

Megan Sapp-Nelson and Abigail Goben

# The Missing Path

Data Librarianship at Mid-Career

**A**s the subdiscipline of data librarianship is navigating the second decade of wide adoption in US academic libraries, many of the librarians who specialize in that discipline are approaching or are firmly mid-career. Data librarianship requires deep knowledge of policy, technology, strategy, and political environments on campus and nationally. Those data librarians are developing skill sets that are highly valued in library administration, regardless of specialization. Due to the lack of support within data librarianship career tracks, the only clear career path forward for many holding those roles is to move into library leadership, either in their own institution or moving elsewhere, thereby gutting the institutional data management knowledge that has been hard won and leaving libraries to functionally restart data services time and again. As a result, in the past three to five years, a significant number of data librarians have transitioned from data roles to library leadership and management. In the process, we are switching our most expert data librarians into roles where those skills are no longer updated. Simultaneously, data librarians who remain in their roles—due to personal preference, economics of health care, geographic or political limitations, or family situations—face career boundary limitations, with an expectation to take on ever more complicated skill sets without recognition, clear career paths, or support.

As noted above, data librarianship builds skill sets that are highly valued for library administrative positions and in industry, leading to pressure for data librarians to move away from their area of specialization. Working collaboratively with campus leadership in multiple disciplines builds name recognition at the campus level, a desirable characteristic for future associate head or dean positions. Focus on policy creation and analysis builds in-depth knowledge of the operations of a given institution. Campus-level discussions to finance support of data repositories build negotiation skills that are valuable for leveraging and communicating the role of the library on campus. This combination of skills, plus extensive knowledge of the liaisons within an institution, makes a data librarian a leading candidate for any middle library management role and, in many cases, creates a compelling dossier for the role of head of the library.

Rapidity of reskilling has been a constant requirement for data librarianship due to the rate of changes in technology, funder and publisher policies, and discipline-driven changes. Job ads that initially described “interest in” certain areas now often have requirements not only for academic librarianship skills in literacy, pedagogy, information organization, and collection development but also data science skills, such as programming, high-performance

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computing, and data visualization. Often still hired as the only person with these responsibilities, data librarians run into the challenges of coordinator syndrome, developing strong networking skills but often ultimately reliant upon the kindness of peers and enthusiastic volunteers to accomplish their work rather than an established structure.<sup>1</sup> As a result, when a data librarian leaves their role, there is often little backfill, creating an environment where the replacement librarian must seemingly start from scratch again, often after an extended period where the position was empty during hiring.

In addition to challenges within the library, data librarians are also likely to be in a continuous phase of rebuilding relationships as frequent campus leadership changes due to retirements, reorganizations, and other transitions, will necessitate significant efforts in justifying the need for strong data management services and advocacy across campus units to incoming administrative hires. Many data librarians build interpersonal relationships with key advocates on campus to accomplish their work. When the advocate holding the position leaves, those relationships must be rebuilt person by person without a straightforward plan or guidance on how to rebuild those relationships. This cycle of relationship building may be supported or challenged if the library administration is unwilling to permit the data librarian to have the authority and autonomy to establish and maintain these relationships.

Further, data librarians are often limited in their ability to change institutions and continue in a data management role due to the conflict between rapidly increasing skill expectations and administrative willingness to pay for expertise. Salaries in academic libraries are, due to the feminized nature of the profession, often significantly lower than would be seen elsewhere in the academy, particularly considering the additional computational skill requirements that have been added to many job ads. A further concerning trend is that hiring committees actively invite experienced professionals to move laterally or take pay cuts to build a new service from the beginning, often coupled with a significant geographic relocation. Even as they recognize that the candidates have successfully implemented a research data service, library administrators' base salary levels upon the nonexistence of the program at their own institution rather than existing skill sets that the data librarian brings to the table. Given the difficulty of implementing a service, and recognizing existing skill sets that have been successful, those data librarians should be hired with a salary that is commensurate with their expertise and the requirement of deep skill sets that a data support service requires.

Despite the constant reskilling and rebuilding requirements, many data librarians are seeking career advancement that does not require them to move away from the roles they enjoy and in which they have expertise and demonstrate excellence. In many cases the traditional hierarchy of libraries does not provide a method of advancement within the same institution for those who have developed expert knowledge of data librarianship, or any other subject matter expertise for that matter. Although some institutions still support librarians holding faculty positions with promotion and tenure, achieving these roles often primarily adds more institutional service work and mentoring obligations as opposed to greater responsibility and support within their area of specialization. Functionally at mid-career, many data librarians may see giving up their data work to move into a management position as the only way to gain a significant salary increase and recognition for their skill. The other evident option being to remain in their role doing work they enjoy but face stagnant wages with a constantly increasing workload that has limited options for a professional trajectory.

If academic libraries are committed to providing data services and wish to expand these critical offerings to campus beyond continuous restarts and rebuilding, efforts must be made to celebrate deep knowledge and expertise while providing a career path that is not predicated strictly on the traditional hierarchy of individual → department head → associate dean → dean. *nn*

## **Note**

1. The Library Loon, “Reconsidering the C-Word – Gavia Libraria,” accessed February 7, 2025. <https://gavialib.com/2011/12/reconsidering-the-c-word/>; Megan Sapp-Nelson and Abigail Goben, “Models for Engaging Liaisons in Research Data Services,” *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 8, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309.2382>.