

Amanda Pirog and Arielle J. Rodriguez

# Contingent Librarianship and Precarity

## Two Lived Perspectives

**A**cademic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors, and they were given space to explore. This issue's conversation is the first of two that will explore contingent labor and precarity in academic libraries and how it impacts people, services, and communities. We begin with the personal experiences of two incredible library workers, and next month will discuss management approaches to precarity. - *Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Amanda Pirog (AP):** Arielle, something we have in common is having been/being temporary librarians in academic libraries. Thank you so much for your willingness to talk with me about your experiences and insights. How has your current role impacted your relationship-building with the students, faculty, and staff you support, and how does that make you feel? How do you think it makes your students, faculty, and staff feel?

**Arielle J. Rodriguez (AJR):** When I started at my former position and then this year at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), I felt excited and looked forward to building relationships, particularly with students and faculty. I will usually email faculty to interact with them and students. Unfortunately, I don't always get responses, and I have yet to penetrate any department meetings. I've been able to maintain a solid relationship with one faculty member out of the 11 or 12 full-time faculty members in the School of Nursing and Healthcare Leadership and the handful of nonfull-time faculty they have. I really like teaching information literacy. However, I haven't been able to do instruction sessions nearly as much. In my previous temporary role, I was working mostly with one to three faculty members from different disciplines. It is hard to lay the groundwork for faculty-librarian relationships when faculty know you might be gone by the end of the academic year.

I also try to work with other units to support students. I have taken on the role of liaison librarian to our Husky Post Prisons Pathways (HP3) students. I have worked previously with incarcerated students, which I really enjoyed, so I wanted to connect with our students at UWT who have been impacted by the carceral system. This is the cohort's inaugural year.

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It felt perfect that this is their first year as a cohort at UWT and my first year as a librarian here. Now, with the likelihood that my contract will end soon, it feels like that hope for a strong connection has kind of gone by the wayside. It is very difficult to build trust with students who have been incarcerated and who are system-impacted. HP3 wants this relationship with the library, and everyone else is spread so thin already, but I know you all will support them with care.

Amanda, how did you feel when you were temporary? How did you feel about relationship-building and the work it took to get relationships established? Did they kind of fizzle out? Something else?

**AP:** A lot of what you shared resonates with me, even though my experience being “temporary” was in one position that lasted almost four years, rather than shorter temporary roles at different institutions. Even though I am now in a promotion-eligible role as the Business and User Experience Librarian at UWT, I feel like I’m a much earlier career librarian than I actually am. I’ve been going through the process of relationship-building for almost six years now, and because it has been with different schools and different faculty, I feel like I don’t have much to show for it; instead, I am just repeating the early stages of relationship-building.

I’m not alone, though. As a business liaison, I see a heavy reliance on adjuncts in the discipline, especially in teaching entry-level courses, classes where a librarian often forms key relationships. As soon as I get a good feel for how a class works, a new person is teaching it. I’m building the relationship all over again, and the instructor is relearning how to use the library. Instructors have often taught at other local schools with different library policies and support services. This impacts the students when the librarian and the instructor are new and both getting a feel for the class and assignments. The systemic reliance on temporary labor in academia frustrates me, but I know I can’t fix it through my own relationship-building.

How has your experience building and rebuilding relationships made you feel about academic libraries? How have these things made you feel about your prospects in the field?

**AJR:** I constantly question my future in academic libraries. I love them, and I think it’s where I feel most comfortable. However, as an early-career librarian, lack of stability makes me feel like I should ditch them before I get in too deep. I stay because of the kind of opportunities that higher education has provided me. I’d like to pay it forward to students.

I want to give students a sense of stability, the best I can, and make spaces where our campus community can feel stability, even just temporarily. Nursing and healthcare leadership has a lot of transfer students that come in from area community colleges, and the HP3 students I work with are also trying to find their footing in a really unstable time. When we’re not able to provide students a sense of stability, I think they notice that, and it comes at the detriment of the university and the library. After all, why should they take the time to come to the library, build up a rapport with a librarian they work well with, to just have to keep starting over every six months to a year?

**AP:** What you said just made me think of a student I met yesterday. The student had a tutor in the quantitative center that they really loved. And then that tutor went away, and they stopped using the quantitative center, and they stopped using some of the other conjoined services like the writing center and the library. Their meeting with me was one of the first times they’d been back in these spaces. You’re completely right that when a student finds one person they feel connected with, they rely on that person. They can be a lifeline to getting support and are not easily replaced, even though the tutoring center and the library are still available.

**AJR:** Right. I think that relying so heavily on temporary labor can cause students to have negative perceptions of their school, hurts student retention, and their sense of belonging. UWT is a large commuter school, so if the campus can't provide students with a sense of stability and lasting community, then they just go to classes and leave. It hinders any communal relationship building that we all could be engaging in and benefiting from on campus.

**AP:** Speaking of communal relationship building, how does your temporary labor impact your sense of belonging and how you envision your future?

**AJR:** I usually try to dive right in and see what spaces I fit best in. It feels great to find those spaces and feel part of a community. That goes well for a while, and then I have to hit the job market, so belonging kind of takes a backseat.

I feel like I belong here, but that feeling has dissipated over time. I am fortunate that at the library and with the relationships I have been able to establish, I don't feel like an outsider. In my past role, I didn't feel like I belonged at all, and that was demoralizing. I seriously wanted to quit being a librarian. Getting to know people and maintaining the relational aspect of librarianship is hard work. Then, once you have made some inroads, they are gone in a matter of months. I can't think about belonging when I have to think in six-month intervals. I am just thrust into survival mode.

What about you? How do you think being temporary impacted your sense of belonging?

**AP:** Even though my role is no longer temporary, I forget that most of the time. I think this lingering temporary identity is due to the heightened awareness of my work life in increments from my previous role. Sometimes my appointment was six months, sometimes it was three months, sometimes longer. I became hyper aware of these timelines, but everyone around me forgot. People would either assume that my position was almost done, and I couldn't contribute to projects. Or colleagues assumed I had gotten hired permanently and then would ask me questions about things I wasn't eligible for, like promotion or certain types of committee work. Both assumptions made me feel I was less valuable than other staff.

On a more personal note, I was noticeably different from colleagues because I only took vacation when I was about to "lose hours if I didn't use it." I wanted to keep as much vacation time as a buffer so I would still be able to get by if I wasn't able to find a new job quickly. I still hoard my vacation time, even today. I can't shake the habit in the same way that I am unable to imagine my future in the field. When people ask, "What are your career goals?" the first response that comes to mind is "Being employed. That's my goal."

**AJR:** I totally feel that.

**AP:** To close this out. I'm wondering what advice you would give someone else doing this work, or advice you would give past you taking on a temporary role?

**AJR:** Higher education relies on temporary labor, and it can be stressful for workers. There are some benefits and some downsides to being temporary. You can get the experience you need to hopefully better your chances of finding something permanent later on. If you are in a supportive environment, you can use a temporary role as a means to an end. However, you might not get paid well, and you have to continuously go on the job market year after year. You could just get stuck in a temporary position cycle forever.

Would you be okay in a potentially low-paying, demoralizing role? How can you get as much out of it as possible? My first librarian role, before UWT, was temporary and demoralizing. I really needed experience, though, and I felt like I didn't have a choice. I made a

tough, year-long emotional and financial sacrifice. It was my unfortunate reality, and I don't recommend just going into it without thoughtful consideration.

You have power! You got hired because they need you. You do have some leverage. Reminding myself of that helped me learn better self-advocacy and bargain for some things I wanted. Finding your power and self-advocacy is hard, but it is so worth it. Try not to let your precarity convince you otherwise.

Find balance. Burnout is real, so reflect on what a meaningful contribution looks like. You don't need to just produce. You have to learn to say no. This is also not easy, but you need to protect your physical and mental health for yourself and your community. You owe it to your past, present, and future self.

What about you? What would you tell past Amanda?

**AP:** I think what you started with is such good advice—we have things to offer the organization and leverage in what we choose to take on. I would add that rather than proving yourself to the organization in a temporary role, you can prove yourself to yourself. What do you want to accomplish during your time in a position?

Having an idea of what your limits are, though, is really, really important. Doing work that negatively impacts your health or other aspects of your life is not sustainable, even if you are working toward a chosen career path. This is where I think having a supportive supervisor who cares about your long-term career rather than just the work you are currently doing can be helpful. I'm sure we'll learn more about that in part two of this conversation, focused on supervisors and leaders' roles in contingent labor! //