ACTION ITEMS
for New Librarians

by Susan Whitmer, Christina Cool, Amanda Mims, and Suzanne Townsdin

A librarian's first year of professional work is full of expectations – both from the new librarian and the employer. Job responsibilities can range from serving as the LibGuides administrator to library instructor for first-year English composition classes. Library and information science schools prepare new librarians with theory. However, it is on-the-job training and the ability to adapt to an institution's culture that determines success.

We are four new librarians at the Texas Woman's University (TWU) Libraries. The TWU Libraries have locations in Denton, Dallas, and Houston. TWU is a co-educational, liberal arts university that has an enrollment of approximately 15,000 full-time students. TWU is the largest university primarily for women in the United States.

Education and Employment Background

Christina Cool: I received my BA in the study of religion from the University of California at Los Angeles in 2002. I then used that degree to say, "Look, I have a BA!," and promptly became a marketing associate at a local direct-mail and online marketing company in Los Angeles. I moved to Texas, earned a MLS from the University of North Texas in 2009, and then spent the next four years working from home doing search engine evaluation before being hired as the electronic resources librarian at TWU.

Amanda Mims: I have an associate's degree in fine arts from North Central Texas College, a BA in English, and an MLS (both from TWU). Before my first librarian job, I worked in paraprofessional positions: circulation assistant, part-time reference librarian, special projects associate in an academic archive, graduate assistant, and swim instructor. Texas Woman's University is my first full-time professional librarian position. I am a health sciences librarian.

Suzanne Townsdin: I have three degrees from the University of North Texas: a BA in anthropology, a BA in Spanish (with secondary teaching certificate), and an MLIS with a certificate in digital content management. My work experience includes shelver, graduate library assistant, and stacks manager. After receiving my MLIS in May 2014, I accepted my first professional librarian position at Texas Woman's University in July 2014 as the science reference librarian.

Susan Whitmer: I have two degrees from the University of North Texas: a BFA in studio art and a MLIS. Before becoming a librarian, I worked in paraprofessional positions at the UNT Libraries: technical services, preservation, and research and instructional services. I'm the humanities reference librarian at Texas Woman's University.

First Success Brings Confidence

CC: One of my primary tasks is to fix things when they are broken. Databases with linking errors, journals with inaccurate coverage, ebooks not opening – these are all things that I need to know about and fix. There's a process: submission of a ticket into our share drive so I will be able to triage, track, and fix. As it turns out, my predecessor opted for another process. The library staff was used to calling her, and she would make a personal visit to fix problems like clearing a librarian's history and cache. Being new, I assumed that was just the way I was supposed to work. It was frustrating to not be able to track tickets and triage. Until one day my supervisor noticed what was going on.

I returned from clearing someone's cache when she asked where I'd been. When I explained, she helped me see that I was in charge and could shape my work as needed. I learned how to say no and to show users how to submit a ticket. I no longer worry about filling the shoes of my predecessor. I strive to find the best process for the task at hand.

AM: The director of one of our major programs invited me to teach a two-hour research seminar at the beginning of the fall semester. I needed to get students ready for the case report they would be writing throughout the semester. I planned which databases I was going to cover, researched tricks to keep them from getting discouraged, and identified strategies for narrowing down large search result lists. The night of the class, I had over 50 students. I pulled up the speech communication subject guide and the Internet went down. The entire campus lost Internet access. I had to quickly figure out how I was going to teach these students with no access to live databases. I created sample search PowerPoint presentations for another class, and decided to teach from those. It wasn't as good as a live search, but the students could at least see screenshots of what a successful search looks like. The director was impressed that I was able to think on my feet. We set up another time for me to teach when we had Internet access. The instructor invited me to teach again in fall semester.

ST: A few weeks into my first semester as a librarian, I was warned about a difficult biology assignment that brings many first-year students into the library every semester. Assisting these students was difficult, because the topic they were researching produced academic articles they couldn't understand as novices

in the discipline. Every semester, this assignment resulted in students feeling overwhelmed and librarians feeling unable to help.

It is not uncommon for librarians to encounter "bad research assignments." I suspected that this might be one, so I set up a meeting with the course instructor to discuss this assignment with her. First, I asked her to tell me more about the assignment. We performed a sample search in some of our databases, which I was confident would demonstrate that the assignment was too advanced for these first-year students. Instead, I learned that the assignment only required the students to comprehend a few sentences that they could relate to an experiment performed in class. They did not need to completely understand or read the entire article. The purpose of the assignment was for students to find relevant articles and cite them correctly, not for them understand everything they read. I had that "aha" moment about the importance of not making assumptions,

getting first-hand information from the instructor, and being clear on my role.

SW: As the liaison librarian to the humanities, my main responsibility is to teach library instruction to first-year composition (FYC) classes. As a new librarian, I wanted to make a good impression so I created all new FYC instruction materials. I demonstrated these materials to the English faculty hoping they would schedule my library instruction sessions for their classes. The demonstration was a hit, and most of the faculty requested at least one library instruction class.

This happened during the week that TWU provided faculty and students the option to switch from Outlook email to Gmail, so we experienced some glitches in the scheduling. After noticing some discrepancies, I followed up with faculty. I learned that starting a good relationship with faculty is just part of the process; you have to maintain a good relationship by making sure communication is

smooth and that faculty know that you are on top of projects.

Dress the Part

CC: Prior to this position, I'd spent four years working from home. My wardrobe consisted of yoga pants and t-shirts. I knew I would have to step up my game for a professional job. I invested in a nice suit for the interview and then turned to Pinterest for inspiration for a more business casual style. "Dress for the job you want, not the job you have" sounds cliché, but there is a lot of truth to it. You're going to be taken seriously when you look put together and carry yourself with confidence.

AM: I have a bit of a challenge when it comes to dressing for work - I have several visible tattoos. After searching for TWU's tattoo policy (there is not one), I decided on my own personal tattoo policy. On teaching or presentation days, I cover them up so they will not be a distraction. On any other day, it is fine if my forearm tattoos peak out. Not only

does this let me feel more comfortable, consistency helps other staff too.

ST: Despite being in my late 20s, I often get mistaken for an undergraduate. I learned quickly that professional librarians who look young need especially to dress and act the part. You want to signal that you are a professional, not a student employee. I wear business casual on most days and add a blazer on days when I have library instruction scheduled.

SW: Image is important for public service librarians, because we interact with library users and library staff. Dressing above your title shows that you have ambition. I mimic the style of fashionable academics. I shop at consignment stores and thrift stores for dresses, blazers, and suits.

What They Don't Teach You in Library School

AM: A grant writing class would be useful. I've found that one of the things faculty frequently want me to do is look over grant proposals and assist in research or by checking formatting. TWU has an Office of Research, and its staff have been incredibly helpful in navigating the grant writing process. I think it's important for new librarians to seek out that kind of training, whether by contacting the Office of Research or finding webinars and training through different professional associations.

ST: I was not taught how to teach or manage a class in library school. With today's academic reference librarians devoting so much time to library instruction, training in this activity would be useful. Because library school does not focus on teaching, it is important for aspiring academic reference librarians to research basic teaching and learning theories. Familiarity with these strategies can make your instruction more effective.

SW: A statistics course would have helped with all my assessment responsibilities. I did not learn about assessment in library school. Assessment is a large part of my job as a reference librarian and I learned most of my assessment skills by joining assessment committees, assessment webinars, and on-the-job training.

Mentors & Networking

CC: The electronic resources librarian position is a very isolated role. It's difficult to make connections when others do not fully understand what you do. I recommend joining listservs and asking questions either on or off the list. I have "met" several fellow ERLs that way and we have created our own little group with which to discuss new ideas and challenges. I have also found that attending conferences is a wonderful way to foster relationships with other ERLs, and it's comforting to know that help, inspiration, or commiseration is only an email or text away.

ST: Networking can be challenging for librarians, because many of us are introverts. I consider myself an outgoing introvert, but I struggle at networking. A strategy that has worked for me is to volunteer at conferences. Being a volunteer makes me feel more like a hostess, which encourages me to be more outgoing and interact with more people. My biggest networking advice is to make a conscious effort to get out of your comfort zone. Sit with people you do not know. Interact with the people around you and be approachable.

SW: I worked as a reference specialist in the research and instructional services department at the University of North Texas for three years. My mentors were instruction librarians who taught classes, published journal articles and books, and presented at conferences. I was fortunate to have an apprenticeship with these librarians who were willing to let me co-teach library instruction classes and co-author conference papers, poster sessions, and presentations.

Keep Up with Technology

CC: Electronic resources is a very dynamic field. I find that webinars and tutorials are an invaluable resource to keep up with ever-changing formats and interfaces. Depending on your place of employment, you may also have access to Lynda.com; if so, take full advantage of it. Many conferences also offer pre- and post-conference sessions geared specifically towards technology. If you're

attending a conference, it is a good idea to sign up for additional sessions. And don't forget to add your new skills to your CV!

AM: Webinars have been huge for me when it comes to keeping up with technology. Not only do I get to learn about different databases, technology trends, computer programs, and programming languages from experts, but I can also see how different professionals in the field implement those technologies. Things like Coursea and Lynda.com also offer great courses in different aspects of technology.

SW: Become proficient in one area of technology. Focusing on one area of technology makes it easier to learn something new, and patterns will emerge. Since I have a lot of assessment duties, I keep my spreadsheet skills sharp by watching tutorials and subscribing to spreadsheet listservs. Focusing on one area of technology makes it easier to learn something new.

Conclusion

We are four new librarians navigating our way through our first year as professionals. We worked hard to become librarians, and we developed strategies to thrive in our new positions. We have found that the best way to approach new librarianship is to turn obstacles into opportunities, take advantage of continuing education to fill in the education gaps, build a professional wardrobe, find a mentor, master technology, and network at every opportunity because the library world is about connections and being connected. ✪

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