

## Making the Transition from AUL to Line Librarian

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Moving from a line librarian department head level position into an AUL position appears to be an achievement that guarantees that the individual will remain in administration for the rest of their professional career, or at least for as long as the person stays at the same institution. The career path to becoming the dean of libraries beckons to some librarians. For those who had that goal upon first entering academic librarianship, the AUL stepping stone is a good opportunity to learn what is involved in the dean's job at close range without incurring the risks of having to deal directly with the university administration. In addition, the experience of working as an AUL provides the incumbent with skills that are useful whether the person eventually becomes a dean of libraries, assumes a line librarian role at the department head level, or simply returns to a department as a highly productive member of the faculty.

Librarians arrive at an AUL position using a variety of career paths, and their job descriptions are as varied as their past experiences. The qualities that differentiate the most effective library administrators from front-line librarians have been well documented. Peter Herson, Ronald Powell and Arthur Young provided a particularly useful and detailed analysis of essential qualities for university library directors in a two-part series in 2001 and 2002.<sup>1,2</sup> On the other hand, as Eric Shoaf has noted in another overview of leadership qualities, "Our institutions are built on fairly rigid traditions and librarianship seems to attract the risk-averse."<sup>3</sup> The willingness to expand one's horizons may be an inborn trait rather than a learned behavior, and the life experiences in one's career that might make a person a better leader might also make that person less likely to feel like taking the risk of failure that comes with stepping into such an

ambiguous role as an AUL's. In other words, by the time librarians know enough to contribute at that level, they may be so comfortable in their current roles that they decide they would be crazy to travel an administrator's career path. Librarians in line positions may think they could do a better job as an AUL or dean than the top management they have observed over the years, but they do not realize how complex and how opaque some of the activities in administration turn out to be until they are experiencing the job. The ambiguity inherent in administration emerges out of the necessity to preserve the privacy of individuals within the organization, as well as the need to avoid creating panic within the staff by putting forth speculative ideas based on scenarios that may never come to fruition.

In the fall of 2000, I moved from the acquisitions department head position I had held since 1988 into Libraries' Administration, becoming the Assistant Dean for Administration and Finance. At the time, some of my acquisitions skills transferred well, but other skills had to be learned. In particular, the ability to juggle multiple projects and priorities did not come naturally to a detail-oriented perfectionist who preferred to see each task to completion before moving on to the next task. Since my current purpose is to demonstrate how administration experience carries over to a subsequent department head level position, I will not elaborate on the process by which I evolved from a department head to a successful assistant dean. That transition is documented elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

As a department head in acquisitions for twelve years prior to moving into administration as an assistant dean, I had a good understanding of the library's collection budget, as well as a feel for the issues of dealing with a complex department composed entirely of classified staff. I also had some experience of working with library faculty, particularly those in collection development and cataloging, and to a lesser extent with the (primarily public service) librarians

who also worked as subject bibliographers to select materials for the library collections. During nine years in administration, I worked with the library's operations budget, and became very adept at developing scenarios for allocating personnel budget funds to faculty and staff positions in the years when there were raise pools to be distributed as salary enhancements. I also evaluated requests for non-personnel related funding such as those for equipment and facilities needs, travel and professional development activities, and other worthy uses of the operations budget. Although I had considerable influence over how these funds were allocated, I did not get into the pros and cons of specific requests other than to review the proposals put forth by the various department heads. They presumably would know the details of their operations and be able to justify requests based on stated priorities that I could compare to the library's overall goals, promoting those projects which seemed to align best with those goals. My interaction with the actual workings of the library was limited to collecting statistics from all the departments and using them to report out to government agencies and professional organizations on various surveys. In this role I was able to see the trends for our library, to compare them to the trends for the profession, and sometimes to alert the departments to imbalances that might need to be addressed with staffing or other resource changes. The department heads all reported to the associate dean, so I was in the happy position of being able to give the information to someone else who actually had to deal with the fallout from irate department heads.

The last several years of my tour of duty as an assistant dean were consumed by a \$50 million construction and renovation project which increased the size of the main library building by over a third, and involved moving collections and people several times as various parts of the original building were being renovated. In addition to being the library's liaison to the project, interacting with the university facilities planning department as well as with the construction

manager, architects, and many subcontractors, I worked with the library departments as we developed complicated plans for moving materials and departments to different locations for each phase of the renovation. In this role I often had to just tell library people what we were going to do next, and although I listened to their objections, I had to keep the project moving so I basically ran roughshod over quite a few people. This behavior pattern has always come very naturally to me, and having spent the years in acquisitions trying to recreate myself as a more patient and nurturing person, I was able to spend about three years indulging my autocratic tendencies and getting away with that behavior. My justification was that the construction project had to stay on time and under budget.

Eventually the construction and renovation project was successfully completed. Having operated at high speed for several years, my position in administration went back to a more normal pace. Some of my former job duties had been absorbed into the administrative workflow and were now being handled by the associate dean and the business manager, so I was now the statistics expert and provided occasional budget advice. There was no longer enough work left to justify a separate assistant dean position. Fortunately, the organizational culture in our library in recent years has become more accepting of changing roles for senior librarians. The head of collection development had volunteered to move to the vacant department head position in access services (circulation and interlibrary loan) a few years earlier, and when his successor in collection development resigned for another job opportunity elsewhere, I was offered the opportunity to step in as the new head of collection development.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to go back to being a front-line librarian, and in the university setting it is an ordinary occurrence for a teaching faculty member to take on an assistant or associate dean role in their college for a time and to then return to the teaching

faculty in their area of expertise. Among teaching faculty, few actually want to be administrators, preferring to focus on their research interests and teaching duties. In some institutions, librarians are not awarded faculty status, but in many cases the librarians have tenure and promotion expectations and requirements that are similar to those of the faculty in academic college departments. Given this similarity, it is perhaps reassuring to know that stepping away from an AUL position need not be an admission of failure, but may simply be another job transition. In fact, moving permanently into a high level administrator position can have drawbacks. Librarians in line positions tend to be reluctant to communicate with the administration, so the administrators become isolated from their fellow librarians. AULs may eventually become frustrated with the ambiguity of the role if they remain in administration.

Reassigning a senior librarian from an AUL position to a department head position has advantages for both the individual and the organization. The individual can reunite with their peers and there is more interaction with the library's day-to-day operations. When I moved to administration, some of my colleagues suddenly stopped talking to me beyond superficial pleasantries. My freedom to walk around the building visiting with people to find out what was going on was severely curtailed because people assumed I was spying on them and would be reporting back to the dean all the negative things I had heard or observed. I believe I actually knew less about what was happening on the front lines than I used to know when I was a department head. The library environment has a lot of interactions that cross departmental lines and that require cooperation from multiple departments to achieve a satisfactory outcome for the library users, but it is difficult for the administration to get involved in the discussions when the line librarians believe their opinions and suggestions are somehow less valued than those developed within administration. Exactly the opposite is true – the people who do the work are

often the best source of suggestions about how to do it better, and the best thing an administrator can do is step back and let the real experts talk through the problem to find a solution.

Many librarians shy away from administration positions because of the perceived political climate in which they would be required to operate. The nature of university politics as it relates to the library has elements of social caste – the colleges and teaching faculty may see the library as a commodity for their benefit and the librarians as staff rather than as faculty peers. A politically agile dean of libraries works with the college deans and assumes equality. When representing the dean of libraries, the AUL should assume the same attitude. While I was an assistant dean, I was involved in the day-to-day activities of administration, represented the dean at various meetings and public events, and had a pretty good grasp of what it meant to be a dean. Although I made worthy contributions to the ongoing success of our organization during my nine years as an assistant dean, it was not until I moved into a line librarian position that I realized the real value to the library of the experiences I had had during my time in administration.

University level administrators, such as provosts, vice presidents, and presidents, achieve their level of authority by paying attention to everything they hear and absorbing the information into their big-picture view of the university. At the dean's level, which is high up in the hierarchy of the academic unit, this skill extends to being a sponge to absorb all the rumblings from department heads and staff. In the larger university environment the deans are actually middle management, and an AUL representing the dean needs to be aware of the possible ramifications of off-the-cuff remarks. As the head of a department that has a lot of contact with the outside world of the university, the ability to provide a top-level analysis at a moment's notice, without dwelling on the minute details that many librarians love so much, can mean the difference between extra funding coming to the library or the idea being disregarded or not taken

seriously. In addition, the manner of delivery matters to busy top-level administrators, and the casual approach laced with sarcastic humor is virtually guaranteed to be misinterpreted as not caring, at best, or insubordination, at worst. In either case, the dean's credibility and ability to influence positive outcomes for the library can be damaged by the department head's lack of care in communicating. Note that I am not advocating secrecy; I strongly believe in open communication, but diplomacy and succinctness in providing information is a valuable skill that many librarians never develop, and they do not realize how much lacking that skill can hurt their personal career progression as well as the perception of the library as an essential campus unit. In my assistant dean role I learned to be more circumspect, but I could not easily communicate the value of this skill to the library because of the widespread belief that administration is "somewhere up there" and that administrators do not want to communicate with the underlings. In a line librarian position, I have many more interactions with other librarians, and I also see how my particular department can play a huge public relations role for the library. As I go about the campus talking with the faculty in the colleges and departments, I am constantly proclaiming the library messages as well as finding out how the library can become increasingly relevant to the everyday operations of the teaching and research faculty. This kind of interaction can be risky for the library if the departmental spokesperson does not understand the politics, and working in administration is a great way to learn this lesson.

The line librarians see administration as the outward-facing advocate for the activities and collections within the library, and they generally see their own roles as performing their jobs well, without publicizing their activities to the rest of the campus. It was not until several months after I moved from administration to collection development that I understood the value I can provide by publicizing collection development activities to the campus community in

meetings, newsletters, one on one conversations, and e-mail announcements. As an administrator I felt it was my role to back up the dean and to avoid direct interactions that might cause her job of advocating for the library to be more difficult. I now understand that all of us who work in the library can help to further the goals of the organization by whatever means are available to us through our job duties and roles. Furthermore, the dean should not be expected to be the only mouthpiece for the organization. I might never have understood this concept had I not worked in administration and then returned to a line librarian position.

Having a former administrator working in a line department, whether as head or as one of the librarians, has definite advantages for the incoming department. Despite the administration's efforts to be as transparent as possible in providing information, there is a pervasive belief that administration hides information. Having worked in administration, I know how we arrived at decisions, and I can use that information to achieve departmental goals by following procedures that I know will work. For example, in our organization, the administration finds it easier to support a project proposal with funding and staffing if the proposal includes the goals, the people involved, the financial resources needed, an outline of the steps that will be involved, and a timeline. If several projects are being considered and the goals are equally appealing, the proposals with well-demonstrated planning will be more likely to receive support. When the administrative personnel structure changes, the details of their expectations will probably be amended, but the concept of knowing how the administration responds to inputs from departments is useful information regardless of the exact methods to use in approaching the administration with requests.

Another insight gleaned from my administration experience is that people hear what they want to hear, and interpret it in any way that suits their own inner needs. Some people just need



to feel that they are being persecuted, for whatever reason, and resist efforts by administration to be drawn into professional development or morale building opportunities. As a department head before moving into administration, I thought the workings of administration seemed mysterious and sometimes capricious. Attempts by administration to involve the library faculty and staff in strategic planning activities were met with suspicion and skepticism, and as acquisitions department head I found it difficult to reassure my staff that the exercises were worthwhile because I did not see any concrete changes as a result of our efforts. When I moved into administration, an early assignment was to organize and facilitate a series of brainstorming sessions to collect ideas for a new library building or addition to the existing building. The brainstorming sessions took place in 2001-2, but the groundbreaking for the new addition did not occur until the fall of 2007, so it is easy to see how the participants might have thought the brainstorming was a waste of time, even though the addition and renovated spaces did incorporate quite a few of the suggestions from the brainstorming. When one is a member of administration, it is frustrating to deal with the lack of cooperation and buy-in from the employees. At the department head level, I am able to see the opportunities offered by administration and can explain them to staff within my department as well as to others who trust my judgment. This type of interaction helps to allay the suspicion that administration is plotting against the staff. In my previous department head experience in acquisitions, I did not see the depth of this problem, but coming out of administration where the lack of communication upward was more obvious, I have been able to work on this problem with the faculty and staff in my own department as well as to share my insights with other department heads.

The experience gained in an administrator position is often relevant elsewhere within the library. For example, dealing with vendors is a learned skill. The librarian may be at a

disadvantage in interactions with vendors, a fact which might account for the tendency of some publishers and distributors of library materials to attempt to contact reference librarians and subject bibliographers directly in hopes of talking them into agreeing to buy materials at little or no discount. One solution to this problem is to have all the materials vendor interactions flow through a designated point of contact, such as the acquisitions librarian or the collection development office. As a way to develop leadership skills of librarians, it is perhaps more useful to expose the librarians to the vendor interactions. In my case, working with the architects, construction managers, and subcontractors on the construction project was a valuable experience. All of these individuals were experts in their own areas and had very strong opinions about how the project should proceed. Watching them interact with each other, and responding to their individual concerns by providing the library viewpoint for a variety of decisions, was an excellent way to develop a clear, concise, unambiguous communication style, and this experience also enhanced my comfort level with making possibly risky decisions. These skills have been immediately transferrable to situations in my collection development position, where I negotiate prices and content for electronic resources for the library. Another benefit of the interactions with construction personnel was that I saw people working in a variety of areas of expertise, but all of them were dedicated to delivering a high-quality product. Similarly, I understand that the vendor representatives with whom I deal believe that they are providing high-quality content. Although they have sales goals with monetary implications for their own lives, they are our partners in developing a useful library collection, not our adversaries.

A temporary assignment in the administration, as an interim AUL or special project librarian, is definitely worth considering as a tool for developing the leadership skills of new library professionals. In this type of position, the incumbent takes on the duties of the AUL on

sabbatical for several months, or works on designated projects while being relieved of the duties to which they are normally assigned. Exposure to the administrative environment can improve the individual's focus and productivity, similar to the way interval training increases a runner's overall pace. Having to react quickly and accurately to unexpected requests is a good antidote to the academic librarian tendency to overanalyze every possible ramification of a decision. Reading some of the literature about making the transition from line librarian to a higher-level position may be reassuring for the potential administrator who is unsure about possessing the knowledge needed to perform the work.<sup>5,6</sup> Flexibility and adaptability are key attributes for success in such a position, and willingness to keep reinventing oneself is always useful.

#### NOTES

1. Peter Herson, Ronald R. Powell, and Arthur P. Young, "University library directors in the Association of Research Libraries: the next generation, part one," *College and Research Libraries*, v. 62, no. 2, (2001): 116-145.
2. Peter Herson, Ronald R. Powell, and Arthur P. Young, "University library directors in the Association of Research Libraries: the next generation, part two," *College and Research Libraries*, v. 63, no. 1, (2002): 73-90.
3. Eric C. Shoaf, "New leadership for libraries: who has the right stuff?" *College and Research Libraries News*, v. 65, no. 7, (2004): 363-365, 375.
4. Sandra Barstow, "Dollars with Sense," *The Bottom Line*, v. 15, no.1, (2002): 38-42.
5. *New librarian, new job: practical advice for managing the transition*, edited by Cory Tucker and Reeta Sinha (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006). This book is useful for anyone wanting to move up in the organization. It describes the various departments of the library, career advancement strategies, and survival skills useful at any stage of the library career.

6. Pixey Anne Mosley, *Transitioning from librarian to middle manager* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004). This book addresses the many issues one encounters as an administrator at any level within the library, and is worth reading regardless of how long one has been involved in managing people and resources.

## REFERENCES

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