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A SMARTER WAY TO MAKE EARLY AND MID-CAREER DECISIONS

BY ALYSON DRAKE, FRANKLIN L. RUNGE & AUSTIN MARTIN WILLIAMS

**TIPS FOR EVALUATING
YOUR INTERESTS, SETTING
PRIORITIES, AND BUILDING
A NETWORK.**



Libraries set themselves apart as safe spaces for people of all ages to learn, explore, and share new ideas. That being said, how comfortable are you talking to your colleagues about making a career move? Do you have reliable information to help you make decisions?

In the summer of 2018, a group of law librarians escaped a conference at lunchtime. They braved the hot weather and an unfamiliar city to find a lunch spot where they openly compared notes on career satisfaction, work/life balance, the role of librarians at different institutions (including management responsibilities), and how to navigate a career move. The people sitting around the table were in their mid-30s to mid-40s and they represented a variety of academic institutions. Each of them had at least seven years of librarianship experience. For some at the table, it was their first honest conversation about their career development since becoming a law librarian. Following that lunch, the conversation kept going.

In March 2019, some of the same librarians presented a program at the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries (SEAALL) Institute on Leadership and Career Development. Their goal with that program—along with this article—is to formalize information sharing about early and mid-career decisions in a safe and productive space.

Before jumping into specifics, it is critical to acknowledge that law librarians do not make decisions in a vacuum. Sometimes career choices are influenced by a variety of factors, including finances, family concerns, job loss, geography, and the search for a first job. This article cannot unpack each of those situations, but it can assist law librarians that have the privilege of exploring professional options.

Evaluating Your Current Experience

Regardless of whether you are looking to make a change or if you are satisfied in your current role, you should take time every year or two to evaluate your current position. Doing so will allow you to make better decisions about future opportunities and hopefully prevent you from making career decisions based solely on current job dissatisfaction, school rankings, or other short-term factors that will not provide you with long-term career satisfaction. When evaluating your current position, consider what you like and dislike about your current position, and identify your priorities.

In terms of what you like or dislike about your current position, it is important to evaluate both your day-to-day responsibilities and other aspects of your job that can have an impact on career satisfaction. Taking stock of what you like or dislike about your responsibilities will help you determine what you should be looking for in future positions. Even the same job title at a different school may require different levels of teaching, public interaction, managerial responsibilities, and administrative work. Moreover, taking on a new position within the same library or department can change your day-to-day responsibilities. You also need to consider other factors, such as working hours, organizational hierarchy, office location, and professional and university service expectations. In addition, you should consider your library's mission, vision, and culture. Do you value if your library is student or faculty



focused? Is it a place where there is an expectation to try new things, or does it have established programs and procedures in place that are executed regardless of the individuals that make up the staff? Taking all of this into account will give you a clearer picture of what position may bring the most career satisfaction to you in the future.

Setting Your Priorities

Identifying your priorities is a critical step in evaluating your current experience. Amongst law librarians, there is a pervasive idea that the ultimate goal for librarianship is to become a director/manager. However, for some librarians, achieving such a goal would take them away from the parts of librarianship they truly value, which may eventually lead to job dissatisfaction. What one librarian cherishes about their work may differ radically from the next—and it is a question that each librarian must answer honestly for themselves. Maybe what excites you most is doing administrative work, interacting with patrons, teaching, organizing information, or engaging in challenging research projects. It is important to distinguish between what you actually like about your work and what you think you are supposed to like, if you want to advance to a certain position. Ask yourself what pieces of librarianship excite you the

most and consider what roles and duties will best provide you with opportunities to do that type of work. Then, in looking at job openings, you should critically analyze whether positions will allow you to engage in work that will fulfill you.

Talk to Your Mentors and Peers

In addition to evaluating your present position and identifying your current priorities, you should also look to the future and identify what you hope to gain if you make a change at this point in your career. Talking to mentors and peers can shed light on opportunities that may or may not be best suited to your interests, skills, and preferences. These people can take on different forms and fill different professional needs for you.

First, you may have a traditional mentor, someone with significant experience in the field that you look to for advice. You may not have worked directly with this person, but they may be able to shed light on the position or people you would be working with in a new position. They may also be able to give insights on how a particular position might fit within your long-term ambitions.

Second, you may also have trusted peers—often those who came up in the profession with you—who are in a similar phase of their career as you and

that you can have frank conversations with about your ambitions and desires. At the SEALL Institute, the attendees called this category “friend colleagues,” as within this group are people you probably talk to most frequently and with whom you can be most open.

Finally, it is also helpful to develop a trusting relationship with your direct supervisor so you can express your priorities and goals, as they can provide internal opportunities to help bring job satisfaction in your current position or to give you a leg up when you are searching for a new opportunity that aligns with those desires.

To seek these people out when you are actively considering a change, you must also check in with them from time to time when you are *not* looking for a new job. This will cultivate the types of relationships you need when it comes time to make critical career decisions. Gathering a diversity of opinions when making a career decision is critical in weighing out the pros and cons of the new position you are considering.

Some questions to consider when talking to a mentor or peer include:

- Are you looking for something that will challenge you?
- Are you hoping to grow in an area that you do not have the opportunity to develop in your current position?
- Are you trying to move into a position that will allow you to spend more time on responsibilities that you find personally and professionally satisfying?

Talking through these questions with someone else will help you identify and articulate what you really want in your career and can provide you with a much-needed outsider’s perspective.

Other Key Early to Mid-Career Factors to Consider

Evaluating your current position, setting priorities, and talking to professional colleagues can help you determine what opportunities to pursue. Once you are in the applicant pool, you must also fully consider the opportunity that is in front of you. In addition to the items

discussed above, here are few other factors that will be unique to each position and institution.

Factor 1: Professional Development

Law librarians have different professional development goals and those goals change over time. It requires time (and frequently funding) to write articles, read articles that will improve your librarianship, attend webinars, present at conferences, or attend workshops. When looking to make an early or mid-career transition, ask questions about an institution's support for professional development. If you will be on a tenure-track, does the school allow you to have writing time or professional development leave in your schedule? Will the institution purchase materials (e.g., monographs, software programs, etc.) that facilitate your research? Does the institution have a stated spending cap per librarian? Is the cap flexible? If there is no explicit spending cap, you will need to ask the potential employer a series of detailed questions about their approach to professional development. It is best to get professional development promises before you join an organization, when you still have leverage in negotiations, as opposed to waiting until you are in the "belly of the beast" to start with your requests.

Factor 2: The Role of Law Librarians at Different Academic Institutions

Your professional growth will inevitably be influenced by how your institution views you as an employee, and each institution has a bespoke approach. Across academia you will see law librarians that are tenure-track faculty, nontenure-track faculty, a nebulous mix of faculty and staff, or professional staff members. Within these various labels, you will see law librarians that may or may not have voting rights, service requirements, scholarship requirements, or teaching responsibilities.

At different points in your career, you might enjoy different types of institutional responsibilities. Receiving tenure is a notable accomplishment, but it might not be the only answer to your professional growth. It is a challenge

to balance the rigorous work of law librarianship, faculty committee work, and writing responsibilities. It is just as defensible for a law librarian to want voting rights at a faculty meeting as it is to never want to attend a faculty meeting.

In addition to the various labels that law librarians have, there is also variety in how they are treated within academic communities. At some institutions, law librarians are rarely seen or heard by the faculty or administration; at other institutions, they are viewed as integral team players. It is hard to ascertain this type of data during a job interview, when everyone is on their best behavior. You can ascertain this type of data, however, by building and nurturing a network of colleagues at national or regional conferences.

Factor 3: Management Responsibilities

You may open additional professional opportunities if you have management experience on your resume. This can be more difficult to come by in an era of shrinking library staffs and the implementation of "flatter" organizational structures. If you are interested in middle management positions or becoming a law library director, you should begin exploring opportunities to gain management experience in your current position or look for a position that will provide that opportunity.

Managing others is one of the hardest tasks in the modern workplace. You must ask yourself if you are interested in and able to facilitate another employee's professional performance and growth. Effective managers in law libraries must have more than patience for the task; they must be actively engaged in regular and healthy communications with staff members, lead scheduling and long-term planning, and provide staff with continuous feedback on job performance.

The Decision Is Yours

Early in your career as a law librarian, it is easy to push the "cruise control" button professionally because this is an intellectually rewarding job. While it

takes time and energy, we have found the best path to career satisfaction is setting priorities and building a network. Work to find and foster a group of law librarian colleagues that will share data, speak honestly, and unpack experiences. Evaluating early and mid-career decisions is a difficult task, so why do it alone? ■

READ

Andrea Alexander's article "Creating Successful Workplace Transitions," from the July/August 2019 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at bit.ly/JA19Transition.

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Listen to the AALL webinar recording "Expand Your Career and Engage with Your Peers," at bit.ly/AALL2go012319.

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