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Moving ahead without moving up: Seven ways to succeed in academic librarianship without formal advancement

by Brenna Helmstutler (brenna@gsu.edu)

Librarians just starting out often think ahead to where they want to be in 3-5 years, whether this is self-imposed or part of a formal goal-setting process with a supervisor. This may involve setting a goal to advance to a mid-level management position or achieving a certain level of success without official advancement. If you don't have a short-term goal of advancement, though, it can be easy to become stagnant once fully trained and comfortable in the job. This article will discuss how you can be proactive in your job – whether you want to be ready for advancement when the opportunity arises, or whether advancement is not of interest, but you want to succeed in your job and contribute to the profession.

Seven ways to get ahead

1. *Committee work.* Getting involved in library committees is a great way to share skills and ideas with your colleagues and strengthen your CV at the same time. Nominate yourself (or have someone nominate you) for 1-2 committees each year. If you are not elected to a committee, keep trying and be open to other opportunities to get involved; mid-year resignations might give you another chance to get onto a committee. Volunteer for other groups focused on short-term projects, such as working groups and task forces. Once you are a member of any of these groups, participate actively, suggest programming ideas, and volunteer for tasks. For committees with terms of more than one year, position yourself to serve as chair. This will strengthen your leadership skills.
2. *Research/presentations.* Researching topics of interest and contributing to the profession is an excellent way to move ahead even if you do not have faculty status. Thanks to technology, you can find a wide variety of calls for manuscripts from journals, other publications, and conference presentations through association and librarian blogs, conference websites, and email lists. Subscribe to their feeds to organize options into one place for easy access. Talk to colleagues who have published and/or presented, as they can offer valuable first-hand suggestions. Take advantage of workshops available in the library or on campus on conducting research or presenting.

3. *Training.* Training others on a subject of expertise can show potential for a supervisory role, much like serving as a committee chair. Talk to your supervisor or training librarian about offering a workshop to your colleagues. If your unit or library already has a training program, you may already be required to train new librarians about the aspects of your job to give them a feel for how your position impacts theirs, and how it fits into the unit as well as the library. If there is no structured training program and you have an interest, talk with your supervisor to discuss the feasibility of creating one. This will be an effective self-starting mechanism and show that you have an interest in ensuring that librarians in your unit are well-trained and knowledgeable.
4. *Outreach to academic departments/the campus community.* This is typically done by subject-specialist librarians (liaisons) whose charge is to be the main library contact for an academic department. If the liaison model is not in place at your institution or you are in a different position, you will still want to connect with your lirbary's main constituents. There are many ways to "reach out" to departments and the campus community, but start by connecting with a department chair or head of an organization. That person can then promote your services to the staff and generate interest. Attending meetings can also be very useful, not only in getting a feel for issues in that area, but also to promote your services. Ask the head if you can attend, and if the agenda allows 5-10 minutes for you to promote your services. Hand out fliers and business cards, and follow up via email or blog. This can be an effective way to reach many people at once, with the chair or head's support.
5. *Association involvement.* There is no shortage of library associations, so be selective. Consider the activities and conferences they provide, what fits best with your interests and job, and of course, cost and benefits. Membership fees typically include such perks as journal subscriptions, special access to website content, and conference discounts. Attending conferences provides networking and presenting opportunities as well as committee work, sowatch for calls to serve on committees via lists, blogs, or the association website. colleagues on association committees can also help get you on board.
6. *Collaborating with colleagues.* This can take place in many different ways. For example, research projects can evolve into publication and/or presenting together at a conference. You can collaborate on the job, such as when a user is conducting interdisciplinary research, or collaborate on a committee or unit. In any case, collaboration allows you to share knowledge and highlight your work as a team player - which is vital for any job.

Useful characteristics in moving ahead

Cultivate these characteristics to help you move ahead:

- *Self-motivation* — In short, being a self-starter. Librarians not working in a micro-managing environment have a great deal of autonomy. Get organized, and build excellent time management skills. Make daily/weekly/monthly to-do lists with specific deadlines — and prioritize. Keep your calendar up to date, so there is no chance of forgetting meetings or important tasks. If you have been on the job for a while and are feeling like you are in a rut, your self-motivation may be low. Get yourself motivated by thinking of different and more challenging ways to approach your job. Think of interesting topics to research, or get involved in new activities that could change your attitude.
- *Professionalism* — A strong level of maturity and controlled behavior is essential to moving ahead or moving up. Have a strong sense of ethics and integrity in your work, and realize that communicating with intelligence and a professional, friendly attitude will create a positive working environment, especially when problems arise. Professionalism can also be measured by your overall appearance; it is possible to be professional even with a casual dress code. Look to colleagues that exhibit professionalism and "make it your own." Your library or campus may also offer workshops dealing with ethics or communication in the workplace.
- *Confidence* – Feeling positive and being proactive, completing tasks efficiently and successfull, all of these can evoke confidence. Recognition is wonderful, but you won't get it for every single great thing you accomplish. Never rely on others to validate you. Put the best effort possible into your work and validate yourself. Reward yourself with your favorite things when you finish a big project or get a manuscript or presentation proposal accepted. This will bring on the confidence that will allow you to succeed on the job.
- *Health and well-being* — Success, especially if preparing for a supervisory position in the future, requires good emotional and physical health . Taking care of yourself with healthy eating, exercise, and sleep behaviors will help in achieving your goals and give you the energy to make things happen. Get a colleague, friend, or relative to work out with and share recipes and health tips. Confide in someone you trust; discuss issues or problems that are blocking you. Finding a good balance between work and play is important as well. Avoid working overtime or bringing work home if possible, and

take vacation time regularly, even if it is just for a day. Having this balance can really make a difference in your energy level and work satisfaction.

Benefits to moving ahead without moving up

You'll reap a number of rewards from moving ahead without moving up, among these, a sense of personal/professional accomplishment. Even if you do not have plans for a supervisory position anytime soon, making things happen will make you feel great personally and professionally and will inspire you to keep your job challenging and current. Taking these steps also prepares you for future advancement and enhances your marketability when a job opportunity presents itself. You will be more prepared to start a job quickly without an in-depth training period, which is especially valuable in a candidate for a supervisory position.

Not only that, but you'll benefit from enhanced interactions with colleagues and the campus community. Moving ahead will make your colleagues aware of you and your potential; if and when you apply for an advanced position posted internally, you'll have their support. Getting to know colleagues and the campus community through outreach and other activities will strengthen your job effectiveness and success level.

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