

It's Not Where You Start or Where You Finish - It's How You Get There

Christina L. Wissinger & Kat Phillips

Dr. Christina L. Wissinger is the Health Sciences Librarian at the Pennsylvania State University Libraries, University Park campus, clw68@psu.edu

Kat Phillips is the Nursing & Allied Health Librarian for Penn State University, liaising with the College of Nursing, the Health Policy and Administration Department, and the Consortium on Addiction and Substance Use, kec5013@psu.edu.

A career in librarianship may start in a library science master's program, but the path to and/or between career opportunities builds and shifts with time. This commentary discusses the career paths followed by two librarians who each attended the same master's program and are currently both health science librarians at the same institution. While these similarities exist, the unique journeys each followed have helped to shape their approaches to their current jobs, roles within their careers, and their approaches to librarianship. From library school and first jobs, to current positions, this piece discusses how every step along the way has had a lasting impact on the authors' careers.

Introduction

Deciding to enroll in a master's in library science or information science program can simply be the first decision of your career; once enrolled you will have many options for courses, internships, and specializations. Even after those decisions are made, you will make more decisions as you apply for jobs, join professional associations, and share your work with the world. Christina Wissinger and Kat Phillips started their journeys at the same library school and currently work in the same library, but each followed unique paths even though they are both medical/health sciences librarians.

Let the Library Careers Commence!

Christina started the MLIS program in person in 2005, and Kat was accepted into the online program in 2008 but deferred until 2009.

Christina chose the on-site MLIS option from the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) because of its location, specialization in medical librarianship/informatics, and its national reputation. She had a master's degree in sport

science and wanted to enter an area of librarianship that would let her use that knowledge and allow her to work in areas related to healthcare research and education. Before Christina applied to Pitt, she interned at her local public library to understand the different types of roles librarians can have within a library and to learn the similarities and differences between academic and public libraries. Once enrolled at Pitt she was able to secure two internships: one at a small local hospital and one at a local community college. These first-hand experiences helped her identify the type of library and the positions in the library that would build off her background and allow her to pursue her interests. Ultimately, Christina decided that an academic reference position related to healthcare was her perfect match.

For Kat, the University of Pittsburgh was the only university she applied to in search of a graduate program. Pitt was a logical choice, as Kat's family is from Southwestern Pennsylvania, so it is safe to say that, initially, location factored into this decision greatly. Her initial plan was to start the program in person in 2008 but she deferred a year when she decided to move to West Virginia with her partner and pursue the degree through Pitt's virtual program. Kat's only on campus visits occurred once a semester, and then for a week-long in person class in her final semester. Attending the virtual MLIS program allowed Kat to work full time in West Virginia, first as an office manager of a Humane Society, then in several part-time library positions, while completing her degree. While this took a bit longer, only taking two classes a semester, instead of three, it allowed her to allay some student loans, and simultaneously gain several additional years of library experience.

Orientation day was the day Kat decided to pursue medical librarianship. She was drawn to the fast paced, immediate answer seeking nature of the field, and was fascinated by the prospect of working with health professionals. Having experience from her student work at the Architecture and Landscape Architecture Library at Penn State, Kat saw a bridge between medical and academic librarianship, hence beginning her journey as a health sciences librarian.

Her work for the Humane Society provided managerial experience, working in a fast-paced environment with many moving parts, and constant on-the-job learning. She held part-time positions in three types of libraries, as well. As a graduate reference assistant at Chatham University, she honed her reference interview and research assistance abilities, opened and closed the library, and built relationships with many of the full-time librarians, which continue to this day, a decade later. Her work at the Green Tree Public Library strengthened her behind-the-scenes knowledge of how the library operated, the programs and equipment, and the roles of each employee. Lastly, she interned at two hospital libraries, Saint Claire Hospital in Pittsburgh, and The Washington Hospital in Washington, PA. These opportunities opened her eyes to the struggles hospital librarians face in funding, support, and advocacy. As a teaching hospital, The Washington Hospital's internship included opportunities to participate in a student journal club, work with nursing students during their clinicals, and learn about collection development and budgeting.

First Jobs, or What We Wish We Learned in Library School

While this section has a playful header, it is important to note that librarianship is as much about hands-on learning as it is formal education, and that this learning continues within each job or new role. This is not to say that Christina or Kat entered the workforce wholly underprepared for their careers, but, simply, that learning never ends.

Before graduating from the MLIS program Christina secured a position as the Biological and Health Sciences Librarian at the University of Delaware. The University of Delaware Morris Library is a smaller ACRL library, and its size allowed her to learn about each library department and how they overlap or are independent. As a reference librarian, she worked on the reference desk with occasional night and weekend shifts, taught information literacy classes for health-related courses, controlled a collection development budget for print resources, and participated in professional associations.

Christina's education gave her a solid understanding of databases in the health sciences and how they functioned (e.g., controlled vocabulary, filters/limits), how to conduct a reference interview, types of government

resources, and the role of copyright in interlibrary loan. These were all vital skills in her positions. The main skill she did not obtain in her MLIS program, and developed on the job, was learning how to outline and teach information literacy sessions.

Kat's first full-time library position was the Virtual Librarian of Kanawha Valley Community and Technical College in Charleston, WV, a solo role that eventually morphed into Director of Library Services of BridgeValley Community and Technical College. Kat was hired into this job, in part, because of completing her MLIS online. The initial job required her to build a virtual library from scratch, in a computer lab, with no physical collection. This CTC has the most competitive Nursing program in the state, so her medical library education background, coupled with her various positions, had her well prepared for the reference and instruction aspects of the job. Having completed a whole course on instruction at Pitt, she used her final project as a basis for her first instruction sessions. This did grow and evolve over time, but it was a solid foundation to build upon. Her personal use of databases as a distance education student, working with the public to use online library resources, and her introduction to collection development and budgeting at The Washington Hospital all provided background for building a library from scratch. Her experience with databases of all subjects, not just health science focused, aided in both the building of a collection of resources most beneficial to the CTC's specific programs, and in teaching across disciplines. What Kat was not prepared for were things like vendor negotiations and reading contracts, grant writing, and faculty and student outreach and programming. She understood what databases were necessary for accreditation and program needs but had never had to read a contract or negotiate with a vendor. She recommends taking a grant writing class or training, as you never know when an unfinished grant proposal will land in your lap with one week until the deadline.

Second Jobs, Building On Our Experiences

After two years at the University of Delaware, Christina secured a position as a Clinical Informationist at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in the Welch Medical Library. This position allowed her to work with clinicians, medical residents, fellows, nurses and allied health professionals and gave her access to rare and expensive library resources that were not realistic to have in her previous position. At Welch, she provided on-site department office hours for her liaison areas, collaborated on systematic reviews and grants, taught workshops on citation management software and databases, and occasionally attended grand rounds for her departments.

This position did not require any reference desk shifts or night or weekend work, but it did require frequent work outside the library in the clinical units or research labs. In addition, this position did not require any collection development responsibilities or in-depth participation in professional associations. Christina's experience at Welch allowed her to develop advanced research skills, a deeper understanding of patient care and lab-based medical research, and expanded her access to medical resources. The confidence she gained with various aspects of research at Welch prompted her to return to school to obtain a Ph.D. and helped her realize her interest in a tenured faculty position within an academic library.

Kat's second position was as a reference and instruction librarian for Marshall University. She was invited to apply for this position by colleagues at Marshall, and the timing could not have been better as her first job she once loved had begun to change into something which no longer fit her professional or personal goals. It is important to note that it is OK to look for other positions if you feel your goals have changed or if your current position is no longer engaging, and that seeking new opportunities is healthy and welcome in librarianship.

At Marshall University, Kat was hired to work with a new program of incoming first-year students and existing distance graduate programs in Public Health, Education, and Administration. The new group of first-years were starting on a campus which had traditionally been a graduate campus but was in the process of expanding to include first- and second-year students. Her previous outreach and instructional work, collaborations with faculty and

staff, and working with students of varying ages, set her up nicely for this new role. The on the job learning in this role encompassed working with graduate students and their educational needs, providing distance reference and instruction, co-teaching with faculty and staff, teaching full credit courses, and creating online materials for distance learners. While this role initially did not include much collection development or database negotiations, she became the co-creator of CODEC of WV, a statewide database consortium for community and technical colleges. Kat was able to stretch and strengthen her instruction skills in teaching full semester sections of first-year seminars and in creating an Honors-level grant writing course for fourth-year students.

So Where Are We Now? Two Paths, One Destination

Towards the end of Christina's Ph.D. program, she obtained a tenure-track position as Health Sciences Liaison Librarian with the Pennsylvania State University Libraries. This position allowed her to combine all her previous experiences in the health sciences with her newly acquired advanced research skills from her Ph.D. program. This faculty position was uncommon as it was filled while the previous librarian for health sciences was still on the job. Having the predecessor to your role on-site while you begin your job is rare in librarianship. This singular occurrence allowed Christina to get first-hand knowledge of the historical relationship between the library and the health sciences departments at the Penn State University Park location and details about the growth and development of the health sciences collection for the past several decades.

During the interview process, it was shared that this position would be divided into two supporting growth and in-depth development for the health disciplines at University Park. Because these decisions were made in advance it allowed Christina, and the yet-to-be-hired nursing librarian, the opportunity to strategically plan growth, share institutional knowledge, clearly align liaison and collection development areas, create a cohesive team-oriented environment, and identify and promote areas where the two positions clearly diverge.

Kat's partner's career brought her back to Penn State University, where she obtained the tenure-track position as Nursing & Allied Health Liaison Librarian. Like Christina, this position built upon many of the skills she had built over her career to that point. This role required her to hit the ground running, and she started building relationships with the College of Nursing and the Health Policy & Administration Departments immediately. This endeavor was supported by Christina, who did much of Kat's onboarding herself, and clearly mapped out the start of the path to success at Penn State.

The idea of earning tenure was intimidating at first, but Kat's past experiences with teaching, being embedded into programs, grant writing, working with high-touch allied health students & faculty, and confidence with health databases, allowed her to focus on growing her research and scholarly communication skills. She believes in the value and power of saying "No," when necessary, to allow for a healthy balance of time. Coming in to be part of a team has allowed Christina and Kat to identify changes and opportunities for collaboration, and has given them the time to continually recollect, regroup, reorganize, and reprioritize smoothly and as needed. Their paths are not parallel. They are unique with occasional intersections, but they are not interchangeable.

Conclusion

Across the positions, Christina's daily duties remained essentially the same. Having an advanced understanding of how each medical database functioned and what information they contained was central to every job she held. The ability to answer reference questions and to teach information literacy sessions were the skills she used the most consistently. Her sports science degree did help with general health knowledge and some clinical terminology, and her Ph.D. frequently helped with understanding the various aspects of the research and publication process, but

the vital and core skills she used daily came from the medical librarianship specialized courses in her MLIS degree or on-the-jobs skills she acquired.

Kat's core skills remained quite similar, as well, across positions. She views outreach and engagement with faculty, staff, and students as central to each of her positions, as well as teaching. Because her liaison groups have consistently spanned allied health, the education she received in earning her MLIS has had, and will continue to have, a lasting impact on her professional work, goals, and ethics.

Though a master's degree in library science is likely the most important aspect of landing a job in librarianship, you should never forget or downplay all your additional experiences, interests, hobbies, and knowledge. Everything that makes you, you, allows you to be an amazing librarian. All those additional pieces will play a part as you forge your own path in librarianship and will help you create a career that is exclusive to you.