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### Find Your Focus: What Kind of Librarian Should You Be?

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# Find Your Focus: What Kind of Librarian Should You Be?

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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## Prerequisites for any librarian job include curiosity and a desire to help expand others' knowledge. But a satisfying library career may take many forms

As the field increasingly expands to include work with a wide range of physical and electronic materials, resources, and data, the question "What is a librarian?" does not have an easy answer. The classic stereotype of a librarian as someone who manages print books on shelves has long failed to convey a complete picture of this varied and vital profession, and certainly no longer does so in the 21st century.

Most librarians share an enthusiasm for helping people find information and managing the systems that facilitate that process. Some also deal with concerns about reaching the patrons who need their services. Beyond these common traits, is a librarian front and center at a public-services desk? Behind the scenes, organizing material? Fielding requests at a computer terminal? Deciding which databases will meet an institution's particular needs? Something totally different? Or perhaps all of these things?

### ON THE FRONT LINE

Reference work centers around supporting library users' research and informational needs. A basic reference interview will establish what a patron is looking for, ranging from straightforward questions answered via a search engine or by pointing to a specific location in the stacks to extremely involved requests, requiring hours or days consulting databases, experts, colleagues, and other resources. Many reference requests require a librarian to dive headfirst into new areas of knowledge to gain enough expertise to point patrons in the right direction and help them evaluate sources.

Reference librarians frequently spend at least some time stationed at a reference desk, available for walk-up questions. Increasingly, libraries have also begun offering reference services by phone, email, or online chat. These remote options are especially important as libraries continue to adjust to the COVID-19 crisis. And while reference work forms the core of the job, constant connection with patrons allows reference librarians to serve their institutions in other ways as well. At academic libraries, reference librarians may teach classes on research techniques, as a

stand-alone or part of a broader course. They can also play a role in library acquisitions, or participate in committees handling issues having to do with library facilities or emerging technology.

Rebecca Fordon earned her MLIS from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2017 and now serves as faculty services librarian at the UCLA Law Library. The most satisfying part of her job, she says, is “that joy of discovery, that curiosity, and being able to problem-solve and find an answer, tracking it down through whatever twists and turns it takes.” Fordon adds that while challenging research questions can be exciting, they can also be frustrating, requiring a measure of stubbornness and approaching the question from multiple angles before arriving at a satisfactory answer. In addition, Fordon states that public-facing work, and dealing with patrons who may be impatient or frustrated, is not always easy. She draws on her pre-librarian experience working in retail sales, which gave her customer service skills that come in handy at the reference desk, and as a practicing attorney, which taught her how to provide counsel and understand a client’s needs.

## COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY



**Robin Bradford**

While libraries host a wide range of on-site and virtual programs and events, physical and digital collections remain their most valuable feature to many patrons. Collection development librarians are responsible for selecting and curating these collections, researching the best content for their institutions.

According to Robin Bradford, collection development librarian with the Pierce County Library System, WA, and a 2000 graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s MLS program, she “develops every part of the collection, from selection to weeding.” This extends to both physical and electronic materials. Bradford notes that, with her physical library closed

during the pandemic, she has spent much of her time ordering materials for the widely used digital content repository OverDrive, and organizing OverDrive materials to help customers discover new and useful titles from home.

Bradford's other regular duties include training staff on Readers' Advisory (RA), or recommending sources in response to patrons' requests, as well as consulting with staff on the collections in various branch locations. RA instruction includes "genre training," to give staff a deep dive into specific and popular fiction genres. Bradford's collection development duties also involve supporting the library's programming, such as its summer reading challenge, by ensuring that librarians have the necessary materials.

Because maintaining the library's collections requires awareness of its patron base and their interests, prior public-facing experience such as reference work can prove valuable to a collection development librarian. Nevertheless, Bradford describes her daily routine as "lots of time at the office spent doing your own thing," including working extensively with budgets and spreadsheets." If being in an office environment is not your path, says Bradford, "this is not for you."

One of the role's highlights is the joy of discovery as she strives to find engaging and unexpected titles for her library's collections, Bradford notes. But she cautions that the job can feel overwhelming at times, managing myriad materials and wondering how many to buy. Her best advice is to remain "intellectually curious," and "not dwell on things," but rather "make a decision and move on."

## PRESERVING THE RECORD



## **OUTSIDE THE BOX Tammi Kim and student assistant, Maggie Bukowski, accessioning the Riviera Hotel and Casino Publicity Collection and Architectural Records**

Photo by Hana Gutierrez

Archives and special collections are labels typically applied to materials that are rare or unique, or otherwise merit an elevated level of caretaking or curation. Depending on the library, a special collection may include original manuscripts, ancient books, historical documents, rare photographs, or something completely unexpected. Given their delicate and often valuable nature, these may require special protocols for handling and storage. Increasingly, they need to be digitized, in the interests of expanding access and preserving them.

Tammi Kim, special collections and archives technical services librarian at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas (UNLV), earned her MLS from UCLA in 2011. Kim focuses her work on “establishing intellectual and physical control” of archival materials. For newly arrived collections, this involves tasks such as creating records, organizing items on shelves and in storage, and making sure a collection management system is updated with the basic information required so staff and researchers can find what they need. Kim’s work is primarily, but not entirely, behind the scenes, and she commonly interacts with researchers and with UNLV students who work in the library. “It’s really interesting to see the types of researchers that come through the door,” she says, also praising the great variety of archival collections she works with, which track the history of Nevada and Las Vegas.

Collections at UNLV can grow faster than time and space readily permit, and Kim acknowledges that some duties can involve “doing triage” for incoming collections—“making sure some work has been done so that materials are usable and available for research use shortly after we receive the collections.” Physical collections do not always fit neatly on a shelf or in a box and may require special effort to store and preserve. Kim has accessioned artifacts ranging from a casino money change cart and costumes to shovels from university groundbreakings to a wooden ballot box from a local election.

A growing portion of Kim’s work involves digital records. This includes processing born-digital materials and working to preserve content from aging media like floppy disks and CDs. She also works on the UNLV web archiving program, preserving websites that are part of the university’s domain as well as web collections documenting major events in Las Vegas (see “[Bearing Witness](#)”).

## **HANDLING WITH CARE**



**SOMETHING SPECIAL** Colleen Theisen examines a miniature manuscript at Syracuse University's Special Collections Research Center

Photo by Romita Ray

Unique collections and the needs of those who use them dictate the work of a special collections librarian. Colleen Theisen, chief curator at the Special Collections Research Center with Syracuse University and a 2011 graduate of the University of Michigan School of Information, notes that it's critical she keep abreast of what is being taught on campus. Her days involve "meeting with faculty and instructors about their courses, then searching the catalog and the stacks for relevant materials, setting up classes," and "teaching and co-teaching class sessions." She also helps create exhibitions of special collections materials. Theisen wants people "to be excited about history, and care and worry about the books, documents, photographs, maps, and artifacts that record and tell those stories, and the very human process it takes to analyze, interpret, and tell [them]."

In addition to using the collections for coursework, Theisen handles issues like digitization, refining the institution's collection development policy, and searching for new materials to add to the collection. Like many special collections librarians, Theisen aims to digitize portions of the collection, which requires funds, equipment, and staff. Accessing even a portion of the necessary resources can be a challenge, Theisen notes, telling *LJ* that "it takes data, figures, and reports to make a compelling case to any kind of administrator at any institution about the real day-to-day funding needs." Writing grant applications "can help, but they are a lot of work and not a sure thing."

Still, those challenges do not dampen Theisen's enthusiasm for her work, which spans from behind-the-scenes projects like conserving, digitizing, and writing metadata for an online collection to more public-facing work like education, programming, and social media strategy. In all, Theisen enjoys "sharing the experience of exploring the materials and the exciting questions they present with coworkers, faculty, students, and a more general public."

## SPECIALTY SUPPORT

While some libraries intend to attract all comers, others tailor their collections to the informational needs of a highly specific patron group. These specialty libraries often exist within the institutions they serve, and are usually relatively small, forcing their librarians to assume multiple roles. Museum art libraries, for example, support the work of curators and art historians.

Ivy Blackman, managing librarian at the Whitney Museum of American Art, received her MLIS from Long Island University in 2008, with a certificate of concentration in rare books and special collections. She does “a little bit of everything,” she tells *LJ*. This includes acquisitions, cataloging, managing the library’s OPAC (online catalog) to ensure that the collection is discoverable, meeting with curators about research, fielding research requests from curators around the world, and working with museum interns.

Blackman also occasionally purchases books or ephemera that will appear in exhibits, and witnessing the fruits of those efforts has become a key part of what excites her about museum librarianship. It “feels enormously satisfying,” she says, “walking into the museum every day and walking through the galleries when they are closed, being part of the process that creates exhibitions, being any kind of cog in that system.” But, she adds, “special librarianship is challenging, in that you feel like you’re kind of neither one thing nor the other. You’re a subsidiary to an institution. We don’t bring in money—we are supporting the intellectual life of the institution.”

According to Jillian Suarez, head of library services at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and a 2011 graduate of the University at Buffalo’s Library and Information Studies master’s program, much of her work involves helping curators to build their exhibitions by providing access to materials, purchasing new materials or database subscriptions, and generally “making sure things are seamless.” As an art librarian, her daily work includes cataloguing and reference, as well as creating a collection development policy—“Not just what do you buy,” but also “how do you accept gifts, because a museum library can’t just be a dumping ground for art books.”

Work in a specialty library typically requires a second graduate degree, or at least a keen and demonstrated interest in the subject matter. In turn, such expertise can enhance a librarian’s collection development and reference skills. Suarez tells *LJ* that her passion for art and art history makes her even better at her job, saying that, to be effective in that role, you not only “have to care about the arts, and the materials you’re a custodian of,” but become attached to them.

## THE BACKEND: CATALOGING AND METADATA



**Alexandra Provo**

Even the best library collection is of little use if patrons and staff cannot find what they need. Cataloging and metadata librarians are experts in organization, collaborating with others in their institution to make access to materials intuitive and accurate.

Alexandra Provo, metadata librarian at New York University Libraries, tells *LJ* that the “interesting thing about metadata librarians” is that “we really do different things depending on the institution.” Provo spends much of her time creating and reconfiguring library guidelines for how information is organized and how to translate source records into the entries displayed in the catalog. She also drafts the metadata used for the catalogs, prepares MARC records, and meets with colleagues to develop solutions to ongoing issues in the library. “Basically,” says Provo, “we are always thinking about how the metadata moves from one step to the next, and from one person to the next.”

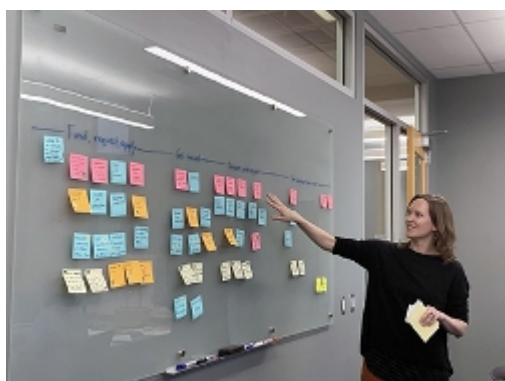
Provo describes herself as a “spreadsheet enthusiast,” drawing on the lessons of a Python programming class and a User Experience class she took at New York’s Pratt Institute, where she earned her MLIS in 2015, both of which infuse her approach to metadata—“Thinking about how it’s being used, and what the user experiences.” Provo’s past work in public services also has enabled her to branch out in her current role, where she conducts workshops for coworkers and others in the profession.

Kathryn Lybarger, head of cataloging and metadata at the University of Kentucky, earned her library science degree from the University of Kentucky in 2007. She reports that “being a cataloging librarian means providing access to the library’s collection,” whatever it happens to include. Her job entails “a fair amount of original cataloging,” or “creating original records for materials that only our library holds.” These include theses and dissertations, books from the university press, and technical research reports.



One of the biggest challenges in cataloging—and also one of the fun parts, Lybarger says—is that she and her colleagues are always learning something new—for example, receiving “large gift collections in languages that nobody in our cataloging unit speaks,” requiring them to “quickly learn at least enough to search for those titles in WorldCat.” Another challenge, she says, is working with a large number of records from one source, which means that “one problem in the catalog, like a dead link, or a weird call number,” likely signifies the existence of “similar problems in there that also need to be fixed.” Lybarger’s background in programming has enabled her to streamline certain processes, such as writing software that allows the library staff “to communicate with our catalog directly” and more easily perform “complicated tasks that would take many steps through a regular web interface.”

## UX: "EMPATHY IS KEY"



**UX AT UA** Rebecca Blakiston outlines a journey map—a step-by-step visualization of how a user interacts with a service

User experience (UX) focuses on ways to maximize patrons’ ability to access and use library resources. UX librarians examine and improve processes, from websites to wayfinding. While aspects of UX work occur behind the scenes, a desire to work closely with library patrons remains a must. The successful UX librarian performs usability testing and interviews, gathering feedback on patrons’ experiences. This research often brings to light challenges that the original system designers might not have anticipated.

Rebecca Blakiston, UX strategist with the University of Arizona (UA) Libraries, who earned her MLS from UA in 2007, described her duties as “identifying pain points, removing barriers, and improving all the things” about the library. She also serves on the UA Libraries space planning committee and has played a role in library renovations. Blakiston started out as a public services librarian, and tells *LJ* that being on the frontlines remains “a huge part of being a UX librarian.” That means serving as the patron’s advocate, noting that wherever the library communicates with patrons, the UX librarian can play a part in shaping those interfaces. As one example, she recently worked with research and teaching librarians to improve the way in which users contact librarians on the web.

To Blakiston, “understanding what the problem and pain points are makes a huge difference” in solving them. Departments across UA regularly consult with her on topics like UX design and user testing. Because the work is “very collaborative” and “never done in isolation,” Blakiston opines that “empathy is key.” She adds that a UX librarian should apply critical thinking skills to problems and be “curious about human behavior.” Given that user engagement and feedback can bring as many surprises as definitive answers, she said, UX librarians should be “comfortable with ambiguity and comfortable saying ‘it depends.’”

## THE YOUNGEST PATRONS



**Jessica Panek**

Librarians can play a key role in helping young users develop an interest in reading and learning. Whether in schools or in public libraries, children’s librarians dedicate their efforts to promoting literacy of all kinds.

The duties of a children’s librarian vary with the age of those they serve. Kristen Todd-Wurm is a 2004 graduate of Long Island University–Post and national coordinator for Family Place Libraries, which supports early childhood programming for babies, toddlers, and their families. Hers is “a different kind of librarianship,” she says, with a practice focusing on “experimenting and hands-on learning.”

As Todd-Wurm tells *LJ*, her work ranges from devising educational sessions for children and caregivers to designing play spaces to developing a collection of board books and toys. One of her main jobs is not just connecting with the children but also with parents or other caregivers, and working to “create an environment that makes them feel comfortable.” Those efforts sometimes extend to creating programming not just for children but for parents as well, rendering the library a resource for the whole family.

For Jessica Panek, the elementary librarian for third through fifth grade at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York who earned her MLIS from Pratt Institute in 2017, prior teaching experience has proven invaluable. As she tells *LJ*, “A lot of my job is working with the teachers and helping them get materials for classroom and research projects,” adding, “Knowing what I would want as a teacher has really helped.”

In addition, Ethical Culture Fieldston students attend a weekly class in the library, which may require Panek to teach a lesson or perform a read-aloud. During library classes, her students are given time to select and check out books, and she guides them one-on-one to find books that they might like—a form of youth RA work. Being open minded is important, she explained, not only to “the things the kids are interested in,” but also “to what the kids want.” The books they select “may be way too easy for them, or too hard,” but as a librarian, she says, it is not her job to judge.

## REACHING OUT



**COMMUNITY MATTERS** Sophie Maier and colleagues celebrate International Women's Day with members of the Louisville community

Libraries have long been vital community spaces, offering value to patrons beyond traditional collections. Outreach librarians focus on connecting with patrons and helping them to take advantage of what the library has to offer. Those offerings may include support for English learners, homework help, and preparation for citizenship, as well as cultural showcases and documentary screenings.

Sophie Maier, immigrant services librarian at the Iroquois Library, part of the Louisville Free Public Library, KY, who holds a 2010 MLS from the University of Kentucky, describes her job as “multifaceted.” She speaks with members of Louisville’s large immigrant and refugee population to “discover who is in the town, what previous experience they had from the library, what they would need from the library, and what they would like to do with the library.” This role requires her to build trusting relationships with the community, connecting with people outside the library and ensuring that they know they are safe and welcomed inside its doors.

Fostering “solidarity with the community” is the objective of outreach librarianship, says Maier, who adds that everyone benefits from getting people civically engaged in their public library. Depending on the community a library serves, the specifics of an outreach librarian’s work may vary. But as Maier explains, the job always involves “a massive amount of connecting,” and advocating for the library and its patrons.

As this overview illustrates, the contributions of librarians are bounded only by their own ingenuity. If these professionals have helped illuminate some of the facets of this diverse field, then they have accomplished every librarian’s most basic job: providing access to knowledge.

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reference	U/X	archives	readers' advisory	special collections	cataloging	metadata
outreach	immigrant services	K-12				

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