Building a Better Librarian: Why Your Work as a Librarian Begins LONG Before Your Graduate Program
by Courtney E. Jacobs

The field of librarianship has undergone dramatic changes in the past 5 years; perhaps most notably in the number and type of open positions, as well as the job application process itself. Numbers point to a bleak market[1], and countless blogs lament the situation while offering never ending “to do lists” for the aspiring librarian. I offer my own suggestions from personal experience; tools that I not only developed to secure a promising position at a prestigious university library in my chosen area, but also continue to use in my present position in anticipation of advancement. This piece is directed to those aspiring librarians seeking advice on the perilous journey ahead, as well as to my peers; the colleagues, supervisors, and mentors of aspiring librarians who seek to offer the same assistance we have all benefited from in the past.

The Challenge
There are many ways to build a librarian. The various roads that lead to librarianship are as diverse and unique as the individuals traveling them. There is no direct route to librarianship (as an MLS supposedly once was), but there are two things I advise every single aspiring librarian to begin immediately: practice effective networking and build a professional portfolio. The good news is that both often occur along side of, as pre-requisites for, or as a continuation of applying to graduate school. However, both are hard tasks requiring considerable effort and persistence. Once begun, they should essentially never stop.

Effective Networking
If you have been reading the articles/blogs/op-eds/tweets/etc. of our field, the battle-cry of the aspiring librarian is “Networking.” The term is used endlessly, yet the meaning can be quite nebulous, shifting from field to field. For those who are confused as I was, I offer this simple definition. Networking effectively as a librarian means knowing people, places, and things. Sounds like an oversimplification, but essentially it has to do with being an informed member of your field. An attractive candidate will have a good idea of his or her interest area, the well-known scholars in those and related areas, institutions making headway in those areas, and possible contributions to be made in research and publishing.

For Students
When applying to graduate school, the information gathered through networking is the driving force behind identifying and applying for a specific program, isolating a focus, and choosing your electives track. Get recommendations from librarians in your network. Identify people who hold positions in fields that interest you and find a way to casually interview them about their experiences and advice. If someone isn’t readily available, request their resume or CV for a snapshot of their career path. Even as an undergrad, it’s important to pay attention to current trends in various fields. This will give you a good idea of what skills are required for certain jobs, how you can tailor your in-class projects to help you develop those skills, and how you can then market those skills effectively to future employers. If you engage with the professional world while in school (and you should), be prepared to talk about the professors you study under and the projects you’re interested in or have completed. Read the relevant articles published in your specific field. Sign up for list-serves and investigate professional associations that relate to your interest areas. Do not wait until your practicum to build on-the-job-experience. Seek out volunteer opportunities as soon a possible.

For Mentors
Aspiring librarians cannot learn to network in a vacuum. Because of the nature of our field today, we must help them understand the methods we employ for success in our own positions. Introduce them to other members of your network and explain how their position interacts with your own. Recommend resources and projects for them beyond their isolated tasks; suggest ways to highlight and promote their student work with poster sessions, articles, blog posts, etc. Don’t assume the
relevance of their LIS programs; instead, help them to bridge the gap between the theory they discuss in class and on-the-job experience.

Building a Professional Portfolio
One of the key factors in being able to effectively network is the strength of your professional portfolio. Essentially, your portfolio is you, in print and in person; your relevant experience as well as how capable you are at selling it. With the job market in its current state, being able to effectively market your skills and tailor your application package to specific positions and institutions during the application process is vital and, like networking, takes years to master.

For Students
Your portfolio will include the contacts and skills you’ve built through successful networking, and should remain current. Obvious additions would be a current Resume/CV, drafts of multiple cover letters for various purposes, and professional letters of recommendation. Begin this process before applying to graduate school since many programs require a resume, application essay, and recommendation letters.

One critical function of the portfolio is to assist you in developing well-written and targeted cover letters. Every time you write about yourself and your work you should save it in your portfolio. Save the papers and projects of which you are especially proud from your undergraduate and graduate programs. Most importantly, save the work you’ve done for professors and other mentors who will be included in your portfolio, i.e. those writing letters of recommendation or serving as references. Don’t assume they will remember the specific details about you or your work. Be able to provide examples of your work and back up your experiences articulately to both your mentors as well as prospective employers.

Maintain contact with your past mentors, colleagues, references, and favorite professors. Keep them updated via email about current projects and job prospects. No one appreciates being cold-called after 2 years for a letter of recommendation.

Begin practicing the job application process within a few months of matriculation by targeting positions in your interest area. Whether or not you submit these applications is a personal matter, but pay attention to the job requirements and tailor your courses to reflect market demand for specific skills. Start applying to positions at least a year before graduation, if not more, since the process from job application to acceptance in many libraries can take 6 months or longer.

For Mentors
All too often internships are viewed as short-term contingent labor without reflection on the tangible skills being imparted to the aspiring librarian. More often than not, internships provide free labor toward a discrete task a department couldn’t afford to prioritize. But internships have increasingly ceased being dress rehearsals for full-time employment, and it behooves us to spend more time identifying necessary skills for various areas, and helping our interns and volunteers understand what their work experience translates into within the institution and within the field.

Schedule regular meetings with those you mentor, guiding them through the process of evaluation. Suggest they submit regular portfolios, even at a casual level, so they might be familiar with the process of putting forth a body of work and isolating how their experience relates to today’s market. Share your search committee experiences of how candidates best displayed their particular strengths. Offer to workshop job letters, CVs and other materials, and provide opportunities for mock-job talks for those you mentor, as well as the broader community.

In Conclusion
Succeeding at networking and professional portfolio building takes far longer than the one or two years it requires to complete an MLS, so a well-prepared student will begin practicing them long before matriculation. Going beyond what is required by your LIS program will help you be seen as a valuable member of your field, not just another newbie librarian.

For mentors, it is important we recognize the changing face of librarianship and the dynamic, hands-on, and multi-disciplinary approach to mentorship it necessitates. It is not enough anymore that we offer relative job experience in the form of an internship, or offer to serve as a reference during their job search. As professionals in this field, we must lead by example, providing proactive
support throughout the process. Our field as a whole will reap the rewards.

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About the Author:

Courtney E. Jacobs is an Archives and Rare Books Librarian at the University of North Texas Libraries. She holds a BA in English from Ohio State University and an MSLIS from the iSchool at Syracuse University. She completed her undergraduate degree while working as Head of Reserves and Circulation Manager for OSU’s Social Sciences Library and has over 10 years paraprofessional experience in access services, special collections, and conservation. She has benefited from the tireless assistance of countless mentors and is looking forward to providing that service to a new generation of librarians.