

## How to Become an Essential Librarian

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### **Abstract**

Becoming an essential or indispensable librarian will allow new librarians to have increased job stability and other benefits. Based on personal experiences and research, I have compiled a list of six steps to becoming an essential librarian: find a mentor, read the literature, collaborate, adapt, become a leader, and be persistent.

## Introduction

After obtaining the Master's Degree in Library Science, what comes next? How can new librarians become an integral part of the libraries in which they work? This article will attempt to answer these questions and describe how to become an essential librarian in one's library.

During the job hunt, new librarians come across many different job advertisements. Some of the most sought after skills or personality traits listed in the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* job listings for librarians are the following:

- service-oriented;
- familiar with current and emerging technologies;
- innovative, proactive, self-motivated, or strong leadership skills;
- adaptable, flexible, dynamic, or versatile;
- collaborative, good teamwork skills, or good interpersonal skills

("Job Search Results," 2011).

Most librarians who enter the library profession in hopes of working with patrons are already service-oriented. Most new librarians are already familiar with technology from their experience as students and in everyday life. The last three are characteristics that new librarians need to improve if they haven't already gained these skills in previous professions. Little has been written about how to improve skills as a new librarian. This article attempts to fill this gap in the literature by discussing the steps to becoming an essential librarian.

Who is an essential librarian? Essential librarians fulfill a needed and indispensable position at their institutions. Functioning in this integral role can have wide-ranging benefits. If a person is seen as an essential component of the team, then the administrator will not want that

person to leave for another library, resulting in increased job stability. This increased stability could lead to raises, bonuses, or other job benefits being offered to the essential librarian.

Perhaps the essential librarian will have the opportunity to attend more conferences. How can you become an essential librarian at your library? Simply follow the six steps outlined below:

find a mentor, read the literature, collaborate, adapt, become a leader, and be persistent.

### **Find a Mentor**

Finding a mentor is the first step to becoming an essential librarian. When a librarian first begins working at a new library, it is important to learn the ropes. This can be accomplished by obtaining a mentor, sitting in on meetings, or observing a more experienced librarian. Finding a mentor and shadowing can occur during library school or at a librarian's first professional position. According to the American Library Association's (ALA) New Members Round Table (NMRT) Mentoring Guidelines, "a mentor is an experienced person who provides guidance and support to a developing professional" (NMRT, n.d., para. 4). Moore, Miller, Pitchford, and Jeng (2008) discuss the two kinds of mentors: formal and informal (p. 77). Moore et al. (2008) state that formal mentors are matched with mentees based on program parameters, while informal mentors can be found through personal connections that focus on building relationships between the mentor and mentee (p. 77).

At one of my previous, part-time positions, I did not have a mentor and needed to learn things on my own. I learned things at a slower pace than if I had a mentor to assist in my transition and training. With the lack of a mentor, I did not learn the library's culture. As a result, I did not know what was expected of me when creating bibliographic instruction sessions. If I had stayed in this position, I would have looked for an unofficial mentor to assist me in learning about the library's culture.

According to Moore et al. (2008), multiple mentors are needed for each individual since one person is unlikely to be able to act as the only support for that individual (p. 78). I have found this to be the case and will describe my journey of being a mentee at the University of South Carolina Upstate. In August 2009, when I began my position as the Evening Public Services Librarian, I was assigned a librarian mentor who brought me up to speed on university policies and culture. In addition to this formal mentor relationship, my office neighbor turned into an informal mentor to me, because I felt free to ask her questions as they popped into my head. She is the Coordinator of Reference and a wonderful role-model librarian. I have learned a great deal about how to become a good librarian and really use my librarian skills to the best of my ability. With the assistance of my mentor and role-model, I was able to learn the ropes.

Asking for a mentor can be a great way to learn the ropes at a new library. Librarians love to help people. If you ask, you will likely find a willing mentor, whether it is official or unofficial. If you do not feel comfortable asking a colleague, join one of the various library associations or listservs. Gieskes (2010) discusses the benefits of e-mentoring, where new librarians find mentors available online, which is convenient and does not require travel (p. 147). On [ALA Connect](#) (ALA's online, collaborative workspace), I was able to request mentors in some of the areas of librarianship in which I was less familiar. In addition, I participated in the ALA NMRT Mentor Program. The ALA Connect mentor and NMRT mentor relationships have given me valuable insight into the profession of librarianship as a whole, as well as specific advice to assist with my current position.

### **Read the Literature**

Reading the literature is ingrained in you during your master's program. Research took up much of your time in college and in high school. Hopefully you honed your research skills

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during your master's program. The key to research is keeping up with literature in your subject area. While all librarians work in the same profession, areas of expertise can vary greatly. If you are an academic or special librarian, you may have specific areas of expertise, such as the social sciences or humanities. For the sake of this paper, I will focus on librarianship in general, since most readers have this profession in common. The thing I remember hearing over and over in library school was the importance of keeping up with the literature: in other words, reading library journals and other sources of library information. I tend to read the literature that has to do with my current projects. Keeping up with the literature does not have to be as daunting as it seemed in library school.

I have found that e-mail is my preferred mode of keeping up with library literature. That's why I subscribe to *American Libraries Direct*, which provides me with weekly library news and technology news. I also subscribe to library listservs, such as the Information Literacy Instruction listserv through ALA. Reading the articles, summaries, posts, and e-mails help me keep up with emerging technologies, best practices, and other things happening in libraries around the world.

There are many mediums of accessing relevant library literature. Whether through RSS feeds, Twitter, Facebook, academic journals, *American Libraries Direct*, or library-related blogs, find sources that provide you with current information written by scholars of the profession and review them on a regular basis. Keeping up with the literature will allow the essential librarian to come up with creative solutions and keep you up to speed with what is occurring at other libraries.

To help keep up with the literature, I have recently begun reading *CHOICE Reviews* on a monthly basis. I focus on my collection management areas. This has helped me learn about some

great resources to improve our collection. If you do not regularly read *CHOICE Reviews*, I would recommend you start, or read book reviews from another source to which your library subscribes.

You can also browse library journals or blogs for articles that might help your institution. Since I work in an academic library, I focus on journals like the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *College and Research Libraries*, or *Library Issues*. If you are a distance-learning librarian, you may want to focus more on journals such as the *Journal of Library and Information Services in Distance Learning* or *Journal of Library Services for Distance Education*. The same is true for public, school, and special librarians. Read journals, blogs, listservs, or library news that focus on your areas of librarianship.

### **Collaborate**

After finding a mentor and reading the literature, what is the next step? The best approach to become an essential librarian is to start collaborating with colleagues. One benefit to collaborating as described by Thomas (2002) is that collaboration helps librarians to grow as professionals and become successful (p. 17-18). Kezar (2005) mentions a few of the other benefits of collaborative relationships and teamwork, including increased efficiency and effectiveness (p. 831).

After obtaining my Master's Degree in Library and Information Science at Dominican University in January 2009, I understood the basics of librarianship and was eager to take the plunge and apply my newly acquired skills. One opportunity to collaborate with my colleagues came as a result of the large number of students who transfer to the University of South Carolina Upstate campus. The Coordinator of Instruction was interested in assessing the research skills of transfer students. A committee of five librarians was created to help assess transfer student

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research skills. I worked with four other librarians to create the Foundation for Information Literacy (FIL) quiz that is administered to transfer students to assess their information literacy skills. We completed pilots in 2010 and 2011, and based on the success of the program, we have chosen to continue it. This project strengthened my potential for being seen as a leader in my library and provided me with assessment experience.

I recommend joining a library committee or similar group at your institution to work as a team. Library committees can help provide confidence to new librarians and hone library skills. Assuming the position of project leader or joining departmental committees can reveal your strengths as a librarian and demonstrate to yourself and others that you can fulfill the needs of the library. By working on something that your library or entire institution needs, you not only help your patrons, you also integrate your role with that of your colleagues. Ultimately, you become the person who librarians go to when they need help on a project, advice, and eventually a mentor to others.

This holds true not only for academic libraries, but also public, school, and special libraries as well. Join groups or clubs at your institution to make your face identifiable and library services known to your patrons, whether they are students, the public, or shareholders. Allen and Bradley discuss this idea for school libraries by suggesting that becoming more involved by leading clubs or attending department meetings as a means of becoming indispensable as a library media specialist (2009, p. 50).

## **Adapt**

Wherever you are in your librarianship career, it is important to be able to adapt by specializing and generalizing. The two concepts are simply opposite sides of the same coin. In order to function as an essential librarian and help your library where and when you are needed,

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you will need to be flexible. Knowing a little about all areas of librarianship and remaining adaptable to new situations allows you to function successfully and fill voids wherever the need may be in your library. See if your library director will allow you to shadow librarians in other departments or areas of your library for a day. Being versatile will help make you an essential librarian, and you can gain experience that could build the desired skills and qualifications for a future position.

Priestly (2009), who works at both the Long Branch Public Library and Monmouth University in New Jersey, notes:

The reference librarian must have a broad and deep knowledge about the areas of specialization within librarianship. There are specialized positions such as collection development librarian, acquisitions librarian, catalog librarian, interlibrary loan librarian, and serials librarian. Then there is the general reference librarian who must have a general command of all these specialties. It is necessary to pay for this additional knowledge.

Not only is the reference librarian a jack-of-all trades within the library field itself –in hiring the reference librarian the library is obtaining a jack-of-all-trades for a number of other professions. Surely there is value in the variety of services provided by one person (p. 7).

This is an accurate description of the generalization required of reference librarians and the need to be both flexible and adaptable. The example could be used for librarians working in any type of library since school and special librarians are often the only or one of a few librarians at their institutions and as a result are a jack-of-all-trades in their libraries. While there are many

specialized positions and needs for specialization within libraries, there is also a great need for generalization as the quote suggests.

Another caveat to this discussion is that of hybrid positions. Schultz (2004) states that hybrid librarian positions are being created so that librarians can have blended job descriptions and duties (p. 12). She discusses a position that was created at her library for an “extended collections services librarian” and goes on to say that they were looking for someone with experience in a variety of libraries, including school, public, and academic libraries (Schultz, 2004, p. 12). This generalization may be considered extreme. The library wanted someone that knew about a variety of libraries to fill the new hybrid position. By generalizing at your library, you can gain experience that could give you the desired qualifications for a different position in the future.

Leonhardt (2005), director of the Scarborough-Phillips Library at St. Edward’s University, discusses the importance of having librarians with a holistic approach in which each librarian becomes knowledgeable about all areas of librarianship, such as cataloging, reference, and collection management (p. 13). He suggests that a librarian with a holistic approach will be “a more knowledgeable and valuable librarian, and performance of each responsibility benefits from the having other additional responsibilities” (Leonhardt, 2005, p. 13). This approach is similar to generalizing your abilities and responsibilities. When you try everything you can at your library, you will become “knowledgeable and valuable” or for the purposes of this article, a “go-to” and essential librarian.

On the other hand, it is also important to become specialized. For example, I am one of the go-to librarians for plagiarism issues. I specialize in plagiarism prevention and detection and instruct students and faculty about plagiarism. I am also the go-to librarian for metadata-related

issues, as I will discuss in the next section. Because of my expertise in plagiarism and metadata, I am becoming an essential librarian in these areas. If people have questions, they know they can approach me and rely upon me to have an answer. Find your niche and areas of expertise.

Subject librarians and liaisons are specialized, essential personnel in academic libraries; we become subject experts, thus allowing us to better help our patrons. Feldmann (2006) suggests that, “subject librarians have in-depth subject knowledge, teaching skills, people skills, and negotiating skills; talents that are valuable and could continue to be essential in the foreseeable future” (para. 2). The same idea is true for public libraries. Some positions focus on outreach, teen services, or other specializations. Sometimes school or special librarians are the only librarians at their library, but they still need to specialize and generalize in order to fulfill the needs of their patrons. As a result, the need for specialization and generalization is great in all types of libraries. At the smaller libraries, one librarian can try out almost every aspect of librarianship as Newhouse (2006) did at the Metropolitan State University, St. Paul (p. 35-36). If you are at a larger library, you will have an easier time specializing in a few areas of librarianship. Whether you are at a small or large (or medium) library, it is important to both specialize and generalize to fully explore and utilize your strengths as a librarian.

### **Become a Leader**

To become an essential librarian at your library, you will need to assume leadership roles. One of the most highly sought after qualifications I saw repeatedly when applying for jobs was good leadership skills, including initiative, innovation, being proactive, and being results oriented. Managers look highly upon librarians who can lead when the need arises. According to DeLong (2009), “leadership is not just a matter of position or authority; it should occur at multiple levels within an organization” (p. 445). In other words, all librarians should strive to be

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leaders regardless of your current position or title. Cromer (2009) states that “good leadership skills will enhance any librarian’s individual career and the profession as a whole” (p. 888).

Don’t wait to be asked to lead. Create your own opportunities to lead in addition to jumping at the opportunity to lead when it is offered. My first example of taking on a leadership role was while I was attending library school, and a technology competency requirement was introduced. My class was the first group of students who were required to pass the technology competency requirement. Unfortunately, there was no way for us to learn the material for the technology competency other than asking our professors for help outside of class. The requirement involved learning to use Microsoft Office Suite and to create a basic webpage using HTML coding. I felt that students needed to be offered workshops on how to learn the material. So I created a two-hour workshop, which was greatly appreciated by the students who were required to pass the technology competencies. As a result of the success of this endeavor, students in the Dominican University Library and Information Science Student Association (LISSA) have continued to offer this workshop on a regular basis. That self-initiated venture was my first library- related leadership role, but it resulted in success and gave me confidence in my ability to lead.

The second opportunity to lead came when my library dean asked if anyone had experience with metadata. At Dominican University, I learned the basics of using Dublin Core metadata during a digital libraries course. I mentioned that while I was not an expert, I had a little experience using metadata. She explained that we were going to create a digital library and would have to create the metadata for the digital objects. She asked if I would be willing to lead this project and I immediately said yes. As a result, our digital library has been created and my metadata skills were sharpened. I could have approached this situation differently. I could have

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just let that e-mail slide by without letting my boss know about my small amount of experience, but I chose to take the plunge and have been happy with the results. Besides helping my institution create a new resource for our online collection, this opportunity increased my confidence as a librarian.

A third example of taking a leadership role involves the issue of plagiarism. A coworker and I took over the role of plagiarism detectors at our institution in 2010 after discovering that no one was responsible for extensively teaching students about plagiarism. Often, plagiarism is assumed to have been taught by someone else: faculty members assume it was taught in high school, and high school teachers may glaze over it and assume it will be covered during college. Thus, while the topic may be covered briefly in some classes, it is not really emphasized in any one class at the University of South Carolina Upstate. This was an area of need at the institution. My colleague and I learned as much as we could about plagiarism through reading the current literature (one of the characteristics of an essential librarian) and discovered that some libraries offer plagiarism workshops for students.

My colleague and I created a plagiarism workshop proposal and our library dean introduced the idea at one of her meetings. The other deans liked the idea, but decided that they needed a workshop for faculty on plagiarism prevention and detection. As a result, we created an hour-long workshop for faculty on plagiarism detection and prevention in addition to the student plagiarism prevention workshop we had already prepared. The learning outcomes for the student workshop were that participants would be able to define plagiarism, describe its importance, avoid plagiarizing, use paraphrasing and quotes properly, and remember to cite sources. My colleague and I are now in the process of analyzing results from the first two semesters of

holding the workshop. This semester we have held 21 student plagiarism prevention workshops so far. Faculty members appreciate this option to introduce students to plagiarism and how to avoid it. By offering these workshops, my colleague and I have fulfilled a need of our institution and become more essential to our library. Even if you do not see yourself as a leader, take on a leadership role if an opportunity or need arises.

### **Be Persistent**

The last important characteristic I want to touch on is that of persistence. This characteristic reminds me of the little engine that could. He kept chugging along, until he made it over the big mountain. As a librarian, you will reach your own mountains that need to be climbed. I traverse hills every day as a librarian, whether it is an in-depth reference question, or the request for a faculty plagiarism workshop. You will need to be persistent to be an essential librarian.

One of the worst things that can happen to a librarian is burnout. Burnout is hard on everyone; the librarian going through it, library patrons, and the librarian's colleagues. I asked some experienced librarians how they avoid burnout, and the most prevalent suggestion was to change focus every so often. In other words, after specializing in one or two areas, change your focus and try specializing in other areas. To be an essential librarian, you will need to go the distance. If you start getting restless, focus on something new. Caputo (1991) wrote an insightful book titled *Stress and Burnout in Library Service* in which she agrees with the idea of changing focus and states that finding new interests can be one method to avoid burnout and recommends attending workshops and conferences as a way to think of new ideas (pp. 129-130). I recommend the Public Library Association Conference, the American Library Association Conference, the

Special Libraries Association, or the Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, depending on your area of interest.

Another of Caputo's (1991) recommendations is exercise; she suggests a brief walk during your lunch break as one method to avoid burnout (p. 128). Some librarians at USC Upstate regularly take short walks during their lunch breaks. Morning exercise makes me enthusiastic and motivated for my day at work. On days that I do not exercise before work, I am a little drowsy and generally not as productive. Even 20 minutes of exercise can make a big difference to your day. Along with the exercise, Caputo (1991) also discusses the importance of nutrition and eating healthy (p. 128). If your library is anything like mine, you know that librarians love to eat. We'll have potlucks every once in a while and the desserts usually take up more room than the rest of the food combined. I love dessert and snacking, but eating an apple as a snack instead can improve my productivity.

Pergander (2006) looked at long-term librarians who never went through burnout or who still enjoy being a librarian. Pergander (2006) states that these librarians found "ways to reenergize every week" and stresses that keeping the job new and fresh is one of the ways of avoiding burnout (p. 79). In this case, change is good. It is important that we keep up with technological change and other changes and bask in change rather than become overwhelmed by it. Take a webinar on a topic that is confusing to you, for example. This can be a helpful way to make transitions and also ensure that you remain essential to your place of employment.

### **Conclusion**

My involvement at the USC Upstate Library has had a snowball effect on becoming an essential librarian by following the six steps of finding a mentor, reading the literature, collaborating, adapting, becoming a leader, and persistence. At the beginning of your career and

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throughout, you will want to find a mentor and read literature to grow in your knowledge of library issues and trends to prepare you for the other steps in becoming an essential librarian. As the job advertisements in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggest, collaboration, adaptation, and leadership skills are three important qualifications that are desired in many of the librarian positions posted and are important for essential librarians to exhibit. Lastly, to avoid burnout, essential librarians must be persistent. These are a few of the characteristics I see as necessary steps in the ongoing process of becoming an essential librarian. Use your strengths as a librarian, and make yourself essential at your library.

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