Level Up: Transitioning to a New Library

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Level Up: Transitioning to a New Library

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Abstract

After seven years as a librarian at a small community college in the Florida panhandle, I accepted a position at one of the largest research universities in the country. After I made this move, I heard from a number of people inquiring how I was handling working at such a drastically different library. Transitioning to a new library can be difficult in any circumstance, but adjusting to such a different institution added new wrinkles. Anyone thinking of making such a change, or supervising anyone making such a change, will find something useful in my reflections.

Background

In 2010 I started my first library job as the collections librarian at Gulf Coast State College in Panama City, Florida. Gulf Coast State College is in the Florida College System, which comprises all of the community colleges in the State of Florida. Gulf Coast State College is a beautiful school, located between two bays. The second floor of the library has a nice waterfront view that can be quite distracting on sunny days. Like that at many community colleges, enrollment can shift drastically with changes in the economy, but FTE generally hovered around 2,000 for most of the time I was there. When I started, there was a staff of five librarians, three library staff, and one library director, along with some part-time student assistants.

My job duties included reference shifts, overseeing the acquisitions and collection development of the monograph collections, teaching library instruction for two departments (Business and Visual & Performing Arts), developing library guides, and any other library-wide projects that arose. By the time I left in 2017, my title was collection strategies and technical services librarian, as I had added overseeing cataloging to my job duties.

In spring 2017, I started my new position as the acquisitions and collection assessment librarian at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. The University of Central Florida is consistently in competition for being the largest research university in the country. As of this writing, it has 66,000 students in a wide variety of degrees. This university is, quite simply, enormous. Because I started near the end of the fiscal year, within my first month on the job, my monographs unit received more books in one week than I had handled in an entire year at my previous library. I was suddenly working with dozens of accomplished librarians who had a wealth

of knowledge and experience. I knew that in order to be effective in this new position, I would need to adjust quickly to this fast-paced environment.

Big Changes

The biggest change I saw in my job transition was that suddenly I didn't have to be a generalist. At many small libraries, librarians have a hand in every pie. Everyone needs to pitch in on every project—there is never simply a “task force” that will take on a project. As a result, I got a wide range of excellent experience and had the opportunity to decide what avenue of libraries was the best fit for me to pursue. However, I got used to having a certain amount of control. At the end of my tenure at Gulf Coast State College, I was the only technical services librarian, so I saw the entire cycle of a book through from beginning to end. I was able to implement cataloging changes fairly quickly, and I was the go-to person for any collections question that arose. Now, at a large research university, I no longer have to be a part of every project. I work with a number of terrific people. Within technical services, there is an acquisitions department, which I am a part of, and also a cataloging department, which is separate. We have different goals and timelines, though of course we coordinate and work together. This was a bit of an adjustment—I can't necessarily redesign a workflow in isolation! I need to get input and cooperation from cataloging to make real changes and let go of having control over every part of the process. I also now have the opportunity to really become a specialist. I've long known that acquisitions was my favorite part of librarianship, but I hadn't had the opportunity to immerse myself in this type of work.

Another big difference is the change in status on campus. At the University of Central Florida, librarians have faculty status. As such, though we do not

earn tenure, we must research and publish. This certainly fits—librarians here are specialists, so of course they should conduct research to deepen their knowledge in their chosen areas. This can be a huge adjustment, though, for someone coming from a smaller institution. Many libraries, regardless of size, can't allocate much money to librarians for travel to conferences, which is a large part of scholarship. Librarians who are not able to afford travel to these conferences on their own begin to feel isolated and cut off from exciting conversations and ideas. It can be difficult for a new librarian who hasn't had the expectation of scholarship to begin the process of presenting at conferences and writing for publication. Conference presentations, often a precursor to publishing an article, can particularly be difficult in the first year, as the new librarian may have already missed key deadlines for submitting proposals.

There will also be various cultural differences between institutions that will pop up, expectedly or not. The community college library I worked at was fairly willing to conduct weeding projects and de-select items that were no longer being used or adding value to the collection. However, many research universities are hesitant to part with monographs. There is not necessarily a "right" view or a "wrong" view—just different philosophies! It's important that you find out which philosophy your new library ascribes to, and keep that in mind as you're making decisions in your new environment. You'll also quickly learn which of your types of patrons get priority. Is this new library student focused? If so, do graduate students get priority? Or is it faculty focused? Or a combination?

Solutions

One of the most useful things that happened in my transition was something completely out of my control. After I had been on the job about three months, my boss left the country. She would be in China for about a month, leaving me to complete the fiscal rollover on my own. She had prepared me for this, gone over the process, and left me with someone to contact if it didn't go according to plan. This proved to be enormously helpful. For one, I couldn't rely on her to solve every issue that arose. I was forced to figure some things out without being able to run ideas past her first to get reassurance. This generated a great amount of confidence for me in my new position. I had proof that my boss had confidence

in my ability to handle things, and then when I did solve unexpected problems that popped up, I had proof to squelch any self-doubt. This may not be the most accessible solution in this paper, but I highly recommend that managers schedule some time off after a few months if possible to give their employee a chance to embrace his or her new role.

The best step that the University of Central Florida library takes is to assign new librarians a "UCF Mentor." This mentor is another librarian on campus, preferably from the same department, who will help the new librarian adjust to working at UCF. My mentor, Tina Buck, has been exceptionally helpful. She isn't my career mentor, she isn't my life coach, but she is someone who will sit down and explain details about how the bureaucracy of UCF works. Every university has their own unique red tape maze, and I cannot overstate how helpful it is to have someone to help you navigate. This is my number one recommendation for anyone starting a new job, or anyone who's hiring someone new. Tina has answered numerous questions about UCF and the library here, and it was very freeing to have someone who I knew would be expecting me to ask those questions. I didn't have to constantly bother my boss with procedural questions unrelated to my role, and I didn't feel like an imposition on my mentor. I could run ideas past my mentor, and she would tell me if there was a political reason I shouldn't bring something up, or approach it from a different angle.

Another helpful strategy is to constantly take notes. From the first day of my new job, I made the decision to write everything down. Starting a new position is exhausting, and even those of us with steel-trap memories may find ourselves starting to forget details. I averaged about a full notebook of notes a month in my first six months. Honestly, many of these notes, particularly those I took during meetings, did not make a lot of sense to me when I wrote them down. I could not possibly know all the background behind projects, or the various new acronyms that would pop up, and often it would not have been appropriate for me to pause a meeting to get an explanation on the spot. Instead, I took good notes, wrote down everything, and did research to fill in some gaps. I also read them again after a couple of months. This really helped me connect the dots and flesh out some ongoing projects that I wasn't directly involved in, and it also gave me great

reasons to follow up with people who had mentioned something offhand at a meeting. Personally, I prefer to hand-write notes, but others may find it particularly helpful to type up their notes later so that they will be easily searchable. As I went through these notes, I was able to pull out ideas for potential collaboration on papers and proposals and jot down ideas for further research.

Lastly, I also recommend that new librarians read everything they can get their hands on about their new library. My first few weeks on the job, I pored over old library annual reports, I read every single campus-wide e-mail that came to my inbox, and I read everything on the campus website. This helped me get a handle on what the big projects were in the library, and on the campus as a whole. I was able to see what the university was most proud of, and get a feeling of where the administration was leading the campus.

Conclusions

Starting a new job is exhausting, particularly when it's a completely different environment than your previous positions. Cut yourself some slack! You do not need to be running everything from day one. Give yourself some time to observe, learn, and reflect. After you start to get your legs, seek a project you can complete independently to give yourself confidence. Ask for a mentor who can help you learn the cultural norms at your new institution and navigate bureaucracy. Don't be concerned if you don't know something. Write everything down and revisit your notes later to fill in gaps. Take in all the information about your new institution that you can, and immerse yourself in it. As you do all these things, you'll naturally begin to feel more at home, and you'll spark new ideas for projects that can turn into papers or proposals. These steps will help you adjust quickly, build your confidence, and be effective in your new position quickly.