

Martin Garnar and Rebecca Floyd

No Wrong Turns

A Year of Exploring Why We Choose Librarianship

Academic 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. In past issues, the topics were proposed by the authors. However, during 2026, the column will focus on the authors' stories of librarianship. How they got here, why they stay, and even why they consider leaving or transitioning at times. During this time of great upheaval in higher education, exploring our many "whys" is a worthy venture. — *Dustin Fife, series editor*

Martin Garnar (MG): Rebecca, I'm glad we're going to have this chance to learn more about each other. Since we're supposed to talk about how we came to the profession, I'll start with my winding road to librarianship. After my original plan to be a high school math teacher met with disaster in the form of Calc III, I switched majors to history so that I could teach social studies. Adding geography along the way, I made it to my senior year and realized I didn't want to teach high school students, so I decided to get a doctorate so that I could teach at the college level. I made it to the second semester of my doctoral program when I freaked out about my future. First, I admitted that I wasn't excited about the prospect of teaching anyone. Second, though I liked history for its universal quality (i.e., everything and everyone has a history), the focus of my studies was getting narrower with every class. How was I supposed to teach world history when all my work was on 19th century British and German feminist movements?

I knew I wasn't interested in finishing a PhD in history, but I also didn't want to just quit, so I decided to stop at a master's and see what happened. Well, the next semester I got a work-study in the science library working on the reference desk, which is how I got a taste of what it might mean to be a librarian: being curious about whatever question comes before me, feeling a sense of accomplishment when I was able to help someone, and knowing that I could be part of the academic enterprise without having to grade anyone. That experience, now more than thirty years ago, ultimately led to a library degree and a career as a reference librarian and administrator.

Rebecca, how did you come to librarianship?

Rebecca Floyd (RF): My road to librarianship actually had a lot of sharp turns one direction or another. We are similar this way, but I'm closer to the beginning of my library path.

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I often refer to being a librarian as my third career, after one in geography and one as a stay-at-home parent, school volunteer, and substitute teacher. My bachelor's and first master's degrees are both in applied geography, focusing on remote sensing and geographic information systems. My husband was in the Army at the time, and we moved to Anchorage just after I earned my master's degree. I worked at an aerial photography and digital mapping firm for most of our six years there. Then we moved three times within the next six years, and I did not have a paid job during that time.

As I began to think about what I might do when my children grew up, I kept going back to the idea of working in a library. Every place we moved I saw library jobs available, and the public library was the first place we went when settled, for books and information about local resources and to meet other families. Turns out I wrote myself a letter as a college freshman saying I wanted to major in either geography or library science. So, in 2018, I decided to pursue that second path by applying for an online LIS master's degree program. I graduated in 2021 and applied for a part-time job at Colorado College, which gave me the opportunity to apply for the full-time position I have now. I did not take any courses focused on academic libraries while in school, so much of my learning and training has been on the job.

I'm a bit older than the usual person beginning their career, but I hope to continue to grow and learn in this position and am excited to see what comes next.

What hooked you and made you stay in this profession for this long, especially after so many early direction changes?

MG: Rebecca, we need to talk more about geography—the gap year I mentioned was spent building a digital map of customers for a food distributor—but librarianship is our topic. I'd say what hooked me on libraries is that my natural inclination to want to know about everything (which makes focusing on one topic really difficult) is a feature in this profession, not a bug. My career has been in smaller academic libraries where everyone is expected to be more of a generalist than a specialist. While I was happy to use my subject expertise from my prior education as the subject librarian for history and women's studies, I was also glad to develop new knowledge in fields like business and nursing as I supported students in those programs. I also did things outside of my normal role, like running the library website (on the strength of a four-hour HTML class in library school) and, despite my initial hesitations about grading, teaching classes in the core curriculum at two different schools. Though it was a lot to juggle, I enjoyed having so much variety while staying within the same profession.

Meanwhile, I feel like I've been able to live out all of my childhood career fantasies once I became an administrator, as this role has so many different aspects to it:

- Lawyer: Though I can't give legal advice, I've learned more about contracts, copyright, free expression, and privacy than I ever expected.
- Counselor: SO MUCH of management is being able to listen, empathize, and help people figure out answers for themselves.
- Architect: While I'm still holding out for a building project before I retire, I've had the chance to reimagine spaces.
- Math teacher: Even though calculus was not my friend, I love a good spreadsheet and feel an outsized level of accomplishment when I figure out a formula on my own.

And while all of those professions are interesting, I still feel most like myself when I'm sitting at the desk on Friday afternoons and helping folks with whatever they need, whether it's checking out a power cable or finding an article from an obscure journal.

Now that I've reflected on all the different "jobs" I've had as a librarian, I'm curious to know what your experience has been so far. Is the profession as you expected it would be?

RF: Martin, the common link with geography is interesting! Future conversation for sure. With geography essentially being the study of why things are where they are and, of course, searching for things on different types of maps, I think for me it dovetailed well with librarianship and the idea of searching for information and organizing things to be findable.

I went into library school—and graduated from library school—thinking I would be working in public libraries because that's where I saw the job openings as we moved around, so most of my classes focused on topics around public librarianship. However, and obviously, I ended up working in an academic library at a small liberal arts college in the city I already lived in. Some of my classes prepared me for this, such as cataloging, research services, and the fundamentals of instruction. But many other things I have learned on the job, which has made the experience exciting and occasionally a little overwhelming. The ideas of helping patrons with research and teaching people how to use research tools are fundamentally the same, but the topics and reasons behind the research are a bit different. I also manage our institutional repository and digital archive, work with open access and open educational resources, and help with scholarship tracking and celebrations. I've learned about all those things with professional development, mentors, and from my fellow librarians. This part is not at all surprising—library professionals are a resourceful and helpful bunch of people. I have learned a lot from more experienced people by being willing to ask questions.

I do think the librarian profession is what I expected and also better. Library people are kind and courageous defenders and explorers. There are challenges in any job and profession, and the librarians I know are really great at working together to find solutions. Thinking of local and national challenges leads me to wonder what changes you've seen in academic libraries and to the library profession over your career?

MG: Three decades is a long time in any field, and I feel like the profession has been saying it's in transition the entire time I've been in it. The card catalog was still in the library during my first year of college, and five years later (when I started at the science library) our big excitement was the addition of four terminals with the Mosaic web browser. One of my regular tasks was loading the latest CD-ROM into the tower to update our Silver Platter databases when I wasn't fighting with the dot matrix printers.

Fast forward to the present: last month we withdrew all of our government document CD-ROMs because they weren't being used and, more importantly, we haven't had optical drives in our public computers for a few years (but I'm still battling printers—some things never change). At the same time, I've heard about the death of print since I started working in libraries, but students and faculty alike will almost always prefer the print book over the ebook if they're given an option in the library (unless they're in their room or office—then they want the ebook).

As librarians, we say that we've gone from gatekeepers to facilitators, though we're still hung up on using systems that are arcane to the general public. Wikipedia has gone from

being the root of all evil to a (mostly) trusted source, and now generative AI is the next subject of the perennial “useful tool or existential threat” debate that has defined my time in librarianship. The necessary skill set for librarians has also changed, though in typical librarian fashion we add new expectations while not letting go of the obligation to maintain legacy formats and services. One thing that hasn’t changed is that we’re still wrestling with the essential whiteness of the field, though I remain optimistic that we can move the needle on having a more representative profession in the years ahead.

Rebecca, I’ve been talking about the past and present of librarianship. To finish up our conversation, what are you excited to see in the future of the profession?

RF: Much has changed and much has remained the same! I definitely agree that many people prefer the print book over the ebook when it’s available and accessible. I think providing materials in all different formats for all different types of learners will continue to be important for our students and faculty and staff.

For the future of academic librarianship, I’m excited to see where the idea of “open”—open education, open access, open science—leads us. In a time when resources cost more and our budgets are remaining the same or shrinking, supporting open access should be how we’re moving forward. The best parts of open—free or low cost, inclusion, accessibility, customization, sharing of knowledge—all support our students, faculty, and staff in their learning, research, and publications. In my job, I support open education and open access and enjoy talking about the benefits of each with both students and faculty. I think we have come a long way with the ideas of open, but there’s so much growth potential there.

Thank you for engaging with me in this conversation; it’s been wonderful learning about your career and how the academic library profession has evolved during your time in librarianship. Looking forward to having this conversation someday from your end with someone like me!

MG: Thanks, Rebecca! It’s been great getting your perspective, which gives me hope for the future of the profession, and hope is what we need to make it through the tough spots. Next time, let’s talk about maps... ʘ