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Transitioning by Degrees: Becoming a subject librarian through advanced education

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TITLE: Transitioning by Degrees: Becoming a subject librarian through advanced education

ABSTRACT: This paper examines on librarian's path from generalist librarian to subject specialist, with a focus on the value of additional advanced subject degrees in relationship to this work. Following the author's career path from MLS to Business Librarian at a public university, the conversation also examines attitudes, perceptions, and frequency of additional advanced degrees in the literature.

Keywords: subject librarian, academic libraries, careers in librarianship

Introduction

As part of the "Narrowing the Scope: Transitioning from general librarianship to specialized subject liaisons" panel at CAPAL18 - Community, Diversity, and Education: Academic Librarianship in Challenging Times, this paper looks at the experiences of one librarian's transition from working as a generalist librarian to a subject specialist position at a public research university, with a focus on the educational experience (namely an additional advanced subject) that guided the transition.

The paper also discusses current literature that explores librarian attitudes regarding the importance and relevance of a subject master's degree to the work of librarianship and the prevalence of a second degree requirement in job advertisements, as both topics are relevant to the conversations regarding transitioning to subject librarianship.

The presence of literature on additional advanced subject degrees is somewhat dated for a 2018 audience. Mayer and Terrill noted in 2005 that much of the research and writing was conducted in the late 1980's and early 1990's (2005, page 59). Since their article, a few more studies have appeared including the work by Smith and Oliva in 2010 regarding attitudes toward generalist and subject specific reference and professional development. More recently, Jennifer Ferguson published a study in 2016 on advanced subject knowledge in libraries that explores the occurrences of dual master's degree options and the prevalence of additional degree requirements in librarian job advertisements.

As the author works as a Business Librarian, literature focusing on the transitions in career paths is also relevant, the author reviewed several key publications including the book "Career Paths and Career Development of Business Librarians" edited by Diane Zabel (2009) and the article Business Librarians: Their Education and Training by Liu and Allen (2001). Neither of these works focus solely on the issue of advanced subject degrees, but both publications do include discussions on obtaining degrees as well as the transition to subject librarianship in business disciplines.

The author as a generalist librarian

The author's personal experience as a professional librarian begins with receiving her MSLS in 2007 from Clarion University of Pennsylvania. Prior to earning that degree, she obtained Bachelor's degrees from Penn State University in Comparative Literature, East Asian Studies, and Japanese. While studying for her Master's, she worked as a library assistant at Penn State University Libraries, with primary duties supporting outreach activities and working at the welcome desk. The author worked closely with many librarians, gaining an understanding of subject librarianship at flagship research institution, an experience that shaped her impression of the profession at an early stage in her career.

After graduation, the author looked for librarian positions that might fit her academic studies, primarily in the humanities. She accepted a position as Public Services Librarian at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). This position managed the reference and circulation desks of the library and worked as a member of the reference team. The library had five full time librarians, nine library staff, and a varied number of part time librarians working evening and weekend reference shifts a served a population of approximately 4000 enrolled students studying at the baccalaureate and graduate levels. Librarians at this institution were tenure-track faculty, but were considered bi-partite and were evaluated only on service and primarily professional responsibilities. No scholarly research or publications were required for tenure, but were encouraged.

At UAS, each librarian served at the reference desk approximately 8-10 hours per week, requiring generalist knowledge. With a small team of librarians, no one individual was a subject librarian, however each librarian served as a liaison to a department, primarily for collection development, program reviews, and instruction. Most of the instruction was done by the instruction librarian, however. Generalist knowledge related to the curriculum had to be learned, especially the region specific resources to support program such as Alaska Native Studies, languages, and Marine Biology.

After four years at UAS, the author accepted a position as Director of Library Services at Maine Maritime Academy. Maine Maritime Academy is a public college with an enrollment of 1000 students. While unique in many aspects regarding its curriculum, the school still maintains the general education classes required for Bachelor's degrees. Programs includes International Business and Logistics, Marine Engineering, Marine Transportation, Ocean Students, and Small Vessel Operations. The school offers one program at the graduate level, both online and in person, for International Logistics Management through the Loeb-Sullivan School of International Business. With the niche focus, the job had some similarities to working in a subject library, but as director, the author spent a great deal of time and energy on administrative duties. Regular reference desk shifts and collection support still required a generalist knowledge, but also an understanding of resources to support the specialized focus of the school. In this respect, the process of learning these disciplines is similar to becoming a subject librarian. The author had to network with other maritime libraries, read professional

literature, and work with faculty to understand the needs of their discipline. However, it was only a portion of the job and didn't require a full investment of time. Additionally, there were two additional librarians and two staff to share the work.

During the author's tenure as Director, the Dean of the business school approached her about working as an adjunct faculty for two graduate business research courses. After teaching the courses for a year, the author decided to pursue a graduate degree through the Academy in International Logistics Management. Several factors came into play in this process. First, tuition was waived for the program as a benefit of employment. Second, the author recognized that a number of jobs posting required a second master's degree in a subject area for promotion and tenure. Third, the author had been interested in subject librarian positions from her first exposure to them at Penn State and hoped that she would be in a better position to pursue a subject librarian position with an additional advanced degree.

After two years of working full time and taking courses, the author finished the subject masters and elected to go on the job market. She selected a position as Business Librarian at the University of New Hampshire. This is the flagship research institution for the state of New Hampshire. The student body is approximately 15,000 and grants degrees from the associate to the doctoral level. This position was new to the University, reallocated about a retirement, tenure track faculty status, and part of the newly implemented subject librarian model. The author covers all majors and programs in the Peter T. Paul School of Business and Economics, including undergraduate and graduate level programs. There are approximately 3000 students enrolled in the school. At this time in her career, the author had been a librarian for nine years.

A question of degrees

The additional advanced subject degree certainly played a large part in both obtaining the job itself and getting acclimated to the new position. A second degree is required for tenure at the author's current institution and having that already completed likely influenced the search committee's decision in some form. The institution would not have to invest the resources in the author obtaining the degree, as well as the author's trajectory towards tenure being more solidified with that box already checked.

While an additional advanced degree is required to obtain tenure at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), it is not required for hiring. A hired candidate without the second masters would need to obtain one by the time they stood for tenure. The author was hired in a cohort with three other subject librarians and was the only one of the group that already had the additional degree in hand. The others in the cohort will pursue a degree program from the institution and complete it along with the other tenure requirements.

There are many ways librarians hone their subject expertise outside of additional advanced degrees. As noted by Smith and Oliva, nearly all the literature to date of their article (2010), cited these four areas as the categories of education and development for librarians doing subject specialist work:

“Self-directed education. Keeping up with current events, watching educational television, reading professional library journals, browsing the library's reference collection, and reviewing core subject research journals.

Informal, collegial training. Working with colleagues with subject expertise, cross training at the reference desk, meeting with teaching faculty.

Formal training/in-house training. Classes/seminars at own institution, in-house training on databases by colleagues, in-house training on reference tools by colleagues.

Formal/outside training. Attending professional library conferences, database training by vendor representatives, formal training sponsored by library associations.” (page 129)

Much of the literature relating to subject specialization training and development skirts the issue of a second degree. However, as noted previously, there is a demand in the job market for that credential.

There are many models for librarian positions in academia. The author's position is as a subject specialist at the flagship research institution for the state and tenure track. All librarians at UNH, whether a subject specialist or not, must obtain an additional advanced degree. Other institutions the author was employed did not have the same requirement for additional degrees. How prevalent is the second degree requirement? Other institutions have different requirements. In a study of recent job advertisements, Ferguson noted that 33 percent of the 800 job ads surveyed “either required or preferred a second advanced degree or advanced subject knowledge.” (2016, page 728) Of those 236, only 53 required a second degree while the remainder stated it as a preference. Of the 263 positions that required or preferred a second advanced degree, the most frequent functional areas asking for advanced subject knowledge were subject specialists (89 positions), which equates to 34 percent of the positions. (Ferguson, 2016, page 728) Those wishing to become subject specialists have a higher probability of needing an advanced subject degree. It should also be noted, the ads in Ferguson's study may have not have required the additional degree for initial hiring but may have some requirement for tenure.

Transitioning to subject librarianship

Once the author arrived on campus in this newly created position, holding an advanced degree in business opened the doorway to talk with faculty in the business school. She held an increased familiarity with journals and databases, along with the types of research, reports, and data that would be needed to support faculty research and the curriculum which came directly from her advanced academic studies. The author was experienced with the projects business students were engaged with in the classroom because she had handled similar projects as both a student and as an adjunct professor.

What was the best approach to learn a new position, particularly in the case where the position hadn't existed before? The author found it very important to rely on contacts within the field to help serve as advisors and mentors in the transition. She contacted and met with several other business librarians to talk about their daily work, research goals, and approach to subject librarianship. She also joined new professional organizations, such as Business Reference and Services Section (part of Reference and User Services Association), and sought to be active in committees within those groups. These actions would help anyone transition to subject librarianship, with or without the additional degree. The author felt confident in her understanding of the business curriculum through her coursework and focused more on the "how-to" work of business librarianship to aide her transition into the new position. In this respect, the additional degree was very valuable and helped the author dive in quickly and begin to build relationships on campus and in the profession.

The author recently attended a library conference in which there was a very full room attending a session on "imposter syndrome". According to Gill Corkindale in the Harvard Business Review, "Imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success. 'Imposters' suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence. They seem unable to internalize their accomplishments; however successful they are in their field... some researchers have linked it with perfectionism, especially in women and among academics." (paragraph 3, 2018) This sentiment was echoed by business librarian Gene Hayworth "Although I had conducted a few bibliographic instruction sessions for business classes at the community college and worked with the small business reference collection, these experiences did little to prepare me for my current position as a business librarian at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I came into the position feeling that I was not suitably qualified, but I soon learned that such a situation is common." (page 230, 2008)

Even with a subject master's degree in the discipline and three years of experience as an adjunct professor, the author still felt a touch of imposter syndrome. After nine years as a librarian, it was a major transition to move into a subject specialist position and feel the weight of the expected expertise. The author had gone to business school, taught in business school, and worked as a professional librarian, yet she had never been a business librarian. As the only one on campus (or in the history of the school), there was a great deal of networking to be done to learn more about the specifics of the job. Though the educational experience was valuable, there were many gaps to be filled in and not much immediate mentorship available. This was especially felt in the space of promotion and tenure and the idea of creating a research plan for achieving tenure.

Despite subject expertise in one area of business, other areas would still require training and learning to support. Some of the other challenges in the transition included not having official mentorship to help acclimate and understand the new institution, moving from a small institution with three librarians to a larger institution with sixteen tenure track faculty

librarians, and starting a newly created position. These challenges are typical of any transition to a new position in a new location and were not the result of educational background. One challenge related to subject expertise was finding that the library didn't have many business databases that would be typical at an AACSB accredited school. Working with the collection management librarian to identify funds to purchase needed resources, as well as advocating to the library faculty for the need to spend in these areas was vital work that was begun quickly after the author's arrival.

Attitudes about additional degrees

The author's institution requires a second master's degree for all faculty librarians to achieve tenure. There is no requirement, currently, in which discipline the degree should be obtained. With the subject librarian model in place, the incumbent faculty do not have to earn an additional degree in that subject field, but rather in the field of their choosing. Of the author's colleagues currently in subject librarian positions, only she has a degree/is earning a degree with direct correlation to the subject discipline.

If not required by the institution, what are the reasons that librarians seek the additional degree? According to a study by Mayer and Terrill "The top reasons cited for deciding to pursue a graduate degree are as follows: "personal fulfillment" (37.46%), "intention of working in the subject field" (37.30%), "help in career advancement as a librarian" (26.18%), "greater marketability when searching for a library job" (23.04%), and "to help in job performance as a librarian" (18.03%). Also of note is that many respondents (41.22%) obtained their advanced-subject degree before deciding to become a librarian." (Mayer and Terrill, 2005, page 63) The majority of respondents in their study agreed that librarians in certain positions should have advanced degrees, including administrators and subject specialists and tenure track faculty (Mayer and Terrill, 20015, page 64).

Could the author have become a subject specialist without obtaining an additional advanced degree? In short, yes. Certainly the adjunct faculty experience she gained would have opened the door in the business librarian realm. Knowledge gained through teaching those courses developed a sense of expertise and understanding of business curriculum. Practical experience definitely counts for a great deal and is a good way to transition into subject librarianship without the price tag of a degree in addition to the terminal librarianship degree. Ferguson asks "can we afford the luxury of education for education's sake in a profession where average starting salaries are relatively low and students must take on a heavy load of debt to finance their educations?" (2016, page 733) The author was fortunate to have her graduate tuition waived by the institution where she was employed while earning her second degree, but recognizes that may not be the case for many who are seeking to obtain more education.

Conclusion

For the author, having an additional advanced degree in a subject area was highly beneficial for making the transition to subject librarianship after nearly a decade as a generalist librarian. It

increased familiarity with curriculum, aided in networking with faculty, and provided more initial insight into the needed resources for success in the position. However, the author acknowledges the difficulties related to obtaining a second masters, particularly the time and financial resources required. Literature in the field supports the need for librarians to consider education as a way to specialize (including the number of job advertisements requiring the second degree for hire or for tenure), but recognizes the varied attitudes amongst librarians about the degree's actual value.

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