Julie Adamo and Caro Pinto

Finding Your Anchors

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*

Caro Pinto (CP): Julie, hearing you talk about stay interviews got me thinking that this conversation is itself a kind of stay interview—about why each of us stays in this profession. We both know people who are contemplating an exit from librarianship or who've already left. Those reasons are valid: pay, workplace abuse, truncated opportunities for growth, compassion fatigue. But I'm more interested in why librarians choose to *stay*—especially now, when the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the current attacks on higher education are triggering a fresh round of handwringing about the profession's future.

Julie, why do you stay?

Julie Adamo (JA): I love how you connected our conversation about stay interviews to this article, Caro. The factors that initially drew me to the profession, such as collecting and preserving information and making it accessible, continue to inspire me. Additionally, at this point in my career, a major anchor in staying for me is a desire to help create the conditions that make it possible, and desirable, for other librarians and library workers to stay. There are no libraries without library workers, and I've come to understand that low morale and retention are deeply connected.[1]

Disabled and neurodivergent people remain underrepresented in management, and our strengths and offerings continue to be underutilized. We also end up as canaries in the coal mine because we are sometimes more readily impacted by unhealthy working conditions (though ultimately everyone is impacted).[2] Along with other underrepresented groups, we experience higher rates of low morale experiences and negative workplace acts.[3] This all makes it harder for us to stay. I want to help change these dynamics.

Julie Adamo is director of collections strategies and acquisitions at Middlebury College, email: jadamo@middlebury.edu. Caro Pinto is humanities and social sciences librarian at Middlebury College, email: cpinto@middlebury.edu.

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I've had moments, especially earlier in my career, where I've thought about pivoting away from a traditional academic librarian role, prompted by low morale experiences and long periods of unrelenting stress and burnout. I no longer have rose-colored glasses about our profession, even though I still genuinely love it and know this is where I belong. The magic of libraries themselves has never faded for me. Every time I've explored alternate professions, I've never found anything that superseded my investment in this field, and I'm not convinced that the challenges we face in libraries aren't also present in other fields.

I think it serves us well to remember that, even as many of us are drawn to this work because we want to contribute to the greater good, myself included, library organizations are workplaces at the same time as libraries themselves are sites of exploration, research, creativity, and wonder.[4] We can inspire library workers to stay by creating the best possible working conditions. In turn, those library workers can provide the best possible support, services, and resources to our faculty, students, and communities.

What about you, Caro? Why do you stay, and have you ever thought about leaving?

CP: I've had my moments of thinking about leaving—low-morale stretches, burnout—but I stay because of the relationships I've cultivated, both in my various workplaces and in the profession more broadly, Julie. My work with students, especially over the past thirteen years at two liberal arts colleges, has pushed me to think harder about inclusion, positionality, and my own identities. I've learned a lot about myself through that work in ways I didn't expect. I enjoy the day-to-day: teaching, seeing the world through students' eyes, the camaraderie with faculty collaborators. I'm an indoor cat at heart—I love working in a climate-controlled building with quiet spaces for contemplation, surrounded by books, immersed in the scholarly conversations they hold, finding new ways to make books and book culture come alive for students. Above all, if I hadn't stayed in librarianship, I wouldn't have met so many wonderful people—including you.

JA: That is very true for me too. The library field is full of truly interesting people from all over the country and all over the world. I love sharing space with the library community and learning from and with other library workers, students, and faculty, including you. This connects to a question we both loved from the ACRL stay interview guide: "What do you look forward to at work each day?"[5] Caro, what do you look forward to each day?

CP: Every day, Julie, I look forward to being surprised—learning something new or new to me, having my perspective shifted by something I've read or by a conversation with a student or faculty member. You never know what you're going to learn or how your thinking might change. Those moments add up over fifteen-plus years to me being a more expansive thinker and person.

In the bigger picture, I look forward to the ways our profession can support students and faculty in navigating an increasingly complex information ecosystem complicated by AI. I want to keep having explicit conversations about the power structures driving those developments, both good and bad. We librarians have a critical role to play as stewards of cultural heritage and information more broadly. We must forge partnerships and alliances to tackle these challenges collectively. Closer to home, I've also noticed a number of faculty are drawn back toward the analog, and I am enjoying rooting more of my teaching in physical books,

zines, among other strategies, as a way to resist the AI-ification of education and to nourish students' spirits and minds as they cultivate their critical thinking skills.

How about you, Julie?

JA: That resonates with me a lot. Looking back on the many years I've been working in libraries, there have been so many evolutions in the tools we use, the work we do, and how we talk about our work. Issues that used to go unmentioned are now prominent conversations. I find that fascinating and encouraging. To do this job well, I have to stay plugged into librarianship, into higher education, and into everything happening in the wider world that touches these fields—which means constantly learning, growing, and being in conversation with all kinds of people, and I love that.

I'm especially grateful for the communities of practice I've found through the Boston Library Consortium, the Oberlin Group, and ACRL. I love being in spaces where people bring questions they're grappling with and the community offers up its collective expertise and comes together to solve problems.

Getting back to what you were saying about AI, Caro, you and I have already lived through one or two historical moments when people thought libraries were finished. I remember when some people thought Wikipedia, or the Internet itself, would end libraries. It's clear that didn't happen. If anything, libraries grow more important with each of these moments when the information landscape becomes more complex.

Caro, we talked about what keeps us in librarianship; what do you think people need in order to stay?

CP: Material things matter—competitive salary, benefits, retirement—but people also need to see themselves reflected in the organization, to know their work is valued and visible. That doesn't necessarily require grand gestures. It requires a manager, colleague, or administrator who can say, plainly, "I see your work, and I see you." When the work that people do feels invisible, or disposable, staying can feel Sisyphean.

JA: I agree, Caro. I also think that when people are working really hard every day and veering into or already in burnout, it's easy for them to start feeling more removed from the greater meaning of the work. That can be another inflection point for people to consider leaving a position or the profession, and concrete recognition of their contributions along with genuine care for their well-being from managers and administrators can make a huge difference. I also think that people need sustainable workloads in order to stay.

In the aftermath of the Great Resignation, administrators sometimes focus on identifying individuals who might be "flight risks" for specific, outwardly observable reasons—for example, they have skills that are better compensated in other industries or they lack family ties to a location. With this approach, you can end up unintentionally overlooking others who are equally valuable and just as much of a flight risk but whose circumstances haven't raised alarms. People with low morale, for example, may also want to leave. As the saying goes, high tides raise all boats, and in my opinion, the work of making it worthwhile for people to stay is best applied across the board.

CP: I also think people need trusted relationships to stay. We all need sounding boards we can be honest with, about both day-to-day frustrations and bigger questions alike. Sometimes that trusted person can reflect a lot back to you about your strengths and contributions too.

JA: I'm so glad you said that, Caro. I think about how much it has meant to have you reflect back to me the contributions I've made at work, especially now that we've worked in two different libraries together. Many of us, including me, find it hard to see our own strengths and accomplishments clearly. You've been a mirror—showing me the positive impacts I've had, even when they weren't formally seen or recognized. I think everyone needs that: someone outside themselves who can reflect back their gifts and provide a safe space to be heard and work through problems without fear of judgment or retaliation. Being friends, spouses, colleagues, and intellectual partners is exactly what lets us provide that for each other—and I wish that anchor for everyone in this field because I know it can be genuinely hard to find.

CP: Thank you for helping me stay, Julie.

JA: Thank you for helping me stay, Caro.

Notes

1. Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 57, no. 8 (2017): 846–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325; Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "Leaving the Low-Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study," *Alki* 37, no. 2 (2021): 9–24.

2. Ludmila N. Praslova, *The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2024).

3. For example, see Joanne Oud, "Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Librarians with Disabilities," *College & Research Libraries* 80, no. 2 (2019):169-194, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.2.169; Rachael Anne Cohen et al., "Autistic Librarians in the Academic Library Hiring Process," *College & Research Libraries* 86, no. 5 (2025): 705, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.86.5.705; Kaetrena Davis Kendrick and Ione T. Damasco, "Low Morale in Ethnic and Racial Minority Academic Librarians: An Experiential Study," *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 174–212, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0036.

4. 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/.

5. Erin Nevius, "LibGuides: ACRL Library Worker Retention Toolkit: Guide," accessed September 7, 2026, https://acrl.libguides.com/c.php?g=1321674&p=9723675. It is also worth noting that not all staying is a net positive for an individual or an organization. See Samantha Guss, Sojourna Cunningham, and Jennifer Stout, "Not All Staying Is the Same: Unpacking Retention and Turnover in Academic Libraries," In the Library with the Lead Pipe, 2024, https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2024/not-all-staying/.