

It Isn't Just Me: A Story of Four Recent Library Science Graduates on the Prowl for their First Librarian Job

By: Theresa Bruno

I I have become a slave to my answering machine. Immediately when I walk through the door I see the blinking light. My heart trembles, my breath quickens, could it be someone asking me to come for an interview? I press the button and hear the message. Alas, it is not for me and I must wait another day.

Unfortunately, this has been my life since I began searching for a librarian position. I am beginning to feel as though I am in high school again, waiting anxiously by the phone hoping against hope that the boy I admire will call. I often wonder, is it me? Are other library science graduates as frustrated as I am? That is when I decided to put my research skills to the test and find other recent graduates who were experiencing the same problem: unemployment. After all, misery likes company and perhaps I could even make a few valuable contacts along the way.

After conducting some brief research, I discovered three other recent graduates unemployed, unhappy and anxious about the future. Christen Orbanus, a recent MLIS graduate from Rutgers University, was brave enough to share her pain, angst and at times hope in an article in the *Library Journal*. Christen started applying for library positions when she first enrolled in library science school. At first, she was looking for entry-level experience as an intern or clerical worker. Through perseverance, Christen found two rewarding and diverse internship experiences and was excited about her future. After all, she had been told that there would be plenty of jobs for new librarians.

Christen's optimism was short lived, however, as she began to apply for professional librarian positions. When the rejection letters started coming in, Christen began to feel more anxious. In her article, *Where are all the jobs?*, Christen wonders why

she keeps on receiving rejection letters. Like me, she worries if she is did anything wrong in her interviews saying, "Do I talk to fast?" Do I look too young? Do I look presentable?" (Orbanus, 2007) I can imagine Christen sitting by the phone, waiting, and jumping to answer the phone, only to never hear from these places again.

Honestly, why did my parents never tell me that looking for your first professional position is like dating? You see an ad on the Internet, you apply, get an interview and then you wait and wait for the phone to ring. Meanwhile you sit and wonder what did I do wrong? Was there something in my teeth? Did I talk too much? I wish they would just tell me *why* they did not hire me. Is it just me, or is this the same thing I went through when I was young and first dating?

Unfortunately for Christen and me, it was not so much what we did or did not do during the interview, but what we lacked; professional experience. Both Christen and I worked at a variety of libraries, so we believed we had the experience required. We were both dead wrong. Libraries, especially academic, want librarians with librarian experience, even for entry level positions. As my coworker Darby Fanning says, "Usually libraries do not care if you have 5 years clerical experience in a library. They want to hire someone with professional library experience. It is a vicious cycle. You can't get a librarian position because you don't have experience and you can't get experience unless you have a librarian position."

Darby Fanning is not the only person who is frustrated with this paradox. John Berry III, Editor-at-Large for *Library Journal*, is also frustrated by the opportunities for new librarians. In his article titled, *The Experience Trap*, he writes "My own students complain bitterly when they find 'experi-

ence' that they haven't yet been able to gain listed as a preferred attribute of candidates for entry-level positions." (Barry, 2008) Although Berry believes that experience is overrated, never the less, this does not change the reality for most recent MLS graduates.

To add insult to injury, it appears entry level positions are declining. Rachel Holt and Adrienne Strock conducted a study on librarian job ads placed on ten prominent library jobs websites. Of the over 900 librarian positions posted, a shockingly small amount, only ninety-nine of the available jobs were considered entry-level. (Holt, 2005) After they finished surveying the library ads, Holt and Strock mailed questionnaires to the ninety-nine libraries to determine who was applying for these entry-level positions. Surprisingly, they found that many "veteran librarians," those with four or more years experience, were applying for entry-level positions. In most cases, Holt and Strock found that librarians fresh out of graduate school did not have chance; employers often went with the more experienced candidate. (Holt, 2005)

To make matters worse, many recent MLS graduates are so depressed about their chances of getting a librarian position that they apply for clerical positions. Evan Simpson, a recent MLS graduate, is an example of this. Before graduation, Simpson applied for a number of library positions, including some that were technically clerical jobs in libraries. After reading job postings for entry-level librarians, he was unsure about his prospects of finding a librarian position and figured a job, any job at a library was better than nothing. (Simpson, 2005) Many places refused to even interview him because he had his MLS, although one prestigious university in the Northeast agreed to interview him for the interlibrary loan specialist position. It was not a librarian position, but he was desperate and figured with his newly minted MLS degree, that he had a good chance of getting the job. (Simpson, 2005)

Evan's interview went well and he felt confident that he would get the job. The next two weeks he waited and waited, hoping against hope that he would receive that important call. Unfortun-

nately, weeks turned into two months and Evan saw many of his friends landing their first professional library positions. Finally, Evan received the call he was waiting for and he happily accepted the clerical interlibrary loan position that he interviewed for previously. This was a triumph for Evan. While this was not a professional position, at least it was a position at an academic library.

The United States is not that the only place where novice librarians are having trouble landing entry-level positions. Carolyn Guinchard, a Canadian, is another recent MLIS graduate, who had trouble landing her first librarian position. Carolyn was a stay at home mom for years until she decided to go back to school and become a librarian. After she graduated with her degree in library science, she began to look for work, but was disappointed in the number of positions available to novice librarians. Starting to feel desperate, she considered moving her family to the United States. After several months, Carolyn received the call she had been waiting for and graciously accepted a digital librarian position at a Canadian university. (Guinchard, 2000)

Luckily, Carolyn is not the only one who is now a professional librarian. Both Christen Orbanus and Evan Simpson have also found librarian positions. Christen is now working as a children's librarian for a public library in New Jersey and Evan has been promoted to Access Services Librarian at a prestigious university in the Northeast. I have been successful in my job hunt. Recently, I was appointed Visiting Assistant Librarian, at Indiana University, Purdue University in Columbus. A position I got because I was willing to take a low paying, four month, part-time position, while a full time, tenure-tracked librarian was on maternity leave.

Entry-level librarian positions are vanishing and frustrations of new librarians are rising. However, there are still entry-level positions out there, so one must willing to relocate, or take a part-time or clerical position to get the experience necessary for the entry-level positions. Searching for your first librarian position is tough. It takes time, persistence, a willingness to take a part-time or clerical position and lots of hard work. In the end, how-

ever, you can disconnect your phone, quit taking antacids and enjoy your new librarian position. Good Luck!

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