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On Being a New Librarian

by Elizabeth J. Cox, Special Formats Librarian, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Last month I celebrated my first year as a "new" librarian. I decided that I needed to take a look back over this past year to see what I had learned, what I did wrong, and what I did right. I've come up with a list of "do's and don'ts" that will hopefully be of use to other new librarians.

1. Meet people and get involved.

Some librarians have service to the profession as part of their job description and/or requirements. Even if you don't, get out there and get involved. It will be good for the profession but also for you. Meeting people who have similar positions or have had similar experiences will be beneficial to you in the long run. And years from now when you're a seasoned librarian, you can do the same for someone new!

BUT don't get overextended.

Once you're out of grad school, it may seem like you have a lot of time on your hands. It is very important to get involved locally, nationally, and anywhere in between. But remember that you need time to adjust to your new job, your new environment (both work & home) and how you fit into it.

2. Cultivate relationships.

Get to know your new co-workers. Learn what everyone's specialty is and what quirks they have. Soon you will know who the best person is for questions about the local catalog system and who to go to when you need supplies. This will take some time but it's worth it.

BUT be cautious.

Everyone you've met has probably said this, but it's worth repeating. Do NOT get involved in any politics or gossip! My opinion is that it's worth knowing each individual's quirks and hot buttons so you can avoid them, but stay out of the gossip and conversations about those quirks.

3. Cultivate mentors.

Some institutions have mentoring programs, but many don't. Even if you have been assigned a mentor, be watchful for unofficial mentors. These can be people outside of your department, like the guy in reference who is the best editor. Or the cataloger you met via e-mail who is really good at what he does and is willing to answer your simple questions.

BUT make sure the relationship works for you.

This may sound selfish, and it is! But if there was ever a time to be, this is it. Pay attention to your needs and what your mentor(s) can do for you.

4. Document what you do and/or write a manual.

This is something I learned at my previous job as I was leaving. No one else knew how to do my job, and there was not going to be any overlap with my successor. I spent my last two months writing down everything I did. If I had started sooner, it would have been a lot easier to keep up. Even if you're simply writing it for yourself, keeping track of what you do is also essential when it comes to evaluation time. Each January it can be a pain to remember what you did the previous February!

Also be sure to work closely with your supervisor when writing the documentation. You want to make sure you are following all the local rules and procedures, especially if this material will be posted online for anyone to access.

5. Get training, or read the literature in your area.

I have heard from and of many new librarians who were basically told where their office was, what their responsibilities were, and left. Even if you're given training and guidance, seek out other information. If there is one thing that most librarians do very well, it's documentation. There are tons of articles and books on every aspect of librarianship. Keep those ILL folks busy!

6. Read!

Even beyond the literature in your area, read some of the basic journals of librarianship. Keep up on the current issues of the profession. If you're interested in issues about mentoring, achieving tenure, or writing for the profession, there are tons of articles and books to be found. Also look into local and regional publications. Even if you're not involved at this level, it can be

beneficial to know what's happening. And many of these publications are now online. Start Googling.

7. Keep notes.

In meetings, workshops, etc., take plenty of notes and keep them. You never know when you might need to refer to them. If you attend workshops, be sure to get contact information from the trainers, if possible, for follow-up questions.

8. Keep your resume/c.v. up to date.

Most likely, if you're new to your position, you're not looking for a new job. That doesn't mean you can't keep your records current. When I was last job hunting (the search that ended in my current position), I hadn't updated my resume in over seven years. Can you remember everything you did in the last seven years? I couldn't either. I have to submit my curriculum vitae every year with my evaluation for my pre-tenure review, so I have a reason to keep it up. But even if you're not required to, I highly recommend it.

There are probably tons of things I've missed that I could recommend for other new librarians, but these stand out to me as the most important. If I had to pick the most important piece of advice, I would say "When in doubt, ask someone!"