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Getting to Great: Transitioning from a Special to an Academic Library

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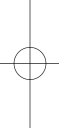


Chapter Two

Getting to Great

Transitioning from a Special to an Academic Library

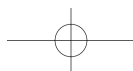
Linda Miles



Transitioning successfully from one library context to another is about more than getting the job and landing on your feet; it is above all about finding a way to thrive in a new situation.¹ The story of my own transformation begins at the library of Lincoln Center Institute (LCI) for the Arts in Education, now Lincoln Center Education (LCE). The library held more than ten thousand physical items plus a modest electronic library of subscription materials. We collected in the areas of educational theory, arts education, the arts, and juvenile literature, and we served the arts education administrators, teaching artists, K–12 educators, and professors of teacher education associated with the organization.

Like so many other industries, arts education took an economic hit in the years following 9/11 and again after the economic downturn of 2008. In 2011, the LCI library closed as part of an effort to form a leaner organization. I was laid off along with the director of the resource center. I had begun my tenure at LCI as a library assistant in 2000 and worked my way up to assistant director, with day-to-day oversight of the library. With multiple advanced degrees plus eleven years of library experience, I was well positioned to transition to an academic librarian position. After eight months on the market, I began working as a public services librarian at Yeshiva University (YU), a private four-year institution in Manhattan.

I had thrived during my years at LCI. I respected, and was respected by, my colleagues across the organization. I was able to apply intelligence and creativity to diverse new challenges as well as core practices of librarianship. I had opportunities to advance within the organization, and I was privileged to be able to give 110 percent to a mission for which I felt an unwavering



commitment. It is a tall order, but this same level of engagement and reward was what I was looking for as I transitioned to the academic library world.

Well, I got my happy ending. I landed the job, transitioned to a new context, and I have come to thrive in that new world. Although I was quite anxious during the jobless months, my transition was relatively easy, particularly because I understood the differences between the two library contexts, received some excellent job-seeking advice specific to academia, and thought strategically about navigating expectations in my new position.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

There are many similarities between my former special library context and the academic world in which I now practice. A significant amount of attention in both arenas is paid to careful negotiation of relationships across the library and across the institution. There are alliances to build and political nuances to negotiate.² There is an emphasis on marketing the value of the library to the larger organization. As a key player in cross-departmental initiatives at LCI (teaching artist training, for example) I was “embedded” in the educational processes of the organization.

The most significant change between these two contexts is in the orientation of the librarian toward users’ information seeking. Often, the goal of the special librarian is to anticipate user needs so that new resources are acquired, excerpted, curated, and delivered by librarians to address known user needs, even before a request is made.³ Academic librarians, on the other hand, continually balance a desire to efficiently meet the needs of users with a commitment to teaching others how to effectively navigate the twenty-first-century universe of information for themselves.⁴ Some special librarians articulate a need to position themselves as those experts who can do what no one else in the organization can do,⁵ while the academic orientation suggests that we teach everyone to be able to do this work—in some cases, to do it even better than we do it ourselves.

The organizational structures within which special libraries are situated are often highly hierarchical. In the collaborative ethos of academia, all perspectives are solicited and debated in service of consensus decision making. This may frustrate librarians used to an environment “where the hierarchical structure identifies those in a position to make a quick decision.”⁶ The pace of the implementation of new practices in academia can seem glacial. In many academic institutions, librarians are granted faculty status and are directly represented along with classroom faculty on the faculty senate or other education policy-focused bodies. At YU, librarians do not have faculty status and so do not have access to power in the same way, but there is still a marked difference in the philosophy governing how I do my job—and how I

practice my profession. This difference is felt most keenly in the discretion I am afforded to address the responsibilities of my position as I see fit. Whereas at LCI initiatives were prioritized on my behalf by my director at the behest of the organization's executive director, at YU I am empowered to develop my own ideas for initiatives that I would like to take on; then I work with my supervisor and the director of libraries to determine whether, when, and how to begin the work. It is a great model for "managing up" or "managing from the middle." Some academic librarians, newly transferred from the corporate sphere, have "reveled" in the sense of increased autonomy in their new situation.⁷

Much has been written about the "silos" of higher education,⁸ whereby organizational units of the institution are largely uninvolved in, and even unaware of, the efforts taken on elsewhere on campus. In some cases, the library cuts across these silos. YU's administrative leaders have only recently focused on merging some undergraduate academic departments across two campuses, but the YU Libraries have spanned those campuses historically. The silos around us still impact our work, however. At LCI, communication across the organization was recognized as vital to everyone's productivity. At YU, there is sometimes a sense of working in a vacuum, without an understanding of what others in the institution may be striving to accomplish. Since we share common objectives for our students, there is a danger of duplicating efforts or working at cross-purposes. As twenty-first-century academia evolves, some of these divisions are breaking down,⁹ and their impact may vary by institution. It is important to deliberately develop an ever-expanding network of relationships, in my case beginning with curriculum-focused discussions that I scheduled with classroom faculty.

Those working in public services will find themselves providing much more instruction¹⁰ and may end up focusing less time and effort on reference work.¹¹ Academic librarians not in public service positions may also be expected to take on instructional duties. In most cases, new academic librarians will take on the role of generalist in these public service roles. Susan Klopper talks about feeling like a brand-new reference librarian again as she began to field questions outside of her specialized area of expertise.¹² My own academic background is in the performing arts, and in the LCI library I developed knowledge in education and visual arts as well. YU is a relatively small academic library with subject specialists only in Hebraica-Judaica studies. There I provide resources, teach, and address reference questions in most disciplines.

GETTING YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR

As a job candidate, you can demonstrate your commitment to making a transition to academic libraries not only by articulating a rationale for why you want to make a change, which you absolutely must do, but also by making it clear that you have “done your research.” Familiarize yourself with the state of the academic librarianship profession. For instance, you might locate and review the academic librarianship’s official policy documents, standards, guidelines, and related materials.¹³ *College & Research Library News* is one of the primary publications for academic librarians. The *Ubiquitous Librarian* blog, penned by Brian Mathews for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, provides timely information about innovations in academic library practice. It is also vital to develop an understanding of the evolving state of higher education. For news and trends, my go-to sources include the *Academe Today*, *Wired Campus*, *Afternoon Update*, and *Weekly Briefing* e-mail newsletters, also from the *Chronicle*. Inside Higher Ed and EDUCAUSE, the latter a technology-focused, higher education-related non-profit, round out my current awareness routine.

Early in my career I discovered the value of involvement in various associations that support practicing librarians. I ramped up this activity during my eight-month job-seeking period, joining a committee of the local chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL/NY), as well as two committees of the national Theatre Library Association. I have since become more deeply involved in ACRL/NY, having served as vice president and currently as president. I also serve as co-convenor of a special interest group of the regional consortial organization Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO). As a result, I have developed lifelong collegial relationships and a unique public professional persona, which has contributed to my suitability for academic librarian positions.

Another way to demonstrate commitment to your transition is to get some training or other type of orientation to academic libraries.¹⁴ Due to concerns about fair labor practices, many libraries will not take on unpaid interns who are not current students, but I was able to tap into local networks to set up “informational interviews” with several librarians in a variety of academic institutions. These are opportunities to meet face-to-face or virtually with working professionals to discuss the nature of their work and the operational structures of specific academic libraries. You may find that you need to assure these individuals that you are not trying to get them to give you a job in order for them to feel comfortable with this practice, but the insight gained is well worth extra effort in arranging these meetings. I was also able to obtain part-time employment as an evening librarian at a local college, supplementing my experience with at least one academic library credit.

While I had transitioned to part-time adjuncting, I spent the equivalent of a full-time job looking for an academic librarian position. Websites like Hiring Librarians, Library Career People, and Vitae are great places to learn about typical library and academic hiring practices. I perused the job notices every day, making use of online sites like INALJ (I Need a Library Job), LibGig, Inside Higher Ed's career page, the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* website, and Indeed, as well as local listing services for libraries and for academia. In some cases, these systems allow you to set up e-mail alerts based on specific keywords. In fact, although within days the notice for my eventual YU position appeared in several of these venues, I first noticed it in an e-mail alert that I had set up for "librarian" and "New York" on Indeed. Prospective employers also may recruit at regional or national conferences, either informally or through recruitment centers.¹⁵ Susanne Markgren and Tiffany Allen provide an excellent description of best practices for the librarian's job hunt,¹⁶ and Anna Gold's description of the salary negotiation process is also very helpful.¹⁷

The concept of transferrable skills will be very important to your efforts to attract potential employers or recruiters.¹⁸ There are many functions that are generically similar in different types of libraries, even if the particulars are very different.¹⁹ For instance, service to users is at the heart of every library mission. You should not expect search committee members to simply *get* how you'll fit into their operations by perusing a simple list of your special library qualifications.²⁰ "I am often more impressed by someone who can sell how well they fit in a position when, on the surface, they may not have relevant experience," writes Laurie Phillips of Loyola University in New Orleans. "It's all about selling your transferable skills and understanding the environment."²¹ Fortunately, by the time I found myself out of work, I had more than eleven years of experience, with increasing levels of responsibility, in a library that shared some key characteristics with academic libraries, particularly in relation to collection development policies and educational mission.

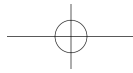
You will also need to develop a curriculum vitae, or CV, the academic equivalent of a résumé.²² The cover letter you write to apply for a specific job will provide you an opportunity to activate your transferable skills by drawing connections to the qualifications articulated in a specific job description. Anecdotally, I had heard from librarians in my network that search committee members at some institutions begin the screening process by reviewing the cover letter, while others never look at it, focusing only on the experience described in the CV. My strategy was to use the initial section of the CV, as well as the cover letter, to demonstrate how my transferable skills qualified me for a particular position.²³ You should also be ready to address questions about your transferable skills in interviews.²⁴

In many academic institutions, particularly those where librarians are considered tenure-track or tenured faculty, there is an expectation that all librarians will have the second master's, meaning a master's degree beyond the ALA-accredited MLS or equivalent. It is common for this requirement to show up in the list of minimum qualifications in the job advertisement, and this can be discouraging for some special librarians looking to make the leap. However, certain hiring institutions are willing to support librarians' efforts to complete this requirement posthiring with tuition remission and/or some release time. This benefit is less available when the ratio of candidates to vacancies is very large, but it may still be worth submitting an application without this qualification. Librarians in this situation should prepare themselves to address this shortcoming in application materials and during the interview. Think about a specific discipline that is of interest to you, perhaps related to your undergraduate degree, perhaps a library and information services (LIS) field, or a field related to the liaison responsibilities of a specific job opening. Do your research and prepare to demonstrate your motivation to address this requirement.

FIRST DAYS, FIRST WEEKS, FIRST MONTHS, FIRST YEARS

Expectations for new academic librarians vary greatly from institution to institution, but research and publication, professional development, and a mindfully crafted professional practice can each play significant roles during the first days, weeks, months, and years in your new position. This initial period will seem like a whirlwind of learning how things work operationally and getting a sense of the working climate and day-to-day relationships with colleagues. "Be a 'sponge' during your first while on the new job."²⁵ Keeping in mind the stated or apparent mission of the institution and the library can help provide an anchor as you begin to navigate the expectations that surround you.

If you are a newly hired tenure-track faculty member, you may find yourself immediately thrust into a process involving meetings with mentors, support groups, and so forth.²⁶ Tenure requirements vary significantly by institution, and the process might be a well-marked, well-paved thoroughfare, or you could find yourself without obvious direction. Even those who are not in tenure-track positions may have a personal interest in contributing to LIS scholarship. The areas of librarianship that you choose for your initial research and publication efforts can set an agenda that will serve you well throughout your career, even beyond tenure. Strongly felt interest in a topic that fits into a perceived gap in the literature can help you sustain motivation and secure publication interest.²⁷ Remember that special librarians also assess their practice and share their experiences. In some ways, it is a simple



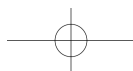
adaptation of past practice to add peer review and publication to the process.²⁸

Academic library professionals are often expected to network with and learn from other academic librarians, formally and informally.²⁹ Professional development offerings run the gamut from online webinars to intensive, multiday immersive trainings and are typically offered through national, regional, or local professional organizations. Regular professional development can be very satisfying and also increases others' professional estimation of you. I have gained much insight and developed a confident, professional voice through participation in workshops, conferences, and symposia; through organized discussion groups or special interest groups; and via taking on increasing responsibilities in professional associations.

Developing a distinct identity as an academic library professional involves distinguishing yourself in service to library, institution, and profession.³⁰ You can diversify your network and bridge academic silos by serving on committees and task groups with colleagues from across the library or across the institution. You may be encouraged to contribute to local, regional, or national professional organizations. As Gold points out, "There are always more chances to demonstrate leadership and the ability to work with others than there are librarians to go around."³¹ In some cases, you may not be granted the discretion to select among these opportunities; this may be determined by your supervisor or your director. Another of the foundations of my identity as an academic librarian is the ability to determine the direction of my own professional practice and the foci of my research and publication efforts.

GETTING TO GREAT: THRIVING

I am fortunate to have experienced a special library situation with responsibilities that varied greatly, and the areas of work represented in my current position are just as diverse. A forward-thinking orientation layered over a strong sense of the library's mission helps me recognize meaningful opportunities for new and challenging work, from which I am empowered to select. Working toward a level of expertise in each area and experiencing the rewards of success and growth contribute to my sense of professional well-being. Just as I have been mentored during my career—especially during the months of my job search—I enjoy sharing knowledge and expertise, formally and informally. I actively seek ongoing learning and professional development experiences. I maintain current awareness of trends and innovations in academic libraries and higher education, providing a realistic framework for my developing professional practice. A wide network of relationships and



collaborations across the library, across campus, and across the profession help sustain my commitment to the work I do.

It is difficult to define exactly what it means to thrive in an academic library since administrative structures and individual strengths and interests are highly dynamic variables. The library director, in particular, often sets the big-picture agenda for the organization, even if individuals are given leeway in carrying out their responsibilities. If you are considering a transition to academic librarianship, I advise you to learn as much as you can about academia, academic libraries, and the specific institution to which you are applying. Once you have landed on your feet, take a step back from the day-to-day to consider what strategies will help foster—for you—a sense of professional well-being.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to two former colleagues, Jennifer Poggiali, currently at Lehman College Library, and Julia Furay of Kingsborough Community College, for sharing insight and helping me frame issues related to this transition.

2. Anna Gold writes of academic libraries that they “are no utopian retreats. . . . They are competitive, uncertain, complicated, political, and constantly under pressure.” Anna Gold, “Moving to the Academy in Mid-career—a Field Guide for the Experienced Librarian,” in *The Successful Academic Librarian: Winning Strategies from Library Leaders*, ed. Gwen Meyer Gregory (Medford, NJ: Information Today, 2005), 184.

3. Alistair Black, “From Reference Desk to Desk Set: The History of the Corporate Library in the United States and the UK before the Adoption of the Computer,” in *Best Practices for Corporate Libraries*, ed. Marjorie J. Porter and Sigrid Kelsey (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 16–18. See also Susan Klopper, “The Journey from Corporate to Academic Librarian,” *Online* 30, no. 5 (2006): 16; Christopher LeBeau, “Transitions to Academic Libraries for Business Librarians and Librarians’ Response to Adjunct Teaching,” *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 13, no. 3 (2008): 303–5; and Valerie Tucci, “Crossing the Bridge Connecting the Corporate and Academic Library Worlds,” *Against the Grain* 24, no. 2 (2012): 22.

4. Gold, “Moving to the Academy in Mid-career,” 196.

5. Amy Affelt, “Best Practices for Aligning the Mission and Marketing the Services of the Corporate Library,” in *Best Practices for Corporate Libraries*, ed. Marjorie J. Porter and Sigrid Kelsey (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 158.

6. Tucci, “Crossing the Bridge,” 22. See also Klopper, “Journey from Corporate to Academic Librarian,” 16, and LeBeau, “Transitions to Academic Libraries,” 303.

7. LeBeau, “Transitions to Academic Libraries,” 303.

8. For example, see Carol Geary Schneider and Robert Shoenberg, “Habits Hard to Break: How Persistent Features of Campus Life Frustrate Curricular Reform,” *Change* 31, no. 2 (1999): 30–35, doi:10.1080/00091389909602677, and David Ward, “Catching the Waves of Change in American Higher Education,” *EDUCAUSE Review* 35, no. 1 (2000).

9. Sue Roberts and Philippa Levy, “(E)Merging Professional Identities and Practices,” in *Developing the New Learning Environment: The Changing Role of the Academic Librarian*, ed. Sue Roberts and Philippa Levy (London: Facet Publishing, 2005), 225.

10. Tucci, “Crossing the Bridge,” 22. See also Klopper, “Journey from Corporate to Academic Librarian,” 16.

11. LeBeau, “Transitions to Academic Libraries,” 305.

12. Klopper, “Journey from Corporate to Academic Librarian,” 16.

13. Susanne Markgren and Tiffany Allen, "How Do I Get There from Here? Changing Jobs, Changing Roles, Changing Institutions," *College & Research Libraries News* 65, no. 11 (2004): 654.
14. Sarah Morrison, quoted in Emily Weak, "Further Questions: How Can Candidates Changing Library Types, or Fields, Best Present Their Skills?" *Hiring Librarians* (blog), September 13, 2003, <http://hiringlibrarians.com/2013/09/13/further-questions-how-can-candidates-changing-library-types-or-fields-best-present-their-skills/>.
15. Gold, "Moving to the Academy in Mid-career," 191.
16. Markgren and Allen, "How Do I Get There from Here?" 653–56.
17. Gold, "Moving to the Academy in Mid-career," 193–94.
18. Sever Bordeianu and Christina M. Desai, "How to Read a Job Ad: Seeing the Obvious, and Reading between the Lines," in *How to Stay Afloat in the Academic Library Job Pool*, ed. Teresa Y. Neely (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2011), 54–55. See also Sarah Morrison, quoted in Emily Weak, "Further Questions: How Easy Is It to Switch between Different Types of Librarianship?" *Hiring Librarians* (blog), March 28, 2014, <http://hiringlibrarians.com/2014/03/28/further-questions-how-easy-is-it-to-switch-between-different-types-of-librarianship/>.
19. Sarah Morrison, quoted in Weak, "Further Questions."
20. Celia Rabinowtiz, quoted in Weak, "Further Questions."
21. Laurie Phillips, quoted in Weak, "Further Questions."
22. For more on the differences between résumés and CVs, see Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong, "The CV Doctor Returns—2010," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 4, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-CV-Doctor-Returns-2010/124492/>.
23. For great advice about building your CV and tailoring your application materials, see Karen Kelsky, "Dr. Karen's Rules of the Academic CV," *The Professor Is In* (blog), January 12, 2012, <http://theprofessorisin.com/2012/01/12/dr-karens-rules-of-the-academic-cv/>.
24. Bordeianu and Desai, "How to Read a Job Ad," 55.
25. Petra Mauerhoff, quoted in Weak, "Further Questions."
26. Colleen Kenefick and Jennifer A. DeVito, "From Treading Water to Smooth Sailing: Mentoring for New Academic Librarians," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 22, no. 1 (2015): 92.
27. Kenefick and DeVito, "From Treading Water to Smooth Sailing," 93.
28. Tucci, "Crossing the Bridge," 22. See also Klopper, Susan M. "The Journey from Corporate to Academic Librarian." *Online* 30.5 (2006): 14–20.
29. Kenefick and DeVito advocate for immediate focus on both formal and informal relationship building. Kenefick and DeVito, "From Treading Water to Smooth Sailing," 91.
30. Newkirk Barnes provides strategies for academic librarians seeking to "carve out a niche" for themselves in "Doing It All: First Year Challenges for New Academic Reference Librarians," *Reference Librarian* 47, no. 1 (2007): 52–55.
31. Gold, "Moving to the Academy in Mid-career," 196.

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