

Jamia Williams and Twanna Hodge

Reflecting on Our Careers and Transitions

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, this feature 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*

Jamia Williams (JW): I am an inquisitive person, especially when it comes to people's career paths, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to start the LibVoices podcast.¹ This is something I've been curious about, I would say, even before I joined our profession: Why do people choose it? How did we even get here? Why did you choose librarianship?

Twanna Hodge (TH): So, that's a great question. For me, I chose librarianship—though sometimes it felt like librarianship chose me—because I fell in love with books and reading and, living on an island that's 32 square miles, traveling is very expensive. So I traveled through books, getting to experience many different lifetimes and universes, fighting in battles, falling in love, and learning about the depth and breadth of what it means to exist.

And so I wanted to introduce people to the wonderful world of books. Having several mentors² and working in my undergrad library deepened my commitment to becoming a librarian. I knew that academic librarianship was for me after working at the Ralph M. Paiewonsky Library since my second semester in undergrad. I loved the energy, the excitement of innovative thinking, the creativity, and the opportunity to help people with their research.

Now I'm gonna toss it back to you, Jamia, and ask you: Why did you choose librarianship?

JW: That is a great question. It was a long road to librarianship for me. The idea occurred to me in my last year of undergraduate studies. I never considered it to be a career path because I didn't see anyone who looked like me in that role. I spent time in public libraries, school libraries, and, eventually, academic libraries when I got to college. However, because I didn't see anyone who resembled me as a librarian, it never crossed my mind to pursue that path.

Jamia Williams is a project manager for the University of Rochester Medical Center Department of Public Health Sciences, email: jamia_williams@URMC.rochester.edu. Twanna Hodge is a PhD candidate in the University of Maryland, College Park College of Information, email: tkhodge@umd.edu.

It was interesting that the thought crossed my mind in my senior year of undergrad. I think it happened because I saw the value of academic librarians, particularly at SUNY Brockport, where I observed how they connected our research interests to the resources available to us. I thought that was a cool thing to be a part of. As a history major, I often found myself looking up different things and searching for information. I thought it would be wonderful to be the person who introduces students to searching databases and finding the resources they need for their research projects or whatever they are curious about.

However, when I looked into what it took to become a librarian, I realized I had to put a pin in that idea. I needed to work after finishing school because I was financially independent and I didn't want to be a broke college student for two more years. I needed to earn money.

After years of working in the human services field, the thought of becoming a librarian kept coming up for me. I had the opportunity to shadow an archivist and a school librarian. Following both experiences, I knew that this was what I wanted to do. The rest is history, and I am glad that I finally came into the profession in a roundabout way. I know that my experiences have significantly informed how I show up and how I function as a librarian.

Then that leads me to the next question: Why did you stay in librarianship?³

TH: Librarianship is my first career. Librarianship is not perfect by any means. It's been a whirlwind of seven years as a practitioner in four different academic libraries. I will always consider myself a librarian. The field is affected by many legacy issues and is situated within systems of oppression.⁴ As a Black Caribbean academic librarian living in the United States for three years, I learned that as much as I loved librarianship, it couldn't love me back. I wasn't experiencing vocational awe⁵ anymore. The LIS profession needs us (BIPOC and systematically intentionally marginalized communities) but does not deserve us. I will always be grateful to all the people I've met and the experiences I've had. But in my last job, I realized that there was nowhere for me to go up or across. The COVID-19 pandemic⁶ and the heightened increase in anti-Black and anti-Asian racism led to my burning question and thus reignited my interest in pursuing a PhD in information studies.

I'm gonna pivot it back to you, Jamia. Why are you still in librarianship?

JW: You definitely touched on a lot of great points. I feel that one of the tenets of being a librarian is professional development, which speaks to me as a lifelong learner. I consider myself someone who is always eager to learn new things and, as you mentioned, unlearn many toxic ideas that keep people marginalized. This is one of the reasons why I have stayed in librarianship.

Another reason is my understanding of the importance of my role as a health sciences librarian in supporting different types of people. This role is amazing and definitely an adventure. I appreciate that every day is not the same; for someone like me, variety is very helpful. It keeps me from being bored and helps me stay intrigued and in tune with what is happening. One day I might be helping clinicians, another day I might assist students, and sometimes I help community members make informed choices about their health, especially regarding new diagnoses. Being part of these experiences is truly amazing.

Additionally, I have stayed in librarianship because of my peers. As you alluded to, we have amazing people in this profession. While some have left, many of us are still here, and I am grateful to have made friends out of my colleagues and peers. At one point I never thought

that would be my reality, but it has been a pleasant surprise. I have formed friendships that I would even describe as family. I consider a few people very close to me, and it's wonderful to have that community around to encourage one another and say, "You're doing amazing; keep it up."

We have been able to create many beautiful things because of this support, and it is rewarding to see each other succeed. In some instances, depending on where you work, you might not have that kind of support. Therefore, having a strong community among your peers is essential and vital. It is a beautiful thing to witness.

I know that many of us have transitioned in various ways. As you mentioned, you haven't left librarianship;⁷ you've transitioned into a PhD program. You mentioned briefly why you made that choice—as you aim to become an LIS faculty member to support those who aspire to enter this profession. Do you want to speak more about why you made that transition into your PhD program?

TW: Certainly. I'll be honest, my last job was as the diversity, equity, and inclusion librarian⁸ at the University of Florida Libraries. I was the first and, unfortunately, the last DEI librarian.⁹ That role was the catalyst for pursuing a PhD program. I held that role during a very tumultuous period from 2020 to 2022, when the K-12 and higher education sectors were facing heightened attacks on intersectionality, critical race theory,¹⁰ DEI, academic freedom, and more.

It's extremely challenging to live in a world where people around you deliberately refuse to educate themselves about the realities of this world and their roles and impacts in it. Librarianship is still more than 82% white in 2026.¹¹ I have several questions for those reading: How many librarians of color do you know? Then out of that number, how many of them are in formal leadership positions? Moreover, consider the number of those who have left the profession, and who is tracking that data? Would the institution you earned your MLIS from have that information if you asked them? Do you know how many people have left the field overall? Would they be able to answer that question? If you asked ODLOS (the Office of Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services) at ALA, would anyone be able to answer that question? If you asked any of the NCALOs, would they be able to answer the question?

I know people who have stayed. I know people who have been pushed out. People who left because of the trauma. I decided to pursue a PhD program because I could not envision myself in another librarian position. Becoming an LIS educator and mental health researcher are new dreams. I initially wanted to look at how Black students are retained in MLIS programs. After completing an independent study course on consumer health information behavior, I came across the concept of mental health literacy,¹² and a new research agenda blossomed.

I don't believe anyone should ever have to suffer or fight just to exist, which happens way too much in this field. I chose to stop being a practicing librarian rather than have anyone else make that choice for me. So that's why I applied to three PhD programs in 2021 and was admitted to two. I selected to start the PhD program in Information Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park,¹³ in fall 2022.

So to flip that question back to you, Jamia, what made you transition into your current role as a project manager?

JW: This current administration¹⁴ has raised significant concerns¹⁵ for me, particularly regarding the censoring of words¹⁶ like health equity, transgender, trauma, and women. Without action behind these words, their value diminishes. If we are told to erase these words from our mission and curricula, we cannot truly know if we are doing the necessary work or if our values are genuine.

I made my transition out of survival, uncertain about the future amidst many changes. As a Black millennial, I was told that obtaining a degree would lead to a good job, especially in government. However, many who once held those positions no longer do due to the failures of the current administration.

Despite this, I've always been interested in pursuing a doctorate degree, and my current role allows me to do important work in my community. I aim to conduct research that advances health equity. This position aligns with my future goals, enabling me to become a better leader and researcher while being more attuned to my community's needs.

While my transition felt like a survival move, I am grateful it has also allowed me to thrive in my interests. And while I am sure there will be other transitions in our careers, we can work towards and hope for a profession that enables meaningful transitions and does not needlessly force them in the future.

Thank you for sharing this topic with me, Twanna. Our stories matter, and everyone who reads this should know that we belong in librarianship and so many other people do too. ♪

Notes

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