



# Making the Switch: Changing Careers in Librarianship

ESSAY/COMMENTARY

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## ABSTRACT

Changing careers in librarianship is not easy. Although they have many transferable skills, librarians trying to get a job in a different type of library may experience difficulties. This article aims to provide concrete steps to help anyone interested in making a career change.

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I always thought my MLIS degree was a “golden ticket” to work in any type of library: public, business, school, college, or special library. When I was working on my MLIS degree at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., I was interested in working in all types of libraries. My mother-in-law convinced me to try school libraries, which I did as a substitute and was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. After graduating, I obtained a position as an elementary school librarian with the provision that I earn a teaching license. I completed the necessary courses for the teaching license within the requisite time limit of two years. Earning fifteen credits in education helped me understand my new role as a teacher and a librarian.

After my son was born, it seemed to work out well that we had the same holidays and vacation times. I loved my time as a school librarian and put my heart and soul into every school I served. However, I never intended to be a school librarian for my entire career, and as my son reached high school the itch to work in another type of library returned. After twenty-five years as a school librarian—three years at Waller Mill Elementary in York County, ten years at Tabb Middle in York County, and twelve years at Kecoughtan High in Hampton—I finally made the switch to become an academic librarian. Making the switch was not easy and took much longer than I expected. When I started applying for academic library positions and got no responses, and no interviews, I realized my “golden ticket” to work in any library was not going to be enough. There are many transferable skills in librarianship, so I started thinking about how I could do a better job with the application process.

## DECIDING TO MAKE THE SWITCH

I became interested in working with students at the academic level because I was teaching information literacy skills to Advanced Placement students and dual enrollment students in my high school. It felt like a natural progression to teach students in college as I became more interested in post-secondary library instruction. I had a high level of motivation to try something new in my life, possibly anticipating my “empty nest” in the future. I decided I was willing to work for a lower salary so that I could challenge myself in a new career. When you start a new career, you may not get credit for years of service. You must consider if you are willing to start over in a lower level position and work your way up. I also looked carefully at the finances related to retirement and changing careers. I was in the Virginia Retirement System as a public school librarian. If I was able to obtain a position at another public institution I could continue to add to the VRS system, but if I took a position at a private institution I would have to retire early

or defer retirement. Full retirement is available from the VRS system at the age of 55 with 30 years of service. I was limited to applying for jobs in my area because I did not want to move. Here are some questions to consider when deciding on a career change:

- Why do you want to switch to another type of library? What is your true motivation?
- Can you afford to change jobs, lose tenure, earn a lower salary, or affect your retirement benefits?
- Are you willing to relocate?

## BUILDING YOUR RESUME OR CURRICULUM VITAE

As you begin to build your resume, think about everything you have done throughout your career which shows you can be successful in your next career. I was involved in the Virginia Association of School Librarians (VAASL). I served as Regional Director, which was a great leadership opportunity. Leadership roles on your resume show that you can work with a team, make decisions, and accomplish goals. Through the years I attended regional and state VAASL conferences as a participant, presenter, and committee member. Making professional presentations demonstrates you have organization and communication skills. In 2016 I had an article published in *School Library Connection*. This article is one of the best things I have on my resume because writing skills are valued by most employers, including academic libraries. Writing and receiving grants can also showcase your writing and communication skills. In 2007 I earned National Board Certification (NBCT) in Library Media Early Childhood Through Young Adult and renewed it in 2017. The NBCT process is challenging, but having additional credentials or certifications on your resume helps you stand out in a crowd of applicants. Try to be exemplary in your current position as you start to plan for your next position. Here are some ways you can help your school, district, or community and improve your resume or CV:

- Identify needs in your school or community, apply for grants, and successfully complete your projects.
- Attend professional development opportunities to hone your skills and stay current with emerging trends.
- Consider getting micro-credentials, badges, and additional certifications.
- Actively participate in professional organizations at your regional, state, and national level.
- Go to conferences, present at conferences, network.
- Serve as a leader in your school, district, and professional organizations.

- Volunteer for extra projects that will help you shine.
- Look for opportunities that will help you stand out in a crowd of applicants.
- Write about your experiences, share your knowledge, and get published.

## LEARN, NETWORK, AND GET EXPERIENCE

Learn everything you can about the type of library you want to switch to. If you want to work in a public, college, business, law or special library, you need to learn everything you can about the culture, issues, hardware, software, and even the lingo of these institutions. I joined the Association for College and Research Libraries to start learning more about the trends, issues, and news of academic libraries. One problem is “how do I get experience if no one will hire me?” I volunteered during several summers at local universities. If you cannot volunteer in the summer, try to find a way to volunteer so you can get some hands-on experience. I applied for and received a position as adjunct faculty at Old Dominion University and taught an online information literacy course. I also served as an assessor for National Board Certification for Pearson during two different summers. Having a variety of experiences listed on your resume shows that you can succeed in jobs other than your current position. Here are some ways that you can get experience while you remain in your current position:

- Join professional organizations such as ALA that represent all types of libraries and librarians.
- Join organizations specific to the type of library you are interested in.
- Earn a post-graduate certificate in the specialty you are interested in or earn another master’s degree in business, law, or technology.
- Join email listservs, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media applications for professional groups and read journals targeted to that type of library.
- Go to conferences such as ALA where you can meet and talk to librarians of all different kinds.
- Volunteer during the summer, at night, or on weekends in the type of library you are interested in.
- Get a part-time job in the type of library you are interested in. Take a job that may not require an MLIS degree that you can do at night, weekends or only in the summer, such as shelving, help desk, interlibrary loan, reserves, etc.
- If you are interested in college or university level, apply to be adjunct faculty for an information literacy course or another course that you are qualified to teach.

## APPLY, APPLY, APPLY

I recommend getting professional help creating your curriculum vitae (CV) if you are interested in academic librarianship. Professional services can help you with creating a resume or CV, cover letters, and with interview practice. If it has been awhile since you applied for a job, these services are worth the money you will spend. As adjunct faculty for Old Dominion University, I was able to utilize their career services for free and get help with interview practice. Many interviews are done over the phone, which is harder than you think, because you cannot see facial expressions or make eye contact. My career coach helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses in interviews. I did not realize I was rambling and not answering the questions. I paid for help with my curriculum vitae and cover letter with a company called Top Resume. A CV is different than a resume, so even though I had looked at examples online, I still needed help presenting the correct information in the best possible format. A resume is focused on work experience and skills, while a CV covers academic experiences such as courses taught, conference presentations, committees and leadership roles, professional development, and publications. Resumes are usually one to two pages, but a CV is usually much longer; 10–12 pages is common.

Some job postings ask for a teaching statement or a values statement in addition to a CV. A teaching statement is usually one page that explains your passion for teaching and examples from your teaching practice. Consider creating an eportfolio with a video introduction, work examples, conference presentations, articles, YouTube videos, website links, and pictures, but be careful to keep your website private; share the link so that only those with permission can view it. Never post things like your transcripts even on supposedly private sites. Here are some ways that you can expand your job search:

- Search job boards provided by organizations such as ALA and VLA and library associations in other states or regions, if interested.
- Search for jobs directly by going to the websites and employment pages of libraries in your area that you are interested in.
- Search USAjobs.gov for government positions and individual state sites such as <https://virginiajobs.peopleadmin.com/>
- Look for jobs that are similar but have a different title in the job description.
- Don’t give up!

It took me six years to make my dream a reality. Applying over and over can become depressing. Keep trying.

Throughout the process stay focused on your original motivation. Now I am working hard to earn tenure, learning something new every day, and relishing the challenges.

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