Life cycle of a librarian’s year

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Abstract:

Almost every librarian’s work life is driven by some type of annual cycle. College and university libraries are tied to the academic calendar and public libraries are often tied to the school day and year. Special libraries are also subject to their own ebbs and flows. Knowing when to anticipate busy cycles and understanding how to manage your time to accommodate these cycles can make you more efficient. It can also ease your level of stress when things are at their busiest. This chapter addresses the cyclical nature of a librarian’s work year and offers suggestions on how to make those cycles work for you.

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Article:

WHERE DOES THE TIME GO?

My biggest challenge when I started my first librarian position was not the transition from student to professional or even the move across the country. My greatest challenge those first few months was gaining an understanding of the patterns and rhythms of my new position. I was a brand-new librarian in a brand-new position. I had no idea how to plan for the year ahead. Fortunately, I had an excellent supervisor and great colleagues who helped me shape my first year in a way that gave me solid footing for subsequent years. However, I have never forgotten how lost I felt when I began.

The more time you spend in your position, the more comfortable you are likely to become with the ebbs and flows in your workload. It takes time to identify the changes in your workload. Often there are not dramatic shifts, but instead one type of work phases into another type. For instance, after the teaching crunch at the beginning of every semester, classes taper off, and you may find yourself easing into the next phase of collection development. Often, you won’t have a true sense of patterns in your workload until you have been in your position for a full year or more. In academic settings (K–12 and higher education), patterns are usually linked to the academic calendar. However, even that can change drastically if your institution is undergoing accreditation or undertaking some other major initiative. Public librarians, on the other hand, may find their workload change is seasonal. These are broad generalizations, and your
experience will vary depending on your workplace, position, and personal work style. In any position, there are ways to identify and effectively respond to annual workload patterns.

Knowing how you spend your time is a critical first step to identifying workload patterns. Time studies, while sometimes tedious, can be useful exercises to help you document your time and eventually evaluate changes in your personal workload. Time studies, including time logs, help people identify how long they devote to specific tasks and responsibilities. They are also effective ways to detect avoidable interruptions and time wasters. You may discover that your workload is not overwhelming, but that you need to adopt some different strategies for managing your time. Isolating those periods when you are not productive is the first step to correcting the problem.

Typically, time studies are short term, taking place over the course of a week or two, or at random points in a given period. The library literature is filled with studies that make use of this traditional productivity exercise to document and explore the nature of librarians’ work. An understanding of some of these studies may help you when starting a new job. Even though the focus of this chapter is a view over the long term—which can’t be determined by tracking time for a week or a few representative days—tracking your time on a smaller scale is an important first step. Unless your supervisor or administration requires time analysis, it is a personal exercise, and its success depends on finding the method most useful and comfortable for you.

### Time Analysis Studies

Ferguson and Taylor\(^1\) asked seventeen academic librarians to provide detailed accounts of their time on five randomly selected workdays in a six-week period in order to analyze and classify their various work activities. Hitchingham\(^2\) put together a snapshot of the work being done by librarians at her institution by collecting and analyzing time logs her colleagues completed.

Brown\(^3\) kept a daily time log for seven years, tracking each activity and noting the amount of time each took. She originally intended the study to help her organize and manage her time as she worked toward tenure, but she found that her logs also allowed her to track time allocation changes over the years. Most important for our purposes, she notes, “This information allows me to take on responsibilities with a fairly accurate idea of the impact on time allocation, and to attempt to maintain a balance amongst all the responsibilities of the position” (p. 65).

A method that has been effective for me has been to keep a continuous calendar document titled “What I did today.” I try to update it daily, adding brief notes about what I accomplished that day with simple notations like “ENG 101 instruction session, search committee meeting, reference desk shift.” This low level of detail works for me, as I tend to forget to record my time in small increments, making traditional time tracking a frustrating and ultimately fruitless endeavor. Over several months, I have been able to pull out patterns in my workload. These patterns have been critical to me for planning and scheduling. For instance, in September and October, I may teach fifteen library instruction sessions in a week. That leaves me little time to take on additional projects. If a writing or service opportunity arises that will require substantial work during those months, I know I must defer the opportunity or turn it down altogether if it has a set timeline. While it is sometimes disappointing to have to reject opportunities, it is far better to be realistic about what can be accomplished than to accept an obligation I cannot fulfill.

Again, keeping track of your time and your tasks is an individual process. If a method like mine isn’t thorough enough to work for you, try a more detailed time log. There are many examples available. At the time of this writing, a Google search for “time log” brings back approximately 1.8 trillion hits. You can download spreadsheets and printable PDFs, find online document templates, or check out web-based time-tracking tools. Low-tech paper calendars can be just as effective for tracking your time in small increments, but they can be more difficult to analyze for patterns over time. Whatever method you choose, be sure that it is sustainable. Otherwise, teasing out these patterns in your workload will be nearly impossible, and you will simply have a collection of papers that hold little value for you.

**IDENTIFYING PATTERNS**

While no two librarians’ workload cycles are alike, patterns tend to emerge among professionals in similar settings and with similar positions. This section explores the patterns that may emerge as you look at how you spend your time. Along with tasks that are clearly work related, be aware of the nonessential tasks you are performing.

**Academic Librarians**

As I mentioned earlier, academic librarians (for our purposes, librarians who work in institutions of higher education) often notice patterns that are closely related to the academic cycle. In my current position as an instruction librarian with reference and departmental liaison responsibilities, I find that I am busiest early in the semester and midsemester. My heaviest teaching loads occur in September and October, with February and March coming in a close second. Other instruction librarian colleagues notice similar patterns. If you are an academic librarian with a primarily public service role, it pays to get to know the patterns at your particular institution. Some professors don’t bring their students over early in the semester but much later. This can significantly shift your work pattern.

While it is good to have an understanding of the work patterns at your institution, noting your personal workload changes is the best way to identify trends and patterns over time. When you are new in a position or library, ask colleagues who have been around for a few years if they have noticed trends in their workload. Depending on your institution, you may find that public
service librarians are busiest with reference work during the first several weeks of the semester when there are a lot of directional and printing questions from students new to the campus. Library instructional teaching loads will also increase. Another busy time can be around the midpoint of the semester, as students prepare for midterm papers and exams. The final weeks of the semester might also be a peak time for similar reasons. A colleague at my library recently noticed a surge in class and individual research consultation requests somewhere between the middle and end of the semester. She learned that this was becoming a “second midterm” cycle for her departments.

Your workload may also be affected if you have promoted your services or if you have done a lot of outreach to your liaison departments. This may create an increase in the number of questions from faculty and students as well as an increase in requests for library instruction. Also, if a faculty member is involved in some significant research, you may start to receive in-depth and time-consuming questions.

One important thing that I have learned over the course of my career is that a busy academic library does not necessarily mean a busy librarian. The past four academic libraries where I worked were filled with students during final exam periods, but the reference desk was not busier than usual. Students are often beyond research at this point in the semester. They are spending their time in the library studying or putting final touches on papers. In my library, we still get plenty of questions during this time of the semester, but the content shifts. For instance, we see an increase in citation and formatting questions. These can sometimes be time consuming and also require a shift in thinking from research. The summer tends to be quieter, making it an opportune moment to budget time for updating LibGuides, Blackboard or Moodle modules, or other study materials.

Academic librarians with positions that are more behind the scenes may not be as closely tied to the academic year. Colleagues in technical services tell me that their workload changes are based on acquisition cycles. If your new job is as an acquisitions librarian, you may notice an increase in your workload at the beginning of the fiscal year when selectors begin to submit orders for new materials. The ordering deadline for the fiscal year is likely to be another peak in workload. As a liaison who has been known to spend a large percent of my collection budgets on the absolute last day of the acquisitions cycle, I can attest to that. Catalogers, who deal with these ordered materials when they actually arrive, will notice a different pattern, though one that is still closely tied to the acquisitions cycle. Archivists and special collections librarians may find that the patterns in their workloads are less predictable. This area tends to be heavily project driven, with workloads increasing significantly following the donation of a new collection or the awarding of a new grant. Major changes to websites and other systems tend to be saved for summer to reduce the impact on students and faculty. This means librarians whose work is technology focused may notice an increase in work during the summer, when many other academic librarians are having the opposite experience.

Depending on your institution, you may also need to factor in issues related to tenure and promotion. If you are a tenure-track librarian, it is critical to set aside time to devote to research and service activities. Again, ask a colleague—either one who is also on the tenure track or one who is already tenured—for advice on meeting tenure milestones while dealing with the day-to-
day work of being a librarian. It can be easy to get caught up in the work flow, believing that you have a lot of time later to focus on tenure requirements. However, if you do not schedule time to work on your tenure package in your early work years, you may find trying to fulfill the requirements in the last year or so quite overwhelming.

Public Librarians

While public libraries aren’t officially tied to an academic calendar, the public librarians I consulted while writing this chapter noted a close relationship between public school calendars and their workloads. Public service librarians in public libraries are often busier during the evenings and on weekends during the school year and all summer long. Public libraries may also be more affected by social or economic changes in the community. Public libraries provide free access to the Internet for the general public, a service that has garnered media attention in recent years. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for instance, public libraries reported an increase in use by evacuees needing government aid or simply trying to communicate with loved ones. In a down economy, free Internet access becomes even more attractive, especially for job seekers. This can result in more requests for help by patrons who are not as computer savvy.

Unlike their academic library colleagues, for public service librarians in public library settings, a busy library is much more likely to mean a busy librarian. In my experience and from conversations with public library colleagues, reference librarians in public libraries spend significant percentages of their time on the reference desk, helping patrons with research questions, readers’ advisory requests, and technology issues. If you are a new librarian working in reference in a public library, you may quickly notice patterns and changes in your workload. It is still a good idea to ask an experienced colleague what to expect during particular times of year. Will there be an increase in homework-related help questions at beginning of a new school year? How popular is the summer reading program at your branch? In many cases, the answers to these questions will be “yes” and “extremely popular,” respectively. Particularly with larger public libraries, the library is a go-to resource for many information and entertainment needs of community members. Knowing when or if there will be slower times can help you plan ahead for projects.

The technical service work in public libraries may look different than it does in the academic setting. In larger systems, there may be a completely separate division (i.e., not in the same library branch) that orders and processes materials. If you are starting a job with a technical services focus in a public library (acquisitions, cataloging, etc.), you will probably notice trends similar to those in academic libraries—increases in work that correspond with ordering cycles.

Librarians in Other Work Settings

Librarians are not found only in public and academic libraries—we’re everywhere! If you are seeking employment or starting a new position in a different area of librarianship, it is critical to make connections with professionals in that field to gain an understanding of the amount and intensity of the workload. I interviewed a school media specialist and found that, as the only professional in her library, she is responsible for filling all roles. Not only does she help students with reference and readers’ advisory and teach classes on information skills, she is also
responsible for ordering and processing books, managing the budget, taking care of administrative tasks, and providing technology support. In a one-person library, understanding the patterns of your workload will be even more important than in other settings. This media specialist’s workload increases at the beginning and end of the school year, and her teaching load spikes at the end of each quarter. While she has a running list of tasks to complete, she is always prepared to change her priorities during those times to accomplish everything that needs to be done. This is valuable information to know, especially if you are not comfortable with constantly reprioritizing needs or if you have trouble changing directions quickly.

Special librarians, that umbrella term which encompasses so many information professionals, do such varied work that the life cycle of each year is likely to be completely unique. If you are starting a new position in a special library, begin tracking your time as soon as possible to identify peaks in your workload early on. Again, talk to others in the field and investigate the library literature to gain some understanding of how the work flows.

ANTICIPATE YOUR WORK FLOW AND PLAN ACCORDINGLY

Once you identify cycles in your workload, sketch out the life cycle of your year in your specific position. To use a typical year in my current position as an example, the cycles generally look like this:

- August–October: My calendar is very full, primarily with planning for and teaching information literacy sessions. I also co-teach a two-credit class during the fall semester, so August and September are particularly busy.
- November–December: With a more flexible calendar, I have more time to spend on my nonteaching responsibilities, including collection development, assessment, and service work.
- January–March: My calendar is full again with teaching. I have also noticed a slight increase in library and university committee work during the early spring.
- April–June: This is conference season, and I see an increase in research and creative work.
- July: My calendar is usually wide open, but I have plenty to do. This is the month I spend planning for the upcoming school year and doing all of the things I’ve been putting off “until summer” for the last year.

I suspected my time would fall this way in my current position because I worked closely with my predecessor. She gave me a heads-up about what I was in for my first fall semester, so I was able to plan accordingly. To accommodate my heavy class load, I reduced my reference desk hours for the fall, scaled back my research and creative activities, and did my best to take on fewer additional projects. I communicated this increase in workload to colleagues outside my department so that they have realistic expectations of the time I could commit to projects and committee work during this time period.

Anticipating your workload over the course of a year can also help you predict and plan for ebbs and flows in your personal energy and productivity levels. The dozens of library instruction sessions that I teach in September and October leave me little energy for other tasks and projects,
so I save the bulk of my recurring, nonteaching work for November and December. Having this plan in place helps me balance my workload and adjust my work flow so that it is a better match for my energy levels. When I have more energy, I am also naturally more productive when it comes to tasks that require focus and concentration, like preparing for conference presentations or writing book chapters. If I do take on an additional project, I reevaluate and reallocate my time. I don’t want to overcommit and fail to deliver. Having a sense of my other obligations keeps me from making that mistake. It is important for librarians to have realistic ideas of what they can accomplish, not only with a given number of hours in the day but also according to personal energy levels. We all need downtime, and that must be factored into the work flow. It is unrealistic to believe that you can teach several classes a week and then throw yourself headlong into a research project when the classes slow down. Everyone needs time to recharge.

Before you enter a new area of librarianship, it is a good idea to get a sense of the rhythms of the work to make sure that the position matches with your energy and productivity patterns. If you draw the most energy from helping the public, a technical services job might not be for you. If you are not a morning person, consider this carefully before accepting a position that requires an 8 a.m. service desk shift. You may even want to negotiate more flexible hours.

When you are new on a job, your supervisor can probably give you some sense of what your responsibilities will be in a given time period. If, for instance, you’re a reference librarian at a public library and your main responsibility is to staff a busy reference desk six hours a day, you probably won’t have the time or energy to devote to a system-wide project or a professional association committee. In fact, when starting a new position, it may be wise to refrain from volunteering for major projects or committees until you know how much time you will have available for those types of commitments.

Another obligation that most librarians face is writing an annual self-evaluation. I have never met a librarian who loves to write the annual self-evaluation or report of accomplishments, regardless of the form it takes. One way I have made this less burdensome is to approach my self-evaluation as a way to look back over the year and determine whether the patterns I notice in the annual review match those that I have already identified. Generally, they do, although some years I may have taken on more committee work or attended fewer conferences. I use these patterns to forecast the following year, which is fortunate, as my institution requires us to submit our goals for the upcoming year and our summaries of the prior year at the same time. I also find my “What I did today” document invaluable as I prepare both my annual review and my goals.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

I hope this chapter has given you some important information about the life cycle of your year. Yours will be unique to your personal situation, but it is critical for you to develop a familiarity with this cycle in order to be as effective as possible. Knowing what a typical year is like at your institution, even if you aren’t yet able to forecast for your specific position, can help you develop a basic work plan. Having such a plan in place will help you be more productive and can also help you manage stress. Don’t underestimate the value of your colleagues, within and beyond your institution. Talking to fellow librarians can be not only educational—and even therapeutic—but also an essential tool in managing the expectations you have of yourself and
your work. When you have a handle on what’s coming up, you will be better able to deal with
the unexpected, the tasks and projects you didn’t plan for, because you can work them into your
existing plan.

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