

Rose Beranis and Justine Cotton

Wellness and Intentionality

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*

Rose Beranis (RB): Justine, when I was first finding my way in academic librarianship, I spent a lot of time searching for examples of what wellness could look like in a library setting. At the time, I wasn't just looking for theory or frameworks, I was looking for people who were actually doing the work. I remember scrolling through posts, conference programs, and professional profiles trying to find even a few examples of librarians who were thinking about student wellness in practical ways. Somewhere in that search, I came across you.

We connected through social media, and what struck me immediately was that we seemed to be asking many of the same questions about librarianship: What does it mean to support students as whole people? Where does wellness fit into academic work? And how can libraries create environments where students (and library workers) can actually thrive? What made the connection even more interesting is that while we share similar interests now, we arrived here through very different paths. So I want to start our conversation with a foundational question. We both talk about wellness in libraries quite a bit, but the word itself can mean very different things depending on the context. How do you define wellness in the context of academic libraries, and how did that definition start to take shape in your own work?

Justine Cotton (JC): We did meet in such a serendipitous way (thank you, Instagram!), and I'm so grateful that we connected about wellness. Wellness has always been a big part of my life, from joining group fitness classes in high school to eventually becoming a fitness/yoga instructor in my twenties. While I didn't officially refer to wellness in my academic librarian role until a few years ago, my approach to librarian work (teaching, consultations) has always had an element of well-being behind it.

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Your point about wellness meaning very different things rings true, and I believe that is often what complicates wellness initiatives in academic libraries. The term *wellness* can have a lot of baggage, so it's important to think about how we define it and the outcomes that we want to have when we build wellness into our library work.

I define wellness in academic libraries as providing students with the support to flourish—intellectually, emotionally, and physically. One of the quotes that I live by (and that hangs in my office) is from Carl W. Buehner and reads, “People may forget what you say. They may forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.”

In academic libraries, we have always worked to teach students to think critically, to explore the wealth of information that is available, and to ask questions. Wellness builds on this by offering students opportunities to connect with peers in a safe space, discover creative pursuits, and balance academic work with activities and tools to support their emotional and physical health.

Rose, I would love to hear how you define wellness. Could you also share some challenges and successes that you have had incorporating wellness in your library work?

RB: I really appreciate how you framed wellness as helping students flourish, and the idea that how students feel matters as much as what they learn really resonates with me. For me, wellness isn't just a program or an event; it's embedded in everything we do and touches multiple dimensions of life: emotional, social, intellectual, physical, occupational, environmental, financial, and spiritual. Wellness is about helping students find their own balance across these areas, recognizing that each person's path looks different. At the same time, it can be difficult to define and even harder to measure in academic libraries, which makes this work both challenging and necessary. The bigger challenge, I think, is not just integrating wellness into a single instruction session, event, or consultation but also helping it feel present, accessible, and part of daily life for everyone in the library.

Some of the work I've been part of reflects that in tangible ways. For several years, our library team created a *Color Our Collection* coloring book. Designed using materials from our collections and Trinity's archives, it gives students a way to pause, reset, and engage creatively. Programs like Snacks and Support bring together campus resources and, more importantly, foster connections between students and the supports they need. Even tools like an academic wellness tracker aren't about “fixing” anything but rather helping students see patterns in workload, stress, and confidence so they can make choices that support their own balance. Making wellness tangible and integrated across the library feels like the most meaningful work I can do.

Justine, I'd love to hear your approach. How do you keep wellness woven throughout your instruction, consultations, and library spaces so it feels authentic and continuous? And thinking more broadly about why we do this work, what keeps you invested in librarianship even during times of change or challenge?

JC: It really is meaningful work, and I love hearing your examples! Wellness programming can happen in so many different ways and involve many campus partners. I'm lucky to have colleagues who are also interested in wellness, and we have programs and collections supporting students in this way (e.g., board games to borrow).

We know that students are increasingly lonely and feeling disconnected. When I work with students in the classroom or one on one, I try to establish a connection from the very

beginning of the experience. It might be as simple as making eye contact and smiling with a student in a large class or sharing a funny story about my own morning. Having a teenage daughter has helped in making me more aware of the crazy trends on social media, which can be a fun way to approach information literacy.

As teaching librarians, I think we all have those days when the work we do can feel overwhelming and misunderstood within the university. Just as you mentioned, focusing on wellness and working to create opportunities to help students flourish has been the most meaningful work I have done as a librarian. Each term, I host a book club for students, and their positive feedback keeps me going on my most difficult days, and I'm still in touch with many of these students, even five years later!

On the topic of difficult days in librarianship, have you ever experienced burnout or observed it in your colleagues? How do you ensure your own wellness during stressful times?

RB: Justine, that question about burnout really hits. I think for a long time I didn't have the language for it, but I've started to recognize what it feels like in my own work. There is this sense of always moving at full speed, juggling shifting priorities, and not always taking the time to enjoy the work as it's happening. I recently heard someone describe it as living in a state of "joyless urgency,"¹ and that stuck with me. There's also this tendency I've noticed in myself to say *yes* often, wanting to be helpful and engaged, while also feeling a responsibility to carry things forward independently. Over time, I've realized that approach isn't always sustainable—and that it doesn't have to be.

What I'm starting to learn (still in progress) is that sustainability in this work has to be intentional. For me, that looks like asking for help and recognizing colleagues as a support system rather than something to measure myself against. It also means being more thoughtful about what I can take on and how I prioritize the things I've committed to. Finally, and maybe most importantly, it's about slowing down enough to actually notice the parts of the work that feel meaningful. Because despite the challenges, I do love this work. I love the people I work with, and I believe in the impact we can have, even in small ways. That's what keeps me here and what makes me want to keep figuring out how to do this work in a way that feels sustainable over time.

Justine, how has your experience with burnout shaped the way you see your future in librarianship?

JC: Rose, you have perfectly described how burnout feels for me with that quote about "joyless urgency." There is a delicate balance between feeling actively engaged with projects and completely worn down (and even resentful) from taking on too much. There isn't much joy in work when you feel your work isn't making a difference or when you feel taken advantage of.

Like you, I'm learning to be intentional about the sustainability of the ideas and projects I take on. Energy and time are not unlimited, and we haven't even touched on our busy lives outside of work. Fewer but more meaningful things is my personal goal for the next few years at work and in life.

To end on a happy note, I would love to share one of the most meaningful moments I've had as a librarian, and I'd love to hear yours too. There are times when my student book club feels like a ton of work for very little impact. Last year, two things happened to make

me commit even deeper to it. First, I had a student write that it was the “highlight of her month” in her feedback. Then I lost my dad suddenly in December and was touched to receive the kindest messages from some girls who had been in the book club more than four years before. It made me feel that, yes, this made a difference in their lives.

Rose, can you share one of the most meaningful moments you’ve had as a librarian?

RB: It’s true, we haven’t even touched on how our personal lives shape our work, just as students’ lives shape their academic experiences. We carry our families, our obligations, and the challenges life throws at us. Sometimes those challenges are deeply personal, as you shared about your father’s passing. In those moments, we have to decide to pick ourselves up and return to work. Not just because it’s expected but also because we care about ourselves and about the community we support.

The experiences that keep me coming back are the ones that remind me why this work matters. Watching students connect with resources, discover connections, and support one another (sometimes for the first time) is profound. Seeing faculty recognize the impact of library instruction or hearing from a student who leaves a consultation with renewed confidence and clarity about an assignment—these are the experiences that affirm our purpose. They may feel small in the moment, but they ripple outward, shaping learning, growth, and collaboration in ways we can’t always measure.

When the work is tough, these instances make this work meaningful. They remind me that showing up, thoughtfully and intentionally, is worth it. That’s why I stay in this field and why I continue to explore how we can sustain ourselves and our students in ways that are meaningful, human, and lasting. //

Note

1. Robinson, M. *The Givenness of Things: Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.