New Academic Librarians and Their Perceptions of the Profession

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Abstract: This study identifies developments relevant to new academic librarians’ perceptions of librarianship. Through use of the long interview and document analysis, the researchers developed a grounded theory consisting of six categories that weigh upon novice librarians’ perceptions of the profession: (1) deciding upon a career, (2) experiencing graduate school, (3) continuing education, (4) defining the work, (5) evaluating the work, and (6) (re)imagining the future. The categories are analyzed to theorize how perceptions shift from the decision to pursue a new career through the first few years of professional work, and these processes’ educational implications are considered.

Introduction

While maxims like S.R. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Librarianship grandly articulate librarianship’s purposes,1 final definition of the discipline belongs ultimately to the rank-and-file. Librarians face a future thick with both uncertainty and possibility; they must come to grips with their identity as librarians to successfully propel the discipline through the information age. Although today’s librarians might have little time in the midst of their work to consider the elevated goals of librarianship,2 a well-formed sense of purpose and responsibility can permeate librarians’ actions and help realize the discipline’s objectives.

Librarians face a future thick with both uncertainty and possibility; they must come to grips with their identity as librarians to successfully propel the discipline through the information age.
Through observing how perceptions evolve among new professionals, a reasonable assessment may be made of what librarianship means to its new practitioners, which can also inform future priorities in education. The following research question is answered using qualitative analysis: how do perceptions of librarianship evolve among novice academic librarians working in Texas’s college and university libraries? To answer this question, the researchers examined this process from the new librarians’ initial decision to attend a library school graduate program through completion of their first six to 24 months of professional work.

Although the formal training may take less than two years, becoming an academic librarian is a process, a transition from outsider to practitioner, and necessarily involves the development of a professional identity. Through understanding what being an academic librarian means to the novice professional and glimpsing how this meaning changes from the decision to get a Library and Information Science (LIS) degree through completion of the first years of library work, it should be possible to observe how formative experiences mold nascent perceptions. This understanding will allow for a better realization of both the formal educational needs and post-educational training of academic librarians.

The Study in Context

Research is prevalent that affirms popular sentiment among librarians regarding the value and goals of the profession to society. Examples include Robert Vaagan and Sigrid Holm’s “value preference” survey that confirmed “free access to information” as a top priority, and Colette King and Susan Hornby’s findings that medical librarians generally feel that patients do indeed deserve access to medical information.3 Equally popular are “issues and concerns” studies, including Bobby Pickering’s survey of 765 librarians that took a closer look at “just what’s going on” in the library.4 There are also attitudinal studies measuring librarians’ dispositions toward emergent or fashionable issues in the information environment, such as those of Jennifer Mayer and Lori Terrill and of Meerabai Gosine-Boodoo and Mark McNish.5 But, although such studies offer a sort of snapshot of librarianship, they provide little more than confirmation of librarians’ professed allegiance to popular ideas or litanies of common complaints. M.

One line of research concerning perceptions of librarianship focuses on college students’ perceptions of the profession. These articles frequently address the need to battle the misconceptions people have about what librarians do and often use their findings to suggest recruitment strategies.

H. Sable noted the need to examine the process of becoming a librarian to benefit the “hundreds of thousands of persons, perhaps millions worldwide, who might find their true profession is librarianship.”6 One line of research concerning perceptions of librarianship focuses on college students’ perceptions of the profession. These articles frequently address the need to battle
the misconceptions people have about what librarians do and often use their findings to suggest recruitment strategies. Paul Genoni and Neil Greeve, for example, explored the negative stereotypes of a library career among students headed for the university, and Shifra Baruchson-Arib and Sherry Mendelovitz found that even library and information science school students tend to list librarianship as a profession with low prestige.7

Allyson Ard et al examined reasons why LIS students entered librarianship, noting “contact with a librarian” or “working in a library” as the most prominent influences on students choosing that career.8 Several studies focus on specific populations of students, e.g., Madison Mosley’s analysis of law librarianship as a career choice for African-American law school students and M. A. Tiamiyu, H. Akussah, and S.N.B. Tackie’s exploration into how University of Ghana library students’ perceptions of the field changed positively after one year of school.9

While such studies tend to center on students, some research focuses on new librarians. Gemma DeVinney and Patricia Tegler’s survey of entry-level academic librarians at the State University of New York identified where the new librarians received training necessary for their library position responsibilities, that is, from library school, self-instruction, or on-the-job. They discovered that cataloging skills tended to be learned on-the-job, skills for conducting original research were obtained predominantly through self-instruction, and reference service skills came through a mixture of on-the-job learning, self-instruction, and library school training.10 The majority of those surveyed agreed that institution-specific training should be left to the hiring institution, generic work common to all libraries should be left to the library schools, and self-instruction was not a preferred method of training.11 Joanne Oud’s survey of organizational socialization among new academic librarians at Canadian universities found differences, both positive and negative, between the respondents’ expectations and the realities of their first professional assignment.12 Among the aspects they found most difficult to learn were “Workplace politics/culture,” “Time management/workload management,” and “Saying no.”13 Oud found that previous, pre-professional exposure to the library workplace did contribute to an easier transition. Corey Johnson and Elizabeth Lindsay studied Association of Research Libraries (ARL) public service librarians, finding correlations between education and job skills.14 They concluded that newer academic librarians favor teaching and committee work and see teaching as having the greatest impact on their users.15 Darcy Del Bosque and Cory Lampert’s survey of new librarians (defined as those with nine years or less in the profession) found that graduate level library education left them relatively unprepared for the amount and variety of technology they encountered when they began their first jobs. Mastery of the technology was generally done on-the-job and on-the-fly.16

Research involving fledgling teachers may also inform the study of new librarians. Gary Knowles’s case study of a new teacher found a stereotype similar to that of librarianship as often described by college students, that of teaching as being a mediocre career choice and of low professional status.17 Yvonne Gold said that the initial years of teaching are a crucial period for developing an understanding of the profession.18 The teacher’s first years are eye-opening, stressful, and busy; hence, their impact on the formation of identity. The same conclusion appears to transfer easily to new librarians. One study tied into the teacher/librarian theme. Scott Walter’s qualitative inquiry into
librarians as teachers explored how academic librarians think of themselves as teachers and how new librarians felt unprepared for their instruction duties from library school, and relied on the support of colleagues.19

The study described in the present article addresses the absence of research involving the perceptions of new librarians regarding their profession. The following analysis of new academic librarians’ perceptions traces their development of professional identity through examination of what is involved in these processes.

Methods

This study employed the grounded theory method developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss.20 Qualitative analysis allows for an in-depth understanding of meaning, and the grounded theory method permits meaning to emerge directly from the data.21 The researchers used two qualitative research techniques to gather data: one-on-one, face-to-face interviews and document analysis. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln described the use of triangulation, or multiple methods of data collection, as “a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, and depth to any inquiry.”22 The researchers collected and analyzed data until theoretical categories had been identified and saturated. Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss define theoretical saturation as the point where further “data gathering and analysis [would] add little new to the conceptualization, though variations can always be discovered.”23 For this study, saturation was reached when the researchers had collected and analyzed interview transcripts from twelve participants. To achieve the purpose of the study, that of understanding how perceptions change over time and context, the better primary method for gathering data was the long interview, as longitudinal participant observation was unfeasible due to practical, economic, and logistical reasons. Grant McCracken’s guideline for conducting the long interview served as a template for both designing the interview strategy and proceeding with the research.24 In addition to the interview, the researchers also observed participants in the academic library where the participants were currently employed, in order to, as R.E. Taylor explained, better “understand the meanings that things have [for participants] in varying contexts.”25

Through the use of open-ended questions, the researchers elicited responses from participants about issues and concepts meaningful to them. In addition, when available, the participant’s own “statement of purpose” essay (hereafter referred to as “SOP”) for graduate school admission were discussed during the interview, allowing the participant to further reflect on past experiences and values. Considering that meanings change over time and context, participants’ reinterpretation of their own past words permitted the collection of rich data about shifting perceptions of librarianship. The researchers further analyzed the SOPs to identify, as described by Ian Hodder, “patterns, similarities, and differences within [the] patterned material.”26 Comparison of documents allowed for insight into meaning that participants might not be able to otherwise articulate themselves. One-third of the participants provided the researchers with a copy of their SOP.
A pilot study involving two novice librarians (identified in this report as Participants One and Two) allowed researchers to (1) test and refine strategies of inquiry; (2) develop a preliminary coding schema; (3) generate additional questions to be answered during full implementation of the study; and (4) identify potential participants for future interviews. The research guide for the preliminary study consisted of open-ended questions that probed participants’ perceptions of librarianship from the time of entering graduate LIS school through their present professional positions. Following the analysis of preliminary data, a revised interview guide was created to address questions raised. As is typical with qualitative research, the interview guide remained flexible and open to change as the study progressed.

Following the pilot study of Participants One and Two, the researchers interviewed twelve librarians (identified in this report as Participants Three through Fourteen). Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was recorded using a digital audio recorder. Interviews were transferred to computer, transcribed, and coded. Follow-up interviews were conducted as deemed necessary.

Kathy Charmaz’s recommended coding procedures served as a guide for systematically analyzing the data. The researchers coded the transcripts using activist imagery, employing gerunds to describe concepts. The researchers cross-coded twenty percent of the interview transcripts to confirm the consistency of the coding. The researchers maintained research memos throughout the coding process and met regularly to discuss the progress of the study.

Participants

This study was conducted in campus libraries of Texas colleges and universities including three universities, three four-year colleges, and one community college. Participants included twelve academic librarians possessing American Library Association accredited master’s degrees from eight different graduate schools who had completed approximately six to 24 months in either tenure track or non-tenure track professional librarian positions. The participants selected had limited or no pre-professional experience working in a library setting prior to entering LIS graduate school. Participation was solicited through traditional postal service mailings, personal e-mail, professional association and library listservs, and the “snowball” technique, using referrals from current participants to invite new participants.

Academic librarians were selected for observation because the duties, expectations, and issues peculiar to the academic library environment present a touchstone for making future comparisons with other branches of the librarian community such as public, school, and special. Richard Rubin identified the functions of academic librarians as serving the students and faculty of the academic community, and to a lesser extent, the administration and

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staff of the institution, the greater academic community, and the local citizenry. The researchers selected librarians with limited previous work experience to gain insight into this particular group’s shifting perceptions of librarianship from a starting point of minimal exposure. New academic librarians with extensive library experience, such as those who worked extensively as paraprofessionals, more than twelve months, likely possess very different perspectives on librarianship. A future study involving this alternative population, “veteran” new professionals, will offer insightful comparison.

Table 1 describes the participants of this study. Two participants received their MLIS prior to 2005, but had not been employed in the profession until two years prior to the interview.

Findings

Six categories that represent phenomena relevant to the changing perceptions of librarianship were derived from the data. Those categories are: 1) Deciding upon a career; 2) Experiencing graduate school; 3) Continuing education; 4) Defining the work; 5) Evaluating the work; and 5) (Re)imagining the future.

Deciding upon a Career

In this initial category, embryonic librarians explored and selected a career path. This process consisted of three interrelated subcategories and an event briefly summarized as follows. Through (1) experiencing/constructing the library, participants drew upon a stock of experiences and conceptions involving the library and librarianship developed both prior to and during the decision-making process to facilitate an initial career decision. Through (2) exploring options, participants delved into making a change in both a general way as well as directly related to librarianship. Thirdly, through (3) defining self, participants identified their compatibility with librarianship in terms of characteristics such as personal skills, interests, needs, and predispositions. These subcategories intersected and acted dialectically upon one another. The initial period before actively becoming a librarian, therefore, was chronologically indeterminate, extending from participants’ first encounters with libraries and librarians to a culminating event, which the researchers termed making the decision to attend graduate school. The figure below illustrates the subcategories and culminating event as a Venn diagram:

With the participants, the act of experiencing/constructing the library began well before any felt need to make a change appeared, and it also entered into their career exploration process. All of the participants described themselves as “book lovers.” Several participants, however, expressed an explicit early appreciation for the library and librarianship as concepts; these participants also tended to be more transparently idealistic concerning the library and profession. Participant Twelve, who used the public library frequently as a child, whose father owned a large collection of books, and who gravitated to the library as a safe and familiar place, felt that librarianship was a positive, noble career move. Participant Nine, another frequent user of the library, correlated librarianship with saving the world. Participant Three’s SOP lists librarians as positive role models.
# Table 1
Description of Purposive Sample

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<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td><strong>Graduate Degrees in addition to MLS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes (3 Masters, 1 PhD)</td>
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<td><strong>Year Graduated with MLS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Library Degree Graduate School</strong></td>
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<td>University of North Texas</td>
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<td>Wayne State University</td>
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<td>San Jose State University</td>
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<td><strong>Type of Workplace</strong></td>
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<td>Four-year College</td>
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In contrast, the less vocally idealistic participants appeared to have used the library less frequently or explicitly mentioned negative encounters with librarians, particularly with school media specialists:

P8: You know some people are like “I knew I wanted to be a librarian when I started walking,” I was not that kind of person... my dad didn’t like me going to the public library after school because there was some riffraff. So isn’t that funny? I didn’t really hang out at the library. When they had those dumb little book sales at school, though, I always bought a ton of books. And you know my high school librarian was not a pleasant person... maybe I am badmouthing my colleagues, but it seems like a lot people in my generation had poor experiences with their high school librarian for some reason.

P10: Our elementary school librarian was mean...

Therefore, prior to acknowledgement of a felt need to make a career decision, participants saw the library as a generally positive concept to varying degree: libraries ranged from being places of high utility to exalted institutions, and participants viewed librarians as ranging from being obstacles to role models. It is important to note, however, that among all of the participants, Participant Three was the only one to self-identify as anything close to being a “born librarian.” None of the other participants were so certain about a career path. Six of twelve participants, in fact, identified librarianship as a second or
later career move. All participants, however, recognized the need to make a change in their lives that would result in a new and satisfying mode of work. This realization came either near receipt of or soon after an undergraduate degree or following several years of employment. Once the need for career definition/change was recognized, if not necessarily yet committed to, participants began exploring options, primarily through weighing alternatives:

P5: I worked really crummy jobs and was working in a health care facility where, um, it was pretty dangerous and so I just sort of started looking for other jobs and I decided that I wanted to go back to school but I didn’t want to go back to school where you would get a masters degree in something that had no job description at the end of it and a librarian, library school had a job description at the end of it.

P11: I researched the heck out of my options...

P12: I was earning very little money... We didn’t know exactly how long we would be in the state for, so after talking to my [spouse] about what our options were, he said “if you want to go back to school, you do what you have to do.” So I thought about it and thought: “if I go back to school it better be for something that I like.” So I actually wrote a list of everything that I liked to do and the jobs that I had liked in the past. From there I thought about what I could go to school for to make my career. Things that came up were law school...
P13: Well, to be honest, I researched [librarianship] quite a bit before I decided to go to library school [...] I really did research before I decided to make a plunge because I was around [during] the dot com era, and I thought tech is the place to be, and that blew up in my face. I did think about [career options] quite a bit.

The overlap between exploring options and the other two subcategories, experiencing/constructing the library and defining self, is apparent; the participants’ exploratory moves often suggested the influence of personal reflection and past experience. Both Participant Five’s and Participant Twelve’s above statements illustrate this interplay. Participant Five’s explanation for initiating the life-change, furthermore, demonstrates the important part practical considerations played in the process. Among participants, practical considerations included the need for economic stability, the proximity of available educational programs, the current state of the job market, and the ability or inability to relocate following graduation. The concept that participants had developed of the library and librarianship informed these decisions. Libraries and library work were typically seen as solid, safe (economically and/or physically), noble, or any combination of the three. Concepts of professional prestige, that is, the type of respect accorded to practitioners, were typically not a factor.

After participants identified librarianship as a viable career choice they began actively exploring options. They did this through multiple methods: (1) visiting libraries inside and outside of their communities, (2) informally interviewing professional librarians, and (3) browsing through available literature about library work. Achieving this basic understanding of what librarianship is, or at least realizing that the profession embodies a range of possibilities, was an important element in the participants’ decisions to enter a LIS graduate school program. Again, these processes relied heavily on experiencing/constructing the library. Participant Eight, for example, wrote in her SOP that he had considered becoming a librarian after frequenting archives during his undergraduate studies. Similarly, Participant Eleven related in his SOP that two trips to libraries opened his eyes to archiving, reinforcing his appreciation for document preservation and organization. He related in the interview that these trips shifted a personal career goal from becoming a teacher to becoming an archivist.

Nonetheless, the nascent understanding of the profession developed through experience remained relatively unstructured prior to graduate school. All participants began their career changes carefully, but with limited understanding of the boundaries and tenets of librarianship. For the majority, librarianship was not a lifelong dream. Instead, it represented an opportunity to make a positive career change toward a trusted, if not fully understood institution.
The third subcategory, defining self, meshed closely with the others and likely influenced (and was influenced by) their development. In the process of exploring options for a career change and reflecting upon past and present experiences in the service of this change, participants constructed a cognitive understanding of who they were and the career for which they appeared best suited.

The most common theme of self-definition that appears in the interviews is the recognition of a desire to help people. This desire typically manifested as a general sense of obligation toward public service. Participant Three identified with librarianship’s civic function—the experience of assisting frightened patrons looking for comfort at the library during the September 11 attacks “really cemented the civic importance of librarians.” For the participants, librarianship was a means of making a difference:

P6: I’ve always wanted to make a difference in the world. I wanted [to perform] a service… I love the satisfaction that comes with helping [patrons] help themselves, and so I think that goes along with librarianship and empowering people to get the information they need to be successful.

Participants also tended to see librarianship as something that meshed with their individual talents or skill sets:

P9: I love the search for information…

P10: I wrote [in my SOP] about always liking the library and liking to work with books…

P11: One of my things as a person… I have always been pretty well organized.

P12: I was a huge book fan…

Through defining self, participants were able to justify and embrace a decision that, while practical, reflected the participants as individuals. Librarianship became bound with the self-identity of the participant; it became a means for self-actualization. Again, at this point, all options were still on the table; participants typically developed their ideas about librarianship as a broad discipline, as opposed to developing particularly sophisticated differentiations between types of librarianship.

This dialectic between experiencing/constructing the library, exploring options, and defining self eventually resulted in making the decision to go to library school. Surprisingly, all of the participants expressed having no reservations about joining the profession prior to the decision, and only three participants had reservations about attending library school, which included concerns about not knowing what to expect, the current state of the job market, the economic costs involved, and personal ability to handle the pressure. This lack of reservations about joining the profession is interesting considering that none of the participants reported themselves as having been actively recruited into librarianship, and that the trajectory toward librarianship was almost entirely on the participants’ own initiative.

**Experiencing Graduate School**

Following the decision to attend an LIS graduate program, participants developed their perception of the profession through experiencing graduate school. As with deciding
upon a career, the researchers observed three subcategories sharing reciprocal relationships. Through (1) integrating into the community of professionals, participants developed their initial understanding of librarianship as a professional community and began to merge into this community. Through (2) refining/redefining goals, participants clarified career objectives through increased exposure to librarianship. Finally, through (3) evaluating the experience, the participants gave value to various aspects of their graduate school experience.

None of the participants found library school particularly difficult academically. Six participants mentioned explicitly that the coursework was not challenging. Among the descriptions given of library school were: “all the concepts were fairly straightforward and easy and I was a little bit disappointed,” “the classes were not very hard,” “I expected it to be more academic,” and “I think it ended up just being not as difficult as I expected.” This being said, there was only grudging support or enthusiasm among participants for the information science theory and research methods classes offered during their time as students. Participants tended to value the practical instruction over the theoretical:

P3: I strongly feel that library school should be more practical, more of an internship, a year of classes followed by a year of interning.

P9: The most valuable thing about [graduate school] was the work experience […] I had sort of thought the school part, like classroom stuff, was, like, the thing you went for, and that didn’t seem to be the case.

While the participants were lukewarm about the content of their coursework, library school was where they began actively integrating into the professional community. The process of deciding to become a librarian suggested a career path for the participants, but, upon integrating into the community found at school, they actively started becoming librarians. These encounters with future colleagues developed participants’ ideas of librarianship as a community of peers and as a means of exchanging professional knowledge:

P7: I really felt connected to my classmates and to my professors... We got to do a lot of group work, which at first I didn’t like. I just did not appreciate it at first. But with time I got used to it. It was a good experience.

P11: I think [the most important thing learned was] actually kind of an offshoot of the “you don’t know everything, but know where to find it;” is really relying on your colleagues...

Learning about librarianship through coursework and peer interaction broadened the participants’ understanding of the profession and resulted in their refining/redefining goals. Their experiences opened them to new areas of librarianship and exposed them to challenging aspects of the profession. Participant Four, for example, said that, “I spent a lot of time at the library at [college] but wasn’t really investigating it in quite the way
I was in library school...” And although participants learned some about librarianship during their career-choice deliberation, they made substantive progress during school toward learning about different types of librarianship. Participant Seven identified professionally with library instruction upon taking a course: “[The course on instruction] was offered my last semester, and so I took it and fell in love with [instruction].”

Exposure to various flavors of librarianship allowed participants to fully embrace the profession and begin defining where they fit within the profession. During school, Participant Eleven realized that he was best suited for academic library work, as opposed to archival work. Participant Twelve was able to decide between a public and academic library career because of coursework and internships. Several participants, in fact, mentioned that they were put on a path toward a specifically academic library environment after engaging in an assistantship or internship. Participant Nine, for example, had a graduate assistantship at the undergraduate library at his library school institution, and he liked teaching students and faculty one-on-one and helping people find information. Participant Six’s appreciation for academic librarianship resulted from his comparative analysis of several library environments:

I tried special libraries. I tried taking that course, several students signed up, so they always cancelled the class. ... And I took a public libraries class. It was my favorite course/class because we had all these field trips, but it helped me to decide it was too much like teaching elementary school. And so that was something I ruled out. And I took a digital libraries class and enjoyed that. I worked at the Business School Library for the summer, so I could have academic library experience. I enjoyed it.

Pragmatism was a second major impetus for participants’ selection of academic librarianship over other types of librarianship. Participants Five, Ten, and Eleven became academic librarians because they felt that was the expedient choice at the time. A third impetus for selecting and remaining with academic librarianship resulted from participants’ perceptions of academic librarianship as “real,” serious work; this will be discussed in the analysis of category five, evaluating the work, which follows.

During and after library school, participants actively engaged in evaluating the experience. Typically they saw the practical elements of graduate school, such as library instruction classes, administration classes, and practicums, as the most valuable. Again, participants tended to discount theory classes, portraying them as disappointing or inadequate. These reflections on school experiences suggest that librarianship had become heavily identified with activity (both individually and as a community of professionals), that is, with practice as opposed to abstract ideas. The decision to pursue a particular professional activity, academic librarianship, appears to have been made as either a practical decision, or as the result of an intuitive self-association with the library.

Continuing Education

The participants continued their education on the job as academic librarians, training in new areas and strengthening weak skills. Participant Eight noted that “I don’t really think I understood what a librarian did until I became one.” Although library school introduced the participants to librarianship as a community and support network, on-the-job training allowed them to bolster weak skills, expand their personal sphere of
possibilities in terms of ability, and gain positive experience with areas of librarianship outside of their academic preparation.

The most effective means cited by participants for strengthening weak skills tended to be informal ones, that is, those skills honed through actively performing job duties. Effective training became synonymous with learning by doing:

P3: I feel like you learn on the job anyway. The only things that I learned in library school that I feel really helped me was the model of the reference interview, which didn’t take two years and $40,000 to learn, and the practice I got as a [teaching assistant].

P5: I don’t know if [library school classes] were taught slap-dash, or I guess they just tried to cram too much into too little space, so that stuff I pretty much forgot as soon as I graduated and then I had to learn it again later.

P6: I definitely had reservations about research because I didn’t feel very prepared… It’s something that I’ve had to, you know, you’re learning on the job.

Participant Four, in fact, noted that a primary skill learned at library school was, using an in vivo code supplied by the participant himself, learning to learn on your own. The first years on the job became a laboratory for applying this technique.

Encounters with seasoned professional academic librarians, nonetheless, were important to participants.

But, although many of the participants took part in some formal training on their first job, including things like scheduled orientations with various library units and formal mentoring processes, learning to be a librarian, again, was typically an informal process often aided by unofficial mentoring by both professional academic librarians and academic library staff:

P5: I came in and the staff here have been work, some of the staff has been working here thirty years and they know so much more than me and I look to them as mentors in a lot of areas of librarianship.

P9: Well, I read, like, all of the files that had been saved from previous […] librarians. I talked with our staff person who’s been handling [the collection] for many, many years, through many librarians, and she was very helpful…

P10: [My colleague] is acting as the Head Librarian now. He is the acting Interim Director. We bounce ideas off of each other and he has worked here a lot longer than I have so he knows a lot more about the University than I do. I am always asking him if I have any questions about, you know, where to go for different services and things like that or different ideas that I might ask him.
Participant Fourteen noted subject-based library association conferences as a way to expand professional knowledge and to better perform job related tasks and projects. The networking skills initiated in library school, therefore, were developed on the first job. When this training process failed, however, the new librarians might be left frustrated. Participant Thirteen, for example, noted that he was provided with little support in learning his job, that “the reference librarian kind of helped me a little bit to find things that I needed to do my job, but in a lot of ways, I had to start over, because the person who left, they didn’t leave any bread crumbs behind for me to find.” Some participants had to fall back on their previous career training in acclimating to their current library positions. Participant Fourteen used Microsoft Access and Excel skills from a former job, while Participant Four applied marketing methods learned as an undergraduate for promoting library services.

**Defining the Work**

As described above, after beginning their professional work, the participants continued molding the meaning of academic librarianship through a direct and persistent exposure to library work that was not available in school. Library school was an environment where such exposure consisted primarily of brief encounters with the discipline through things like coursework, formal and informal discussions, and practicums. Intensive on-the-job encounters with professional work and their continuing education resulted in the participants further defining the work, once again refining their conception of academic librarianship. Analysis revealed three subcategories involved in defining the work. Through (1) faceting academic librarianship, participants identified various frames of reference by which they modeled the concept of library. Through (2) orienting themselves within the whole, they recognized the necessity of collaboration to advance the discipline as a profession. Finally, through (3) circumscribing the profession, they made distinctions between academic librarianship as a profession and other jobs and professions.

Throughout their first year or two of professional work, the participants made sense of job boundaries, duties, and expectations. They determined how they fit in as academic librarians by defining the milieu, that is, faceting academic librarianship, and did so largely through informal methods. Participant Three did this by defining work by place, distinguishing public from academic library work by environmental factors. This participant noted that public librarians are often required to deal with environmental elements such as negotiating encounters with unruly patrons or performing routine maintenance procedures that he did not normally associate with academic librarianship.

When asked what they did, the new professionals faceted librarianship by position or duties, type of library collection, and type of projects undertaken. Although participants said that they were continually performing diverse tasks, they organized the job, what they did as librarians, largely through dividing their work by broad task or project.

P7: The bulk of my role is to manage the service desks which include the [library’s] main service point and the [other library’s] service point. I oversee seventeen staff members that report directly to me and then we have students that report to one of my staff members. And so basically I am responsible for the day to day operations of our service points at
all hours that we are in operation.

P13: I manage the databases. I manage the library catalog that is now remotely hosted, but used to be here on a server. I’m also involved in the overall technology plan for the campus, so I have conversations for, for example, rolling out a device for the freshman class, a pilot program like tablets or smart phones.

P14: What I do is all the technical stuff on the website. I have created an in-house serials management system in Access which has taken me about a year to do that and probably only 75 percent done. It’s just automating things that should have been automated long ago...

With many participants, providing access to information at what they characterized as a “higher level” located them within the job, providing the link between projects:

P5: I feel most satisfied with my job when I, when I solve a very, difficult, well, reference question and it really doesn’t have to be that particularly difficult, it just needs to satisfy the patron. Actually, you know I take that back, as long as the patron is satisfied with me finding their information I’m happy...

Although the participants actively delimited themselves as academic librarians due to immediate environmental factors and responsibilities, they continued to identify themselves with the overarching themes of librarianship learned in school and through previous experiences in the library. A recurring theme that emerged was that, although participants frequently defined themselves in terms of daily job activities, these individual, specific roles combined to create a whole qualitatively distinct from its constituent parts: academic librarianship. Orienting themselves within the whole, the new librarians described the discipline as an organic entity requiring constant collaboration in order to effectively serve the public.

Orienting themselves within the whole, the new librarians described the discipline as an organic entity requiring constant collaboration in order to effectively serve the public. Most participants depicted academic librarianship as a network of collaborative relationships with service as the goal; relationships included collaborating in research, working closely with staff, and seeking help from colleagues:

P4: I really work closely usually with a particular team trying to focus things...

P8: Most of our decision making happens as a group...

Some of these relationships were depicted as looser, informal, or more infrequent, but participants recognized that a variety of library tasks is necessary for the final practical outcomes of academic librarianship. Librarianship became a group effort with a teleological objective: the distribution of knowledge for positive societal change. This teleological goal, however, did not preclude the hierarchical ordering of work responsibilities, which becomes clear in the following category, evaluating the work.

Despite recognizing the dialectical, interactive nature of library work, participants actively engaged in circumscribing the profession of librarianship and distinguishing it from
other information work. For example, although academic library paraprofessionals also engage in the distribution of knowledge, the new librarians had grown cognizant of differences between themselves and non-professional academic information workers. This delimiting was not especially sophisticated; it was mainly due to perceived differences in education as well as a sensed but not fully understood disconnect with paraprofessionals in the immediate work environment. The participants, however, were hard pressed or hesitant to identify concrete differences between what they did as academic librarians and what staff did as paraprofessionals, beyond providing tentative statements about work quantity, degree, and responsibilities, e.g., Participant Thirteen said:

> The roles aren’t defined very well. I was shown a graph, well my first week here, and I assumed that was the pecking order, when they show you the tree. And I don’t, you know, feel that I’m their [the staff’s] manager or anything like that… I sometimes will ask for help and things like that. But they have all been here for quite a while, well most of them…

Participant Five concluded that certain staff members were more qualified to be a librarian than the participant, and Participant Three noted that front line staff often have a better understanding of library processes and patron needs than the professional librarians. This perceived competency of veteran staff appeared to be a result of the paraprofessional’s increased experience with practical library work, and is not overly surprising when one considers the general support of this study’s participants for practical training.

**Evaluation of the Work**

Through the processes of deciding upon a career, experiencing graduate school, continuing education, and defining the work, the participants continuously evaluated their current work, resulting in Evaluating the Work emerging as a core category of this study. Through evaluating the work, participants defined elements of the work that they held to be legitimate aspects of librarianship in general, as well as elements of the work that they held to be legitimate aspects of academic librarianship. By means of their experiences in the library, classwork, and professional experiences, value was attached to tasks through differentiating real work from other work.

For participants, “real” library work involved utilizing expertise. Satisfying real work was easily identifiable within the broadly defined role of serving the public. Practical work was work that directly benefitted society. There were several variations on this category, including providing access, providing outreach services, engaging students, and helping others.

Participants often described real work for academic librarians as “serious” work for their patrons. Participant Six portrayed the academic library as a place where his work and expertise as a librarian would also be taken seriously by those he served:
I still enjoyed teaching but I wanted to teach people who would take me seriously, and so, when I was putting out my applications when I was finishing [library school], I was applying for academic positions dealing with instruction.

Several participants described the type of research happening at academic libraries as “serious” research. Participant Four explained:

I think that I could have found a certain joy [working at the public library]... but I think for me that it’s the scholarship and that kind of research [that drew him to the academic library].

Participant Seven used the adjective “energetic” to describe the “serious” scholarship supported at academic libraries and compared it to research he thought typical of a public library:

“I guess that energy isn’t [in public library research] in the sense that people go in there to do research but it is not necessarily because they are trying to create something or because they are trying to [do things like] fight world hunger.”

Participant Seven found it more fulfilling to work in academic libraries because the research is “novel” and energizing. Participant Thirteen described satisfying work in similar terms, as taking part in projects that are “new and fresh”; in his case, this was revamping the library’s webpage, and the act of creating innovative library services. Other participants described the research work that they facilitated as at a “higher level [than work at non-academic libraries]” and “serious” research as that which “gets things done [in terms of advancing science and positive societal change].”

“Other” work was portrayed as not using the participants’ training and expertise as academic librarians. These aspects of work included clerical and technical aspects of the job and tasks seen as paraprofessional responsibilities. Participant Three reflected on the difference between real and other work. For this librarian, a lot of what he encountered at public libraries qualifies as other work getting in the way of real work, that is, in terms of its meaningfulness to him, hence his decision to enter Academe:

So, for me, I felt like [my eventual career] would be adult services and reference, and a lot of my time would be adult services and reference and a lot of time would be clearing printer jams and trying to shoo homeless people out of the bathrooms and that kind of work, which to me seems more like social work.

Additionally, “other” work included instances in which the librarians supported research projects that were deemed not “serious.” One participant, for example, noted:

I know about popular music to some degree, but I really feel like my expertise is in classical, you know traditional Western classical music, and so I feel a little bit like it’s a waste of several degrees and many, many thousands of dollars for me to tell somebody to, well, you know, go to the liner notes of “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” and you can use that as a resource. I feel like that is not the best use of my knowledge and my talent.

This differentiation between “real” and “other” work may account for some of the professional distance felt between the professional and the paraprofessional observed in category four, defining the work.
For many participants, bureaucracy and workplace politics represented types of “other” work that get in the way of “real” work:

P3: I think that the things that are least satisfying about my job don’t have anything that have to do with instruction. I think that they have to do with politics…

P5: I don’t want to manage anybody. I don’t like to work on subcommittees…

Negative experiences just generally have to do with politics and stuff like that…

P10: I guess [I dislike] a lot of dealings with the administration of the University, making them almost realize our worth as a library. We are constantly asking for more staff, more full time professional staff, and they just want to give us more student workers to do a lot of the professional activities, which doesn’t really work. So a lot of the bureaucracy is in the way.

Finally, one area of work, the tenure process, was often portrayed by participants as an element of the job not fitting into either the other work or real work category. The new librarians did not appear to know what to make of tenure; it loomed on the periphery of their current professional life, and none of the librarians felt sufficiently prepared by school or on-the-job training for resolving the ambiguities surrounding its meaning and details. The participants found the process generally frustrating.

Participant Four, for example, said that the tenure process might make him end up in the fetal position. Participants tended to describe original research, a primary component of achieving tenure, as unsatisfying or confusing. Participant Three disliked the “mandate” to write, feeling that it takes away from his librarianship, “I feel that I can be a better librarian for my users if I didn’t have to um [work on own original research].”

In fact, for eight faculty status participants working on tenure, the general attitude toward publication was one of ambivalence. One participant had difficulty even defining librarian research, eventually describing it as “story-telling,” “how we did it better [type case studies],” “boring,” and “bland.” He went on to blame this on a lack of guidance in school and on the job. Participant Four reiterated this position, describing library research as “white-paperish”: “it’s not like studying some tribe, using anthropology as an example.” At this point, original research leaned precariously toward being a “non-serious” endeavor and was often part of “a drive to get papers out,” to just get something in print:

P7: I caught myself thinking of papers that I could write that are bland, that will just get me that publication versus it really being based on some sort of theory or method.

So, although the participants provided a meta-narrative centering on public service, they sometimes made distinctions between what type of work they should be doing...
and what type of work they preferred to do to advance this narrative. This conclusion is further supported by similar findings in Jennifer Morgan and Mary Lynn’s recent qualitative study of work satisfaction among nurses, which described “what nursing is” as helping and educating people, and unsatisfying work as “not doing things that you were trained to do,” as in clerical work, or nursing assistant tasks.30

The fact that this study’s participants maintain these perceptions, however, does not mean that they felt that the work performed by public, school, or special librarians was not “real” or “serious” work. The participants perceive the “real” work of academic librarians as qualitatively different from the “real” work performed by other types of librarians, and that particular work is meaningful to them in their role and self-actualization as academic librarians. Additional study of these concepts should be conducted in other library settings.

(Re)Imagining the Future

Theoretically, developing and evaluating their perceptions of librarianship should have allowed the new librarians to formulate or adjust their goals for the future. This (re) imagination, however, was indeterminate for this study’s participants, whose exposure to library work expanded their perceptions of the field but did not result in particularly concrete strategies for the future. The participants described the future in generalities and with uncertainty:

P4: You know, five years from now I may still be in relatively the same position, but you know, who knows.

P8: I think [that I still see myself as a librarian]. I may switch to public librarianship.

I haven’t really decided yet.

P12: I want to be still in an academic setting… because I do enjoy working here quite a bit.

P13: Well, that’s a tough question to answer. I like the position I’m in right now, and it’s hard to look five years down the line and say, you know, is that going to be a viable position […] Whether I’ll be here or somewhere else, I don’t know.

Exposure to library work conditioned participants to its nature as a constantly changing and developing discipline, which likely explains some of this uncertainty. Participant Fourteen’s goal was to be a part of this changing future:

P14: I just think the library is going to change so much … in the next twenty years and I want, I want to play a part in the change. Unlike a lot of librarians who are like scared of the change, I want to accelerate it.

Participant Three echoed this sentiment, but with more apparent anxiety:

P3: I think instruction might be easy to burn out on, but I always say that as long as I have the energy to do it I want to do it. So I want to stay relevant to the student population.

The new librarians recognized advancement as a goal within the academic world, desiring to obtain a higher position in terms of increased responsibility, prestige, and salary, but the only well-defined goal with a concrete end was held by librarians with
faculty status: the need to obtain tenure at their institution. Still, the participants appeared uncomfortable speculating about where they would be professionally in five years or what they would be doing in the foreseeable future. At this time in the participants’ careers, having well-defined long term goals was generally portrayed as an unrealistic or futile endeavor, considering the flux that participants encountered during their first professional job and their growing understanding of the dynamic nature of librarianship:

P13: You know, with the differences with the hardware and pedagogy and all these things that are changing with technology, [the academic library is] really where I want to be, and so I just have to keep my skills going and keep having a finger on the pulse of where it’s going, where technology is going, how information is going to be disseminated and, you know, try to judge those curves the best I can. Whether I’ll be here or somewhere else, I don’t know.

Conclusion

This study’s participants saw academic librarianship as a career attached to a positive institution that offered them the opportunity for stability and public service. Conceptions of the profession, however, did not appear to progress beyond vague but attractive ideals until the participants had some experience with library school. Aggressive critical analyses of public perceptions of librarianship should be conducted to develop interventions to counter the enduring idea that librarians are clerks, bureaucrats, or, as Penny Cowell says, “fussy old [women] of either sex, myopic and repressed, and brandishing or cowering behind a date-stamp and surrounded by an array of notices which forbid every human activity.” Ideally, becoming a librarian should not be the result of a failed first career or the attempt to make something, anything, out of a liberal arts degree.

For participants, library school defined the overarching themes of library work and concepts of librarianship as community, but the widespread sentiment that library school lacked academic rigor has potentially negative consequences on novice academic librarians’ perceptions of librarianship as a serious discipline. Also, it became apparent during the interviews that it was in graduate school that librarians began to define librarianship concretely as an activity or a practice, rather than as a set of concepts as associated with more overtly “theoretical” disciplines. It is worth exploring how to effectively integrate theoretical concepts into practically oriented courses and other programs, such as practicums, as these courses and programs were seen by participants as the most beneficial. Professional schools for other applied fields, such as nursing and social work, may provide valuable insight into how to accomplish this task.

The first years on the job left participants better informed concerning their role and domain as academic librarians, but left them somewhat disillusioned concerning what they did. Participants found great satisfaction with the work that they considered to be academic librarianship, while they bristled occasionally (some more so than others) at requirements to perform work that they determined to be somehow outside of their professional attention. This disparity between “real” work and “other” work should be addressed during the graduate school experience, and all of the responsibilities that academic librarians are expected to encounter on the job should be effectively associated
with the tenets and ethics of academic library work. Again, public service fields outside of librarianship may offer valuable insight.

Several participants of this study suggested that a large degree of academic librarianship is learned on-the-job as a solitary, sink-or-swim process. This process of “organizational socialization” was also identified by Oud as one of the primary obstacles encountered by new librarians in her study.\textsuperscript{32} One possible remedy may be to explore and adapt research involving the retention of new teachers. Michele Marable and Sharon Raimondi surveyed 165 new teachers and recommended that during the first year of work teachers be provided adequate support by administrators, mentors, and colleagues, receive specific training targeted for new teachers, and be provided essential resources such as handbooks for new teachers.\textsuperscript{33} Bob Algozzine and others’ analysis regarding new teachers’ perceptions of induction program experiences echoed these findings, concluding that “effective induction programs include mentoring by experienced teachers, release time for observing other teachers, peer (as in the same subject and grade) mentors, varied (as in different subject and grade) mentors, seminars, and multiple opportunities for sharing experiences.”\textsuperscript{34} Several other researchers have likewise suggested that the success of new teachers relies heavily upon careful formal and informal guidance and strategic support.\textsuperscript{35} The results of the present study similarly indicate that participants tended to learn primarily by informal methods; academic libraries should consider adopting methods for identifying and tracking these informal processes in order to develop appropriate learning toolkits for new librarians.

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One positive finding of the current study was that all participants saw themselves as academic librarians in the future (with the exception of Participant Five, who was considering becoming a library school teacher). There was, however, quite a bit of ambiguity as to exactly what this future might entail. This uncertainty should be mediated through a combination of formal and informal on-the-job guidance, but it should ideally be addressed first during graduate school. New college and university professors who are teaching faculty usually leave school with a well-defined teaching philosophy and research agenda. This study’s academic librarians appeared to do most of that learning on the job.

New academic librarians’ perceptions of the profession provide an indication of the state of librarianship, the role of library school education in molding professional identity, and how academic librarians’ initial experiences affect their identity and future plans. Understanding academic librarian perceptions of how they define themselves within the larger whole of librarianship can allow for positive modifications in library education and a better understanding of how to work with new professionals. This study identified six categories weighing upon the development of new librarians’ perceptions
of the profession: deciding upon a career, experiencing graduate school, continuing education, defining the work, evaluating the work, and (re)imagining the future. Future research will investigate the individual categories in more depth and determine how these categories relate to each other. Furthermore, analysis of other groups’ perceptions of librarianship, such as veteran academic librarians or novice public librarians, will allow the substantive theory developed in this study to be judged in terms of transferability, that is, its “fittingness” and its applicability, across various contexts.36

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Notes
2. To protect anonymity, and to revert gender disparity, the masculine pronoun will be used throughout for all participants, regardless of actual gender.
11. Ibid., 227.
13. Ibid., 262.
15 Ibid., 362.
22. Ibid., 5.
