

11-21-2018

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Recommended Citation

Gaida, J. (2018). Overcoming Isolation as a Form of Leadership. *OLA Quarterly*, 24(2), 19-21.
<https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1942>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Overcoming Isolation as a Form of Leadership

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Working in the technical services department of a small academic library is a bit of an isolation double-whammy: not only are you more removed from the patrons you serve than are your public-facing counterparts, you may also be a department of one and solely responsible for discharging a highly specialized set of duties. This has been the case for me since 2015 when I moved to Oregon after accepting the position of Acquisitions Specialist at Pacific University, a small, private, liberal arts college in Forest Grove. I am primarily responsible for tracking the library's resource funds; overseeing the ordering, receiving, and invoicing process for all newly acquired materials; and aiming for the ever-moving target that is continuations budgeting.

Prior to this position, I had mainly worked for larger institutions with more staff members who had the same or overlapping responsibilities. Over the past few years at Pacific, I have had to train myself in conquering the inherent isolation associated with my work. I've found that this has brought out leadership qualities I did not know I possessed, and I have identified a few ways in which I have been able to harness and hone these newfound skills.

Before starting in this role, I would have said that working independently was one of the benefits of a role in a small technical services department; because I am a relatively shy, introverted individual, the idea of being able to help and serve my community from afar is absolutely part of the appeal of acquisitions. However, I began to realize that it's harder to stay grounded in the "why" of librarianship if you are a few steps removed from your patrons. I needed to find a way to elevate and add purpose to my day-to-day work. I achieved this by re-examining and envisioning who my library community is more expansively and inclusively, cultivating and embracing my own areas of expertise, and grounding myself in my own personal and professional values.

An important realization for any early-career librarian to have is that a library's community is larger than just its patron base. I began the process of redefining what serving my community could mean by reaching outside of my immediate institutional network and engaging with my peers at the consortial level. The Orbis Cascade Alliance—the first library consortium of which I have been a part—seemed like a logical and manageable first step into widening my network. After attending and making a few connections at the 2015





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Alliance Summer Meeting, I volunteered to serve on two Alliance working groups. This was a large step for me, especially because I was quite new to my position and the Alliance, and therefore not very familiar with the issue we were tasked with tackling. Nevertheless, at the following Alliance Summer Meeting, I was presenting on behalf of our group to the rest of our peers on procedures for loading records into our shared catalog, a process I knew virtually nothing about just a year before.

Shortly after this, I found myself responding more to listserv questions related to acquisitions. The Orbis Cascade Alliance was the first consortium to adopt Ex Libris' new flagship product, Alma, as its shared ILS starting in 2013. Not only does Alma have a bit of a learning curve, but Ex Libris' software developers continue to build it beneath us as we use it, which can throw a wrench into established workflows with each monthly update. Having been introduced to acquisitions at my previous institution—also an early adopter of Alma—I happened to come into librarianship in time to learn everything I know about acquisitions within this up-and-coming, cloud-based ILS. As more academic libraries migrated to Alma and as I moved to the Alliance's shared Alma environment from my previous institution's independent one, I was uniquely positioned to help my fellow acquisitions librarians as their institutions migrated to Alma. I felt as though having experience with two very different acquisitions configurations within a unique ILS relatively early in the game afforded me a perspective few others had at the time.

The combination of being an Alma acquisitions native and seizing the opportunities provided by the Alliance to increase my knowledge through collaboration with my colleagues coalesced into a spike in professional confidence. This in turn led to an increase in my engagement with my fellow acquisitions librarians, and I came to realize that leadership opportunities can lie within one's areas of expertise. Although I don't consider myself an expert in anything, through my interactions with my peers I've inadvertently perpetuated a positive feedback loop whereby offering solutions or training to others begets confidence, which then inspires me to reach out in support more often.

One of the more vibrant memories I have of this phenomenon started when I was asked by my supervisor to accompany her to help train a new member library of the Alliance, Clackamas Community College, in Alma acquisitions just prior to their go-live date. Up until this point, the vast majority of my correspondence with fellow acquisitions librarians had been confined to off-list replies to questions posed on listservs. Being face-to-face with my colleagues to answer questions in real time and guide them through the processes without having to rely on e-mails and screenshots was a turning point for me. There is a great deal of value in making human connections, and this is what I had been missing with my position's inherent distance from my more traditional patron base.

My experience with my colleagues at Clackamas Community College cemented my enthusiasm for this kind of "meta-librarianship;" as I continue to establish my career, my past successes with being a useful resource for my fellow librarians will continue to fuel my passion for supporting them. In fact, at the time of this writing, I have invited a new-to-acquisitions librarian to come spend a day with me at Pacific's Tim and Cathy Tran Library so I can guide her through her transition, impart what she needs to know to be successful, and offer her the support she needs as she shoulders an entirely new set of responsibilities single-handedly—a feeling with which I am familiar and can empathize.





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Librarianship is a highly service-oriented profession, and both my professional and personal values center around this axiom. Although my position exists to serve and support the patrons of the Pacific University Libraries, I've found some of my most fulfilling work to be serving and supporting my peers. I derive a lot of satisfaction from being a resource people can turn to, but I also don't put an inordinate amount of pressure on myself to know everything. Maintaining a network of reliable contacts for areas in which you are not an expert is vital; my customer service background has taught me that if you are helping someone and don't know the answer to their question, it is your responsibility to find and direct them to someone who does. Just as I endeavor to be a good steward of my library's resources, I also place a high value on sharing what I have learned to help lift up those around me so that we may all be successful.

My advice to librarians of all stripes, but particularly those in positions that have the potential to be isolating, would first be to redefine and find creative ways to get involved with the community you serve. Sign up for working groups and committees, even if you aren't sure whether you belong; although you may not contribute much the first time, you'll be more knowledgeable and prepared for the next opportunity. Then, as you become more confident in your knowledge and abilities, seek out and seize opportunities to use what you know to help both your patrons and your colleagues. Finally, endeavor to make what you do on a day-to-day basis align with your notion of what librarianship ought to be. There is space for all of us to contribute to our profession and grow our leadership abilities.

If I could distill all my thoughts on harnessing one's leadership potential in whatever space you occupy within the diverse arena of librarianship, it would ultimately come down to this: Isolation and imposter-syndrome can work together to become a very real confidence-wrecking force. Although it may be unconventional, when in doubt just follow this classic piece of advice: fake it 'til you make it. And maybe you'll find that you were never faking it after all. 🐘

