JOURNAL OF NEW LIBRARIANSHIP
Vol. 10, No. 2, 2025
https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/19/5

Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Undertrained and Overwhelmed: Adapting to Unexpected Job Changes

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ABSTRACT

As libraries grapple with declining budgets, shifting priorities, high rates of turnover, vacancies, the "new normal," and the persistent push to "do more with less," an increasing number of library workers have found that their roles have deviated from their original job descriptions, sometimes drastically. In many cases, these roles were loosely or confusingly defined and have called upon individuals to perform duties for which they have limited to no experience, training, or guidance. This paper explores the challenges of adjusting to such unanticipated changes and, through exploration of the author's own experiences, begins a discussion of strategies and techniques that may be helpful to those navigating similar circumstances.

KEYWORDS

job changes, role ambiguity, job creep, job descriptions, hiring, staffing

SUGGESTED CITATION

Ginsberg, S. (2025). Undertrained and overwhelmed: Adapting to unexpected job changes. *Journal of New Librarianship, 10*(2), 50–57. https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/19/5

Introduction

In early 2021, a little over a year after when I began working at a new institution, I discovered that the job I had applied for and accepted no longer existed.

My first year of employment in the position, beginning in February 2020, was unusually chaotic. COVID-19 was spreading rapidly, and on March 11 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), bringing about significant upheaval on a worldwide scale. In addition, the Libraries at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP) were still undergoing transitions and reorganization that often accompany a change in leadership—in this case, a relatively new Dean of Libraries. These circumstances–combined with a high rate of personnel change as the nation saw record levels of turnover in 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021)—meant that I unexpectedly found myself with an updated title, job description, and set of responsibilities in an area in which I had interest, but very limited actual training and experience.

My situation is far from unique. A 2018 survey of librarians who left academic library positions over a five year period asked participants what job-related issues influenced their decisions; two of the top three reasons reported "were library administration issues that affected job duties (e.g. change in administration led to job duty changes, lack of direction by administration, unsupportive administration, etc.)" (Heady et al., 2020, p. 587). In fact, Heady et al. identified the effect of library administration on job duties as the factor most frequently mentioned by respondents in the open-ended portion of the survey, with some librarians specifically describing shifting priorities and responsibilities brought on by changes to library leadership. Others discussed "situations in which their colleagues would quit or retire, but their positions were left vacant. This led to their work duties being shifted around to other librarians" (Heady et al., 2020, p. 593).

It is also not uncommon for librarians to feel uncertain and undertrained when facing unanticipated position changes. In her article, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," Fobazi Ettarh (2018) discusses the reality of job creep in libraries, describing experiences in which librarians are called upon to perform duties that are "more than what is in the job description" and often "without the proper training and institutional support." Warren and Scoulas's (2021) study of public services Special Collections librarians asked participants "whether their current tasks go beyond their position description. The vast majority of the respondents (80%, n = 64) reported 'yes' and only 20% (n = 14) indicated 'no'" (2021, p. 320). There is certainly no lack of articles and blog posts written by library employees on the theme of feeling unprepared for various job responsibilities; in fact, the official blog of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) features an entire category of posts entitled "What I Wasn't Taught in Library School…" (n.d.).

Librarians find themselves in these circumstances for a variety of reasons, facing different degrees of preparation and previous experience with the duties they are being asked to perform. In my case, shifting institutional priorities, administrative decisions, staffing changes, and position vacancies resulted in me accepting the newly-established title of Head of Student Engagement Services—an ambiguously defined role cobbled together from duties that needed coverage, current needs that had been identified, and potential future directions and goals—and a role for which I had a lot to learn. While I have only been in this new position for a few years and am still developing the tools and approaches that work for me, it is my hope that sharing my experience can help others consider how to best manage their own situations.

Challenges

Unsurprisingly, this significant shift in my job description was accompanied by a host of challenges, many of which were exacerbated by the specifics of my situation. When I accepted my position at UMCP, I had already expected that I would face a period of transition during which I would need to learn about and adapt to the inherent differences between my previous institution and a much larger one. Immediately prior, I had spent several years as the Learning Technologies Librarian at SUNY Oswego, a liberal arts college with approximately 6,500 enrolled undergraduate and graduate students across four schools, one campus library, and around 25-30 library employees (SUNY Oswego, n.d.); in contrast, UMCP has about 40,000 enrolled students across twelve schools, eight campus libraries, and over 200 library employees (University of Maryland, n.d.). Many of the strategies I had developed to engage with the campus community and establish relationships with colleagues and students were no longer viable in such a drastically different environment. These objectives were made even more difficult by the shift to exclusively virtual operations within a month of my start date due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Without existing professional and social connections at the institution and lacking a comprehensive understanding of how the university and the Libraries ”normally” functioned, I suddenly found I was struggling to integrate myself in ways I would never have anticipated.

Even when UMCP began to gradually move towards resuming in-person activity, the ongoing pandemic introduced complications I had never faced previously. Additionally, as the transition back to “normal” was an incremental, phased process carried out amidst rapidly changing health and safety guidance, we were required to be flexible and adapt quickly, and many things simply never returned to how they had been. For example, rather than returning to face-to-face meetings as the shared default, many people continued to schedule meetings exclusively or primarily through Zoom, and some in-person events or initiatives were permanently altered or canceled. Combined with the scope of turnover and personnel changes, these shifts left me feeling like an uncertain newcomer for much longer than I ordinarily would have. I had difficulty meeting and getting to know faculty and staff both within and external to the Libraries, I lost partnerships that had been established prior to my arrival, and I struggled to

learn about and develop a sense for the student population as a whole. It was against this disorienting backdrop that I abruptly took on responsibilities for student engagement and outreach.

From the start, my new position was somewhat loosely defined. Again, I was hardly alone in this regard. Role ambiguity is a common element and often-identified source of stress for those employed in libraries. A recent study by Nwofor et al. (2024) examined the causes of Nigerian academic librarians' work-related conflict and how these factors affect job performance, finding that limited resources, closely followed by role ambiguity, were the top two most-reported issues (pp. 18-19). Baer explores the impact of this ambiguity on instruction librarians' perceptions of themselves and of their professional identities, referring to Shupe and Pung's psychological approach to understanding academic librarianship, which explains that "among the major contributors to librarian burnout is role stress, which more specifically involves role ambiguity, role overload, and role conflict" (2021, p. 28). Beyond introducing confusion and uncertainty to librarians' understanding of their own duties and identities, role ambiguity may have a negative effect on librarians' mental health and physical wellbeing.

Contributing to the vague nature of these roles is the fact that they are often brought about by budget cuts and reduced resources that require "library employees to do more with less and wear multiple hats at once, thus turning the role of librarian into one 'of a multitasking, boundless expert'" (Heady, 2020, p. 581). The result is frequently a position like the one I stepped into, created to plug gaps left behind by turnover and vacancies combining a range of responsibilities that are not necessarily related and without a formal long-term plan. As coverage of neglected work and overlooked organizational goals drives these roles, it is incredibly likely for a librarian to be, effectively, a one-person unit or department without the benefit of designated assistance or backup. In my case, I became the sole person responsible for the type of outreach I was tasked with, while retaining a significant portion of my original position: namely, serving as a supervisor to a unit that runs a public-facing service desk.

Additionally, since these types of positions are often a unique amalgamation of duties that have not previously been combined, those taking them on might lack, like I did, the example or guidance of a direct predecessor, metrics by which to contextualize and assess their work, and in many cases, even colleagues within the field whose role is a clear match to their own. Depending on the specifics involved, these "multitasking expert" positions may also bring together disparate types of labor that do not always mesh well and call upon distinct skillsets; for instance, while my new duties required me to undertake cyclical, project-based work with sustained periods of focus and pre-planning, I retained the portion of my job in which I served as a supervisor to a unit of staff and student workers responsible for the consistent, day-to-day operations of a public-facing service desk.

The Journey

In an ideal world, this section would present detailed step-by-step strategies outlining the perfect way to succeed in circumstances similar to those described above. The truth, of course, is more complicated. To some degree, I am still in the process of developing those strategies myself. Additionally, as I have explored, these circumstances tend to stem from institutional challenges that are beyond a single person's ability to resolve. Regardless, I hope that by discussing my approach and what I have learned over the course of several years adapting to an unexpected role shift, I can offer some insights to others who find themselves traveling the same path.

One of the first and most important objectives I pursued in my new role was seeking out collaboration. I began this by doing my best to learn what had been done previously. Although I could not draw upon the work of a direct predecessor, I knew that some of the motivation behind passing these duties to me was the lack of coverage for specific established events, either those that had been annually hosted by the Libraries or those hosted by campus in which the Libraries had participated. As there was one specific staff member who had been responsible for these events prior to his departure, I did what I could to gather and learn from any materials he had left behind and conferred with my colleagues about the work he had done. From there, I was able to assemble a list of preexisting campus partners. As mentioned, a number of these partnerships were unfortunately lost in the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic and everything that came with it. However, I was able to connect with a handful of former contacts or departments, introduce myself, and get myself included on various mailing lists or on meeting invitations for planning committees.

In addition to relationship building directly in service of developing plans for outreach, I made a broader effort to network within the Libraries as well as the campus community by joining committees, responding to calls for volunteers, taking an interest in others' work, and generally being open and willing to try out new things. Since my responsibilities as a unit head include a significant amount of work that does not focus on student engagement, I have also adopted a strategy of being alert to instances in which there might be overlap, or in which I might create an opportunity by putting on my other hat, so to speak. As an example, when a School of Public Health faculty member approached my staff with questions about students utilizing our service desk-based poster printers for an annual Research and Practice Day event, I saw a chance to explore a new potential partnership. Rather than simply providing our usual service, I pitched the idea of the Libraries acting as a sponsor; we would offer poster printing to participating students at no cost, and in exchange we could use the event as a chance to reach undergraduate researchers. We agreed that, in the lead-up to the annual event, I would present a workshop on the topic of effective conference poster design that included information about our poster printing services. Additionally, I facilitated a connection between the event organizer and the appropriate subject area liaison, allowing for the librarian to attend and represent the

Libraries. We also discussed the possibility of increased collaboration in future years, such as tabling at the event or hosting an exhibit in our space afterwards to display the judged competition's winning posters. While developing a network and seeking these opportunities has at times been a difficult process, it has proven invaluable in helping me establish some regular collaborators, as well as allowing me to better familiarize myself with the complex operations of such a large university. Even when there have been projects that did not succeed or were not completed for a variety of reasons, or when a partnership dissolved due to a contact leaving their position, I have found my experiences valuable to build upon for future initiatives.

Another factor that has been incredibly helpful along the way has been learning how to manage and communicate reasonable expectations. I am grateful to have a supportive supervisor who has done her best to encourage and guide me in this area. As discussed above, my position has always been somewhat loosely defined, consolidating a range of scattered duties that needed coverage. Even my title, Head of Student Engagement Services, is not entirely straightforward, as there are other people working in various Libraries departments who perform outreach and engagement within the purview of their particular specialties. As a result, as I have adjusted to my new role over the past few years, I have received a number of requests from colleagues who, understandably, did not fully grasp what I do or were under the impression that certain tasks and projects were part of my duties. My supervisor has consistently reminded me of my right to set boundaries, decline certain requests, and otherwise protect my limited time and capacity. She has always made herself a resource if I need help advocating for myself or determining how to say no in an appropriate and professional manner. Simultaneously, I have gained insight into the ways in which I might overextend myself, be overly eager to help out, or let my ambitions and excitement about a project overtake the reality of available time and resources. I am still practicing reining myself in to prevent this while striving to achieve a healthier balance.

Recently, my supervisor suggested formalizing some of this approach by creating a written scope document to clarify the boundaries of my role. To do this, I reflected on my work up until that point, as well as my goals for the future, then outlined my primary objectives along with the intended audience of my outreach. I identified and listed specific types of work or requests that are outside the scope of my position, as well as those that may be within scope but are not feasible at this time considering current resources and staffing (i.e., just me). I also developed a specific procedure for potential collaborators to request my participation or assistance with a project, including required lead time. When completed, this document was reviewed and approved by both my supervisor and the Associate Dean who oversees my department, then uploaded to our libraries' documentation system and shared widely on the internal staff announcement blog. While this scope document is still relatively new and therefore it is currently difficult to judge its impact, the process of having to define and

articulate these details has already helped refine my own thinking and given me more of a sense of control over my workload.

Conclusion

Although my position often still feels like a work in progress, persistent trial and error has allowed me to develop more confidence and identify some beneficial techniques as I have adapted to the abrupt and unexpected alteration of my role. Until and unless the broader systemic issues responsible for creating these situations are addressed, it is likely many more librarians will find themselves called upon to take on responsibilities for which they lack adequate training, and which are frequently poorly defined. In the meantime, perhaps peer support can offer both a sense of solidarity and actionable strategies. It is my hope that sharing my own experience will contribute to this discussion and that it may be useful to others who are navigating their own unique but similar circumstances.

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