

Tia Phillip, Caitlin Perkins, and Daniel Burnett

From the Classroom to the Field

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*

Daniel Burnett (DB): Caitlin and Tia, as we are all current MLIS students, I think we can offer an interesting perspective on this series' overarching question of why we chose librarianship. Personally, my path to librarianship, archives, and an MLIS was not a traditional path, nor did I understand the importance of an MLIS degree or information science career. I chose to enter the LIS field after completing a consulting project for a nonprofit in Uganda during my graduate studies at Georgetown University. As part of that project, I helped train a natural language processing (NLP) model to identify grant opportunities. This sparked my interest in information, so I applied and was accepted to the Louisiana State University MLIS online program. Before beginning my program, I volunteered on projects involving nonprofit collections, botanical records, and Indigenous genealogical research. After beginning my coursework, I explored both archives and records management. While ultimately my MLIS concentration and graduate certificate are in archives, I implement records and information management principles in my work.

This is an important field to enter because information extends far beyond public perception. Archivists and information professionals work in preservation, conservation, disaster planning, genealogy, digital collections, restoration, consulting, and many other specialized areas. Although public institutions face political and financial challenges, there remains a growing need for information professionals in private organizations, nonprofits, businesses, cultural institutions, and communities.

Caitlin, why did you choose librarianship, and why now? Why do you think librarianship is still important, especially during this political climate?

Caitlin Perkins (CP): Thanks for starting us off, Daniel. Like you and many other librarians that I've heard from, I found my way into librarianship somewhat by accident. I have

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a research background in art history and previously worked in art museums doing museum education. In 2017, I had two part-time jobs on the same campus, one in the art museum and one in the library. I eventually shifted into full-time work at the library and decided pretty quickly to go back to graduate school for an MLIS. My prior experience completing a research-based art history MA has helped me understand patron needs at an academic library, and my background in patron engagement at museums maps well to public services librarianship.

I know we all regularly hear comments that question the continued relevance of libraries, so I agree with you that this is an interesting perspective that the three of us can bring to the conversation as current library school students.

TL;DR: Yes, we still need libraries!

The aspect of librarianship that I'm most passionate about is facilitating access to information, and I think this, along with information literacy, is especially crucial in today's information landscape. Knowing how to find and access information and then determine the accuracy or validity of that information is not something we inherently know how to do; it has to be learned. And librarians are the folks who are trained to teach that skill and guide people to the information they seek.

How about you, Tia? Why are you choosing to enter this field at this time?

Tia Phillip (TP): Thank you both for sharing your reasons for getting into librarianship. It sounds like we're all approaching this path from different angles, which is really exciting. For me, librarianship has been percolating in the back of my mind since I was a wee high school student volunteering at my local library. At first, I was doing it just to get the community service hours on my résumé to stand out on college applications, but when I started working at my college's library, the profession became clear. I took a minor detour into screenwriting, which is still a passion of mine, but I have returned to Library Land feeling now more than ever how vital information literacy and accessibility have to be.

I am choosing to enter the field at this time because I believe libraries, and what they stand for, are foundational pillars of a functioning democratic society. Not to get too "vocational awe"¹ about things (RIP Fobazi Ettarh), but as a soon-to-be librarian, I do feel a sense of responsibility to protect and advocate for knowledge acquisition, expansion, and epistemic justice.

Looking at the present and considering that all three of us are fledgling librarians, I'm curious—Daniel, how is LSU preparing you for the future of librarianship?

DB: Both of your journeys are amazing. To answer your question, LSU has prepared me for the future of librarianship by teaching me that the profession is inherently interdisciplinary. Modern librarians, archivists, and information professionals do much more than manage collections; they must also understand digital records, project management, preservation, community engagement, genealogy, outreach, and budgeting. Through my coursework and professional experiences, I have learned that success in the library and information science field often requires drawing upon knowledge and skills from many different disciplines.

One of the most valuable lessons I have gained at LSU is the importance of thinking beyond traditional boundaries. Whether working with digital records, preservation planning,

archival description, metadata, or community-based projects, I have found that information professionals frequently collaborate with individuals from fields such as information technology, law, business, education, history, and public administration. LSU has encouraged me to approach problems from multiple perspectives and to remain adaptable as the profession continues to evolve. As libraries and archives face new challenges related to technology, digital preservation, artificial intelligence (AI), and access to information, I believe the future of librarianship will require professionals who are flexible, curious, and willing to learn continuously.

So Caitlin, how is your MLIS program preparing you for the future of librarianship?

CP: That's a great point, Daniel. Librarians can end up working with or helping patrons in any discipline. I have been trying to cast a wide net with my course selection in my program to get a large variety of experiences and exposure to all these different areas of the LIS field. My program offers a lot of flexibility in this sense, with an impressive array of course offerings on rotation. I am in the online program and take classes part-time while I simultaneously work and parent. One of the best tips that my advisor recommended is that I try to add a one-credit class to each semester on top of the standard three-credit class, which has allowed me to dive into specific topics like grant writing, budgeting, special collections, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA.)

Something that I think UW–Madison excels at is having a faculty that is incredibly current in the LIS research. The program feels deeply relevant to the moment, and we are reading about and discussing the latest concerns, trends, and innovations in libraries, archives, and museums. This is crucial for LIS programs right now. We know how fast the information landscape shifts, and as up-and-coming librarians, we need to be prepared to enter the profession with the most-relevant knowledge and be ready to be innovators in the field.

I love that we can share perspectives from three different LIS programs where we are all at different stages in our degrees. Tia, how is San Jose State University preparing you to be a librarian in this day and age?

TP: You both have given me a lot to think about, so I must thank you for sharing. The adaptability and flexibility you mentioned, Daniel, is something that San Jose State University (SJSU) also encourages with its variety of pathways; and the present-day relevance that Caitlin pointed out is another component of SJSU's core curriculum. What I imagine is useful in each of our programs and what I find SJSU doing quite well is establishing a foundation of collaboration and teamwork. I am only a quarter of the way through my degree, but more than half of my classes have focused on group projects. While teamwork will be an applicable skill in nearly any profession, I believe librarianship requires an even more collaborative spirit as librarians are tasked with wearing a dozen hats at a time and tackling any number of projects at once. We serve the needs of our communities, and as our communities shift and change, so must our services and resources. These group projects are community-based learning opportunities that are pushing me to develop even stronger community-building skills at my current academic library job.

Now that we know how we're all being prepared in school, Daniel, what are some of the barriers and challenges you see for entering the field at this time?

DB: Well, living in Los Angeles, one of the greatest barriers I see to entering the library and archives profession is that the number of available positions is often outweighed by the number of qualified MLIS applicants, both nationally and internationally. In addition, many recent graduates are competing for entry-level positions with experienced professionals who are also applying for those same roles. Although this creates a highly competitive job market, one piece of advice that has stayed with me came from my Society of American Archivists (SAA) mentor: Apply for opportunities even if you do not meet every qualification because you never know which institution is willing to take a chance on you. That encouragement has motivated me to keep applying and growing professionally.

Caitlin, what barriers and challenges do you see to entering the library and information science profession at this time?

CP: Excellent advice, Daniel. And I completely agree—the availability of positions is probably the thing that I am most concerned about. This is particularly challenging for folks who, like me, are geographically bound for one reason or another and aren't able to apply for jobs outside their surrounding area. The other challenges that come to mind are the things that I know everyone is already talking about in their own libraries: how the rise of generative AI is changing patrons' information-seeking behaviors and the unrelenting budgetary headwinds in institutions of higher education. For these, I have no helpful advice except to remember that people will need librarians no matter how the landscape changes, so we will adapt to meet new information literacy opportunities as they arise.

What about you, Tia? What challenges in the LIS field do you see as a librarian-in-training? And if I can throw you a curveball in an attempt to send us out on a high note, is there anything about entering the field at this time that makes you feel hopeful?

TP: I like what your mentor shared, Daniel. And Caitlin, your point about generative AI is really important. What you both touched on—the seemingly ever-shrinking pool of opportunities and the financial limitations of this particular field—are absolutely things I worry about as well. To be honest, one of the challenges I foresee taking its toll on me—personally and professionally—is burnout. I give a lot of myself to this work because I am so deeply passionate about information literacy and accessibility, yet I know that it is an unsustainable practice. Thankfully, I am learning to fill my cup in other ways outside of work—going to karaoke, spending time with friends and family, learning new languages—and that is definitely helping me stave off that dreaded burnout.

That's an awesome final question, Caitlin, and I would be happy to answer it. My hope for entering the field at this time is that it feels like institutions are more open to experimentation and exploration than they have been in years past. It seems that there are opportunities to create the library ecosystems we want to work in—and that excites me and is one of the reasons I am choosing librarianship. ♪

Note

1. Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.