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Being a New Librarian in a New Library:
What to Expect When You Take the Plunge
by Sarah C. King

Just prior to my graduation I was offered a position at a new branch campus of Johnson and Wales University, a small private school esteemed for its culinary program. Largely due to the advice of my professors I decided to make the leap from graduate school into the unknown territory of this new university and its new library. My library science professors had often extolled the virtues of being involved in the birth of a new library; their wondrous depictions of their experiences inspired me to get involved as well. Of course, my professors had not so often mentioned that starting a new library (or any business) can be a chaotic experience that will always defy your expectations. In this article I hope to tell other would-be library planners what they can expect from this type of venture and add my voice to the chorus of those who recommend the experience.

Fair Expectation #1: It Will Be Different from Your Past Experiences

If and when you decide to venture into new-library land, you will quickly discover that nothing is the same as it was in **a.** the other libraries you worked in, or **b.** graduate school. Even if the library you're starting is similar in size and scope to the ones you worked for in the past, you'll be working with different people, a new patron base, and a different bureaucracy.

These differences can sometimes seem like a curse, but actually they provide an excellent opportunity to both new and old librarians. In fact, part of the charm of opening a new library is the challenge of creating the best system for the population it will serve.

Librarians stand to reap a number of benefits in planning and opening a new library. New librarians will be given first-hand experience in the planning and implementation of a new organizational system, and will quickly gain confidence in their abilities. Experienced librarians will be forced to challenge their ideas of what works best, and will ultimately expand their knowledge base. In either case interesting new innovations and teamwork are likely to thrive and everyone will end up with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Fair Expectation #2: Your Schooling Will Not Have Prepared You for Everything

In reality it is unfair to expect that the theory imparted in the classroom will fully prepare you for your first job as a librarian, because in all likelihood it will not. In general I feel fortunate to have received a wonderful and useful education at the hands of my alma mater's faculty, but I still feel that my training was lacking in a few major areas. There are already innumerable articles in which you can read diatribes of various library schools' curricula—this is not one of them. What I do wish to say is that as a new librarian you must be prepared to be unprepared. When I began my new job I quickly became aware that my classroom experiences had not prepared me to teach bibliographic instruction or to supervise, mainly because both of these activities require skills that are best learned through practice rather than lecture. All new librarians will encounter some type of gap in their education; my suggestion is to remain calm and flexible, and be ready to accept the occasional failed BI session or poor reference interview as a matter of course. Fortunately, as librarians we always know how to find materials to further our own training, so we generally are not at a loss for long.

Fair Expectation #3: There Will Be Chaos

In an established library every person has a well-defined job, a set schedule of tasks, and the knowledge and materials with which to accomplish them. The effectiveness and content of policies and strategies have already been evaluated and reevaluated. A new library has none of these things. It is highly likely that each workday will be a semi-crazed adventure; you may never be sure if you'll be totally overbooked or almost completely idle. In an established library there is a desk schedule and a concrete borrowing policy; in a new library, schedules and policies must be malleable, since they are apt to change at the drop of a hat. Even so, the daunting chore of creating order from chaos is a fabulous lesson in flexibility and patience.

Granted, this may be obvious to the experienced librarian, but new librarians often have very clear mental pictures of the Mecca of organization that will be their new

library. I am by no means an idealist, but I was disconcerted by both my initial inability to do things and the difficulty of maintaining organization. That said, even veteran librarians will not be able to foresee all the various ways in which chaos can beset a new library. Of course, a little disorder is an inevitable part of opening a business—no human can be expected to think of every contingency, and the second parties responsible for delivering needed items are also highly likely to cause delays. Again, my suggestion is to not expect immediate perfection. Rome was not built in day, nor will your library be.

Conclusion: The Benefits of Working at a New Library

Of course, now that time has passed my new library has settled into its own routine. We have established systems of organization and information delivery, and our desk schedule is laminated.   In spite of all the basic equipment problems and my occasional confusion, I feel that the benefits of opening a new library far exceed the difficulties. As an employee of a new library I have had an opportunity to work on widely-varied tasks, and have been able to cement the theoretical information I learned from library school into real life knowledge. Also, rather than being pigeonholed into performing one task, I am involved in many aspects of library service, including acquisitions, cataloging, instruction, faculty communication, supervision, scheduling, and reference. I have also been afforded the opportunity to work closely with the basic setup of a library. When setting up a new library, you may learn the hard way about important items that you did not remember to order. Building a collection, watching it arrive, and processing it all yourself is highly rewarding and gives you a step-by-step understanding of what is involved in getting a book on the shelf. Like so many of my professors, I would also heartily recommend keeping an eye out for an opportunity to open a new library. It is impossible to foresee all the difficulties you will encounter, but the gratification of checking out that first book makes even the most trying day well worth the effort.

About the Author:

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