sup>iv</sup> With these moves away from siloed research, librarians too, must find ways to adapt new models of research, and support the creation and discoverability of institutional content. Career adaptability

is essential for librarians to be successful and find fulfillment over the course of their careers.

## **The Four Dimensions (4 Cs) of Career Adaptability**

Career adaptability<sup>v</sup> provides a framework for understanding how librarians might find fulfillment as their roles change, and relies on the “readiness and resources” to cope with “vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas”.<sup>vi</sup> There are four dimensions to career adaptability – career concern, career control, career curiosity, career confidence – and each speaks to attitudes, beliefs, competencies, and behaviors that serve as coping strategies, and indicate openness to career transitions. In this chapter, we explore how academic librarians can develop the readiness, resources, and strategies to manage occupational transitions in a rapidly changing profession, accountable to a variety of stakeholders.

Academic librarians with an adaptive level of *career concern* are those who are or are “becoming *concerned* about their future as a worker”,<sup>vii</sup> in general, or as an academic librarian, specifically. This is not the same as disabling anxiety or worry, but instead involves an attitude or belief that *planning* for the future is necessary and beneficial. Career adaptive academic librarians cope with occupational transitions by being *aware*, and by anticipating transitions in roles and responsibilities in their own careers and throughout the profession. These librarians maintain beliefs and attitudes that allow them to make good choices, and *prepare* for the future by being *involved* in activities that accomplish today’s work tasks, and those anticipated in the future.<sup>viii</sup> By connecting the present to the future – in thought and action – one can experience continuity as the profession evolves. These librarians become able to see the differences between the profession they originally prepared for and what it has become, but they are not personally disrupted by this awareness because they act on the themes that connect the two.

*Career control* is assuming “control over (one’s) vocational future”.<sup>ix</sup> This means that one feels *responsible* for their vocational future, and thus, is able to make *autonomous* career plans and

choices. To have this control, people must be competent *decision makers*. Career adaptive academic librarians are able to be *assertive, disciplined* and *willful* when coping with transitions.<sup>x</sup> This is not a call for extreme individualism, but recognition that people are more likely to experience work-satisfaction after professional transitions when they take ownership of their career paths, instead of leaving them to chance. In this process, some will act independently and others more interdependently. There are parameters on these choices, especially when one wishes to remain in a changing profession, and with an employer. Nevertheless, exercising career control can assist in positive adaptation. People should always review the choices they have; make intentional choices; and take responsibility for their work.<sup>xi</sup>

Academic librarians display *career curiosity*, "... by exploring possible selves and future scenarios" (p. 52) because they believe it is beneficial to be *inquisitive* about their profession (e.g., "What is changing in academic libraries, and at my institution?") and themselves (e.g., "Which of these changes excites me the most?"). To be curious in this way, people must be competent *explorers*, or nimble information-gatherers. There are many resources to aid this kind of professional development, such as journals; professional organizations; colleagues; supervisors; mentors; and events and activities. Career adaptive librarians manage career transitions by gathering information about the profession, their institutions, and noticing where these categories overlap and diverge. Furthermore, they *take risks* and experiment with different professional roles and tasks.<sup>xii</sup>

It is also important that academic librarians have or develop "... the *confidence* to pursue their aspirations"<sup>xiii</sup> and believe they are able to achieve goals, negotiate challenges, and overcome obstacles. Librarians must feel like they are able to achieve broad career aspirations, and feel confident taking on specific responsibilities in a job description. For example, an academic librarian may feel confident in her ability to eventually become a department head, but not feel confident about her ability to contribute to a faculty member's proposal for a large, international research grant. When pursuing their professional aspirations, career adaptive academic librarians cope with career transitions by *persisting, striving* and being *industrious*.<sup>xiv</sup> Being career adaptive requires competent *problem solving*.

As academic librarians negotiate the gaps between the profession they entered (or believed they entered), and the one they find themselves in, different people will have different (and adaptive) levels of career concern, control, curiosity and confidence because of age, professional experiences, and number of years in the profession. Institutional and societal barriers – including discrimination – can influence career adaptability. Also, individual characteristics (such as level of openness to new experiences, motivation, anxiousness) and institutional assets (such as availability of mentors, administrative support, institutional resources, opportunities for advancement or lateral position changes) will influence the development of the four dimensions of career adaptability.

## **Case Study in Career Adaptability: Collaborating to Develop an Open Access Database**

### *Overview*

In 2009, Kansas State University Libraries embarked on a reorganization of library staff in an effort to better address user needs, adapt to changes in library collections, and reallocate resources to new, developing areas in librarianship. One outcome of the reorganization the creation of a new department called Faculty and Graduate Services (FGS); their mission was, in part, to form collaborative partnerships with faculty and enhance research. To get a better understanding of research activities occurring on campus, and identify potential roles for the library, FGS librarians made an effort get out of their offices to network at campus research meetings. At one meeting, FGS librarians began discussions with Dr. Chuck Rice, a KSU agronomy professor, on how the libraries might collaborate with him and support his work for the Global Research Alliance (GRA) on Agricultural Greenhouse Gases. (Rice was a U.S. representative to the GRA, a global alliance of more than 30 countries established after a United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2009.) Dr. Rice and his GRA colleagues identified the need for an open access database of literature and data to assist croplands and greenhouse gases researchers all over the world. Once he and the FGS librarians decided to create a database on greenhouse gas emissions generated by croplands, the Croplands Research Database pilot<sup>xv</sup> was born.

The team determined that the best approach to creating the database was to start small. Dr. Rice was already working closely with an Australian GRA Croplands colleague, so the project team decided to begin with research generated from the United States and Australia. This way they had opportunities to remedy problems before making the site live. For instance, they could identify and correct any copyright issues, understand editing challenges, and set up an efficient work flow procedure that international colleagues could follow.

The Libraries and GRA Croplands Group members agreed that the database would contain published research, grey papers, reviews, and synopses. After the first phase of the project, GRA group members would be able to input their own content into the database.<sup>xvi</sup> The group members and library partners wished to make sure this collated information was not available elsewhere, to enhance the value of this pilot project.

### *Career Adaptability and Timing*

Career adaptability involves adjusting to new job tasks and career transitions “by solving problems that are usually unfamiliar, often ill-defined, and always complex”.<sup>xvii</sup> The opportunity to develop the GRA Croplands database emerged after the Libraries underwent a large restructuring, and the FGS department was established. This Department was still seeking an identity and working to define its collective goals, but most FGS members already had experience as subject liaisons, responsible for instruction, collection development, and reference services for their assigned departments. In the new model, librarians were expected to focus more on building collaborative relationships with faculty and graduate students in teaching and research. To be successful, librarians would need to re-envision their roles, learn new skills, and do new things.

The database offered such an opportunity. Neither of the project librarians involved had experience developing a research database from the ground up. Not only was database creation a new skill, but croplands research was a new subject area for the librarians. Fortunately, expertise in croplands was not necessary for the database to be successful – the GRA researchers brought extensive subject knowledge to the project. Instead, the librarians’ roles were to design



the final project with Dr. Rice, manage the process, and import, clean, and organize the data. Additional library staff members provided the programming support for website development, graphic design, and server space. The pilot project resulted in the creation of a browsable and searchable croplands research database containing research from over 30 countries (available at <http://www.lib.kstate.edu/gracroplands>).

### *The 4 Cs of Career Adaptability*

The reorganization of KSU's Libraries was, essentially, inspired by *career concern* about academic librarianship, and librarians' changing roles. Budget constraints, technological advances, and the changing landscape of information necessitated the library to assess their role on campus. Librarians knew they provided crucial support to research, teaching, and learning on campus, but they needed to leverage their strengths to do it most effectively. The reassessment led to the restructuring of the departments, priorities, and goals of the library, including the creation of the Faculty and Graduate Services Department.

During the library's reorganization, new departments including the Faculty and Graduate Services Department were created, providing an opportunity for librarians to practice *career control*. Librarians were able to increase their control over the future by deciding what work they wanted to do and in which department their work could be accomplished. Librarians who chose to work in the Faculty and Graduate Services department decided that their futures involved collaborating with and supporting the work of faculty and graduate students on campus. They were librarians willing to be partners in grant writing, creating digital collections, scholarly publishing, and assessing research impact. For many of the librarians these activities required them to take initiative to learn about work that was new to them. Few of the librarians had extensive experience collaborating on grant proposals or knew exactly what it meant to support the assessment of a faculty member's research impact.

By leaving their offices to attend campus research meetings, departmental brown bag sessions, and other campus events, librarians

working on the GRA Croplands project demonstrated *career curiosity*. Their participation informed librarians of current and emerging

research projects, and encouraged them to think of other ways (besides traditional research consultations) they might support research. Notably, the librarians first met Dr. Rice at such an event, an example of "planned happenstance." After all, professional success is not always the result of carefully made plans; it is often the product of one's ability to be open-minded, follow personal interests, and capitalize on chance events.<sup>xviii</sup>

Finally, librarians make easier career adaptations when they anticipate their own success, and have *career confidence* in their ability to overcome obstacles. To participate in the GRA Croplands project, the librarians had to overcome fears of having inadequate skills or knowledge, and take risks by participating in something new.

## **Development of Career Adaptability in Librarians**

People with low levels of career concern, control, curiosity and confidence can develop greater career adaptability by accessing support through networking opportunities and information (such as supervisory and mentoring relationships), and by attending workshops and other professional development activities. However, some individuals with career challenges face more serious personal and environmental obstacles that are not ameliorated by encouragement, support, networking opportunities, and information.

*Career indifference* may be experienced by those with low levels of career concern.<sup>xix</sup> Librarians with career indifference tend to be pessimistic about the future and avoid longer-term career planning. *Orientation exercises*, such as attending workshops or conferences focusing on the future of libraries, can be helpful for librarians experiencing career indifference.<sup>xx</sup>

Professional organizations, such as ACRL, publish articles and white papers about the future of librarianship and can serve as valuable resources for information and networking. It is also helpful to have at least one library mentor who can help set goals, ensuring that he or she takes action now to make sure those future goals are met.

Those with low levels of career control experience may *career indecision*, which makes it very difficult to make choices about future career paths.<sup>xxi</sup> Instead of planning for the future, they continue to only focus on their current routines. *Decisional training*, teaching people how to make plans and complete the necessary steps, can be helpful for people with career indecision.<sup>xxii</sup> It is possible that a librarian with career indecision lacks information and feels overwhelmed with the choices ahead, especially in such a rapidly changing environment. Again, mentors can provide help and clarity.

Those with low levels of career curiosity may experience *career unrealism*, and hold unrealistic views of librarianship and how to be successful at work.<sup>xxiii</sup> This may involve librarians thinking that the work they are doing right now is fine and there is no need to change anything. Career unrealism indicates a lack of understanding about librarianship, and may indicate a fear of change. *Information-seeking* activities, such as attending lectures, attending conferences, and developing relationships with mentors who can help them think proactively, can be helpful for those with career unrealism.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Finally, those with low levels of career confidence may experience *career inhibition*, which occurs when people do not believe they have the ability to change or problem solve.<sup>xxv</sup> Librarians with career inhibition may see that libraries are evolving, and know they have to make changes, but they do not think they can do it. Confidence building can be helpful for these librarians.<sup>xxvi</sup> Supervisors can help with confidence building by having clear expectations, and offering praise when warranted. Working with human resources departments to provide trainings and skill-building sessions also may boost staff confidence and competencies.

## Conclusion

The roles of librarians are changing. In this chapter, we focus on strategies academic librarians can use to remain flexible, positive, and adapt to changing roles and responsibilities, with the goal of continued tenure at their current institutions. We hope this process is helpful, and aids librarians who may feel anxious or worried in the changing climate. However, after reflecting on current and future personal needs, as well as those of the profession and institution; taking

responsibility for the course their career takes; exploring career possibilities; and

developing the confidence to respond to changes and achieve the career they want; an academic librarian may decide to seek work at another institution, or switch professions.

In *Reframing Academic Leadership*, Bolman and Gallos (2011) remind us of the need to seek opportunities for growth:

Don't be afraid to experiment – stretching oneself broadens life and work skills. It can be risky: you may not learn as quickly as needed, and you can find yourself in over your head. Think carefully before you leap, and then keep an open mind. We learn from failure as well as success, and sometimes learning is even easier when the going is rough.<sup>xxvii</sup>

## Notes

- i Mark Savickas. "The theory and practice of career construction". In *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work*. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).
- ii R. Feller and J. Whichard, *Knowledge Nomads and the Nervously Employed: Workplace Change & Courageous Career Choices*. CAPS Press, 2005.
- iii David Staley and Kara Malenfant, "Futures Thinking for Academic Librarians: Higher Education in 2025. Association of College and Research Libraries", Association of College and Research Libraries, 2005, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/futures2025.pdf>.
- iv "The NIH Common Fund Office of Strategic Communication", National Institutes of Health, 2012, <https://commonfund.nih.gov/interdisciplinary/index.aspx>; "Rebuilding the Mosaic: Fostering Research in the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences at the National Science Foundation in the Next Decade", National Science Foundation, Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences, 2011, <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2011/nsf11086/nsf11086.pdf>.

v Mark Savickas. "The theory and practice of career construction". In *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work*. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

vi Ibid., .51.

vii Ibid., .52.

viii Ibid.

ix Ibid., .51.

x Ibid., .52.

xi Ibid.

xii Ibid.

xiii Ibid.

xiv Ibid.

xv Livia Olsen, Tara Baillargeon, and Harish Maringanti, "Developing an Open Access Croplands Research Database through Global Collaboration," *Journal of Agricultural and Food Information* 13, no. 1 (2012) : 35-44.

xvi "Croplands Research Group Final Meeting Report," Global Research Alliance on Agricultural Greenhouse Gases, INRA Grignon and Palais de Congress de Versailles, France, March 2011, <http://www.ricclisa.org/informacion-general>.

xvii Ibid.

xviii K.E. Mitchell, Al Levin, and J.D. Krumboltz, "Planned Happenstance: Constructing Unexpected Career Opportunities," *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 77 (1999) : 115–124.

xix Ibid.

xx Ibid.

xxi Ibid.

xxii Ibid.

xxiii Ibid.

xxiv Ibid.

xxv Ibid.

xxvi Ibid.

xxvii L.G. Bolman and J.V. Gallos, *Reframing Academic Leadership*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

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