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## 590: Local Notes -- Professional Development & the Academic Librarian: The Best Route

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## 590: Local Notes — Professional Development & the Academic Librarian: The Best Route

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What is the best avenue for professional development? What is the premier means of growing as a librarian? Tell me; how would you begin to answer? Responses to the question will vary, of course, but perhaps less than you think. When you've cleared the smoke, tossed out the absurd, jettisoned the unrealistic, and placed all the genuine options on the table, one professional development activity will trump all others hands down — the interview. That's right. The only sure-fired way to climb out of your daily rut and jumpstart yourself professionally is the professional job interview. The process stretches and matures you like nothing else. Few choices compare with its challenges. No option matches its potential for growth. The job interview is the quintessential avenue for professional maturity.

Now, you may bristle at my suggestion and counter that there are a host of equally viable and excellent options for professional development. One can attend a highbrow learning scenario (something along the order of the

ACRL / Harvard Leadership Institute). You can publish in the professional literature (The field has a host of fine journals, some valuable and others less so.) or attend a plethora of worthwhile conferences. (Usually your institution's R&D funds will cover the expenses.)

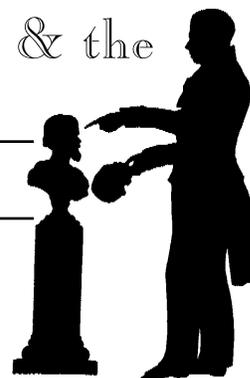
To be sure, all such activities will broaden your understanding and deepen your maturity. Such are the stock and trade of librarian professional development, and they can be enormously worthwhile. I grant you that, but I am not here arguing for what works. I am talking about the best route to development. By that measure, interviewing emerges preeminent, pure and simple. It stands head and shoulders above the more conventional avenues.

But don't take my word for it. Listen to your colleagues in the field — those who responded to a survey, my random and unscientific sampling of academic librarians — people who had recently interviewed for a professional position. What I discovered may surprise you.

To begin with, no one with whom I spoke found interviewing to be an altogether positive experience.

That is to say, they weren't giddy about the process or especially eloquent about the constructive dimensions of what they had experienced. On the contrary, interviewing for them had been work — arduous at times, and altogether consuming. Some of those I talked with had gotten the job. Others hadn't. For all of them, interviewing had been one part chess game and another part combat — challenging, exhilarating and, more often than not, genuinely intimidating.

Even so, that wasn't the whole story. Everyone recognized several common positive themes — genuine advantages to having gone through the process of applying and interviewing for a professional librarian position. More than that, they insisted that there were definite



*continued on page 62*

## 590: Local Notes from page 61

benefits to it all — things that you couldn't likely learn anywhere else. For all of them, interviewing was amazingly and, in some ways wonderfully, heuristic. Together they highlighted three major professional advantages the process had to offer.

They contended first that interviewing forces you to reexamine a host of issues that you normally wouldn't consider. You have to think through where you are personally and professionally — where you plan to go, how you see librarianship, how you understand the issues. If there are technical advances that you need to master or key debates in the field that you need to understand, preparing for the interview makes you do both. If you are not sure where your strengths lie or how your weaknesses affect your work, getting ready for the interview will force you to find out. Indeed, the overall effects of preparing for the reckoning that an interview entails may be a bit like **Dr. Johnson's** famous observation about the personal benefits of execution. "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."<sup>1</sup>

Interviewing also gives one an in depth glimpse into another place. One respondent commented that you can visit with colleagues at a conference or talk with librarians over the phone, but nothing gives the depth of insight into another shop as well as an interview. You are there up front and personal, and you can see first-hand the problems and advantages of the place. Another colleague noted that only the experience of being part of an accrediting evaluation team begins to match the rare insights that an interview offers in terms of assessing either the feel or the understanding of an institution.

Finally, there is the fresh reevaluation of your current position and your current place — a realization that comes from going into an interview and stepping out of your own shoes for a season. Comparing another job, another institution, another library with your own, allows you so see benefits or drawbacks of the home turf. One colleague said that interviewing tends to cure his wanderlust — helps him to appreciate anew his current position. Another said that more often than not he comes back home with a renewed thankfulness about where he is and what he is doing. Try getting that perspective in some of your usual run-of-the-mill professional development scenarios that I mentioned earlier.

Of course, no matter how compelling job interviewing may seem or what advantages it may offer, it isn't for everyone. It all depends on where you are in your career and in your life. For many of you, stepping out of our routine, planning for an interview may be completely out of the question. You like what you do. You sense you are effective where you are, and you have no intention of leaving. I admire that sort of robust self-awareness and resolute contentment, provided neither are a disguise for complacency or a cloak for stagnation.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, you may have no interest whatsoever in the host of the jobs that are offered. That is understandable, and it is completely acceptable. Indeed, don't go for an interview unless you are reasonably sure you want the position. Interview only for what you want or what you think you want. Anything less is at best ingenuous and at worst dishonest.

Given all of that, if you still have legitimate reasons to seek another job and you have genuine opportunity to explore a position, by all means go for it. Seize the day, attempt to get an interview, and give it your best shot. Win or lose, land a job offer or come away

convinced the search committee wished you had never applied, you are bound to gain much from the process.

On something of a personal and concluding note, I also find that going in for an interview can work as something of a catharsis. The perspectives gleaned, the skills honed, the insight gained function as an elixir. They serve as a balm. Like Ishmael's view of going to sea in the opening pages of *Moby Dick*, interviewing can help alleviate one's professional doldrums.

"Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth, whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before the coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet... then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can."<sup>3</sup>

With no sea at hand and being a landsman of sorts, I do the next best thing in such a situation. I account it high time to get to a job interview as soon as I can. 🐼

### Endnotes

1. **Boswell, James**, *The Life of Johnson*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 849.
2. Note: I argue that interviewing is the best avenue of professional development, just as I might argue that outdoor swimming is the best form of aerobics. Both hold true, even though the former won't appeal to librarians who have no intention of changing, nor the latter for people who live where outdoor swimming is out of the question — such as living in the arctic.
3. **Melville, Herman**. *Moby Dick or, The Whale*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1922. p. 1.

## Rumors from page 40

One of our **reference librarians** sent out this very nifty tool for finding acronyms. It's especially useful if you can't translate a text message. <http://www.acronymfinder.com/>

There has been a lot of speculation on **Ann Okerson's** **liblicense** about this recently. **Gale, part of Cengage Learning**, has acquired the assets of **Questia Media, Inc.**, a provider of information and educational resources to students through its **questia.com** and **questiaschool.com** products. **Questia** provides a premium subscription-based online information service that gives users access to more than 76,000 books from 300+ publishers and millions of articles from journals, magazines and newspapers. Financial terms of the acquisition were not disclosed. "Questia has developed excellent products for learners and educators, with quality content and unique technologies created specifically for college students, professors and high school students," said **Patrick C. Sommers**, president, **Gale**. "The business has a solid subscription base and is developing

unique applications to extend its reach to users around the world... A major focus at **Gale** is reaching users wherever they do their research and connecting them with high-quality content and the resources of their library. We see considerable synergy with **Gale's HighBeam, Encyclopedia.com** and **AccessMyLibrary** services, as well as our library products, and we look forward to the expansion of content and services that will result from this combination of resources." Recent product access enhancements introduced by **Questia** include an **iPhone** application enabling mobile access to **Questia's** entire library, and **Research Wizard**, a **Facebook** application that facilitates community research. **Gale** will support these and develop other new applications to enhance the research experience for users. **Tim Harris** is president and CEO, **Questia Media, Inc.** Customer service and technical support contacts will remain unchanged for customers at this time. [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com). [www.cengage.com](http://www.cengage.com) or [www.gale.com](http://www.gale.com)

Continuing with **Questia**, I can't help but point out that we at **ATG** have interviewed **Troy Williams**, once President and CEO of **Questia** several times, once, by **Judy Luther**,

when **Questia** had just gotten started (v.12#5, November 2000) and second, by yours truly, in v.17#2 (April 2005). The second interview is online in PDF. **ATG** clearly knows where the action is! And, a sidelight. My best friend when I lived in New Orleans briefly had an older sister, **Salpi**, who is now an M.D. But in another life, **Salpi** worked for **Questia**. What a small world! <http://www.against-the-grain.com>

Be sure and renew your subscription to **ATG!** Future issues of **ATG** will cover **ERM** (April 2010), **Collection Development Policies** (April 2010), **The Google Book Settlement** (June 2010), **Article Metrics** (September 2010), and **Sustainability** (November 2010). If you want to propose a topic for a future issue of **ATG**, the Internet lines are open! <kstrauch@comcast.net>

And, last but not least, the **call for papers for the 2010 Charleston Conference** is up on the Web at [www.katina.info/conference](http://www.katina.info/conference). There is also a **call for Preconferences**. The deadline for preconferences is **March 15!**, so if you have a proposal, please put it in ASAP! The deadline for papers is the end of July. Come on down! Thanks! 🐼

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