Voices from the Ivory Tower

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Voices From the Ivory Tower

Introduction
by Gail Dickinson

Ivory towers look mysterious from the outside. They sit above the bustle of the land immediately below, and they are seen as both impressive and foreboding. They are removed from the landscape, but they also have a view that encompasses many different landscapes. Deciding to move from being a librarian working with students and teachers in the confines of one or more schools to teaching and researching with those preparing to enter the field is an important decision. Let's hear from some of the voices of those who have taken that journey. We'll start with the voice of the recently finished doctoral student, then proceed on through the ranks of the assistant, associate, and then full professor.
The Doctoral Student—
On the Verge

by Robin Boltz, UNC–Chapel Hill

Continuing education, for me, is like a psychic itch that I’m compelled to scratch. There are always new things to learn, fresh topics to explore. From MLS, through National Boards, and on to a PhD, I’ve continued an education that I hope never ends.

Like most of us in the school library field, librarianship was not my first career path. Once I started working in a school, however, it became more avocation than occupation. The most gratifying part was building the relationships that are critical for a successful program: with students, teachers, and administration. I thrive on the organized chaos that is a busy school library. When I taught graduate students, I told them that if you must finish one task before you start another, this is definitely not the career for you. The unpredictability of the job is another aspect that I enjoy; no two days are ever alike.

I enjoy teaching. In what other field, after all, can a single person work with students from pre-kindergarten to graduate school? Curiosity has propelled me toward a research degree. I’ve truly enjoyed the studies that I’ve conducted to date—“What We Want: Boys and Girls Talk about Reading” and my doctoral project “Listen to Their Voices: What and Why Do Rural Teen Males Read?”—especially when they were over. A huge amount of satisfaction comes from answering the questions you started with, but even more comes from finding answers to questions you hadn’t thought to ask in the beginning. To pursue both research and teaching professionally at the university level requires a doctorate.

I’ve been asked many times why I’ve pursued my PhD; I usually hear this question at conferences from people trying to decide whether or not to attempt the pursuit themselves. My answer is fairly simple: because being a school librarian is the coolest job in the world, and I want to be a faculty member to teach others how to be successful at the job I love. What type of professor do I want to be? The kind that passes on a passionate belief in school libraries and librarians; who does the research that sheds light on what we do in the big room with all the books, computers, and gadgets; who shows how important reading is to all our students and who publishes those studies for the greater good; who advises students on the best way to achieve their own goals; who gives back to the greater community; who grumbles about attending meetings; and overall, one who knows that there is always more to learn and pass on.

So what pushes some of us to make the move outside the bounds of the school library? In my case it’s a combination of factors: curiosity, passion, intensity. Curiosity makes me wonder how we can improve what we do. I’m passionate about doing the research that moves us forward. I also have an intense and restless need to explore things that I don’t understand or have no knowledge of. And there’s satisfaction in believing that I’m doing a small part to contribute to the good of the profession. Advice to others: be prepared for a long, difficult, and incredibly rewarding several years.

Robin Boltz
graduated in May from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her dissertation is entitled "Listen to Their Voices: What and Why Do Rural Teen Males Read?"

The Assistant Professor—
Profess or Practice?

by Renee E. Franklin, Assistant Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University

I would like to be able to share a story about how I’ve known from the time that I was very small that I wanted to work in library and information studies (LIS). To be certain, my interests and activities should always have pointed me toward a career in LIS. I have always been an avid reader, unable to pass by any written material without pausing. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school, I would finish my work early and then beg my teacher to allow me to go to the library. When I began teaching middle-school students with disabilities, I was insistent on forging a relationship with the school librarian—even after she had made it very clear that there were no materials in the library for “students like mine.”

The truth is, however, when I enrolled in the LIS PhD program at Florida State University in 2001 just one month after earning my MLIS, I had not decided whether I would conduct research that concerned librarianship in general or school library issues specifically. In fact, unlike most of my classmates, I did not have anything that even resembled a research agenda. I was intrigued by so many aspects of librarianship and the study of information issues, and it seemed that each doctoral seminar confused me even more by introducing new and fascinating topics. As I continued my journey through the doctoral program, I fretted over which topic I would choose. And then my topic chose me.

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While I completed my doctorate, I also worked at the library in the parochial school at which my son was enrolled. One day, I noticed that the assistant librarian was using a black marker to cross out various words and passages in a particular book. Curious (and shocked) I asked why she was doing this. She cheerfully responded—while continuing to search for material to cross through—that a parent had complained about "unacceptable language" in the book. To avoid the possibility of future complaints, she was crossing out all words that might be considered offensive. She went on to explain that she had done similar things in the past, including drawing "extra clothing" on illustrations of females whom she deemed inappropriately dressed. I was horrified, but it was at this point that I became interested in examining the topic of intellectual freedom and censorship in private school libraries.

While conducting my dissertation research, I waged an internal battle about whether or not to seek a position as a school library administrator or as an assistant professor; ultimately, I chose a tenure-track position within an LIS school. As an assistant professor I am beginning to better understand how to manage the rigorous demands of conducting research, teaching, and service to the school, university, and broader communities. The life of a professor is quite different from that of a practicing librarian. Unlike the relatively fixed schedule that dictates each day in an elementary, middle, or high school, my schedule in the higher academic setting changes each week to accommodate committee meetings, student concerns, and research requirements. Further, there is no ringing bell to signal the end of my workday; I often leave my campus office and immediately begin working again once I arrive at home.

It turns out that choosing the professoriate did not require me to abandon my love of libraries. In fact, my research, teaching, and service activities actually provide opportunities for me to spend time in school libraries. For example, one of the courses I teach—School Media Practicum (internship)—makes it possible for me to examine myriad aspects of school library management, spend time in a variety of school libraries, and interact with K–12 students—all things I thoroughly enjoyed when I'd worked as a school library administrator.

The decision between becoming practitioner or professor was a difficult one. My decision was ultimately guided by two things: (1) my desire to contribute to the profession by preparing the next generation of school librarians, and (2) very few people of color enter the school library profession. It is my belief that my presence as faculty of color will allow me the opportunity to help to recruit to our profession a greater number of individuals from underrepresented ethnic groups.

Renee E. Franklin is an assistant professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. She teaches courses directly related to preparing students to enter the school library profession. She conducts research in school library administration, educational preparation for school librarians, and information access in school libraries.

The Associate Professor—In the Middle

by Audrey P. Church, Associate Professor and Coordinator, School Library Media Program, Longwood University

As building-level school librarians, I believe that one of the joys of our job is the opportunity to work with every student and every teacher in the school, teaching beyond one classroom, one grade level, and one set of students. I worked as a building-level school librarian for twenty years, three years at the primary level and seventeen years at the high school level, and I loved what I did. I often tell my graduate students that, had this position at Longwood University not become available, I would have been perfectly happy working as a building-level librarian for the rest of my career. A position at Longwood did become available, however, in the summer of 2000, when the University advertised for a full-time coordinator for the graduate program in school library media to expand the program to meet the educational and professional development needs of Virginia school librarians. I had taught for Longwood as an adjunct instructor since 1996 and knew that I enjoyed teaching adults, so I applied. The opportunity to enlarge my tiny sphere of influence and share my passion for school libraries by teaching teachers to be librarians was extremely attractive. (In Virginia, one must hold teaching licensure to work as a school librarian.)

I was hired as a lecturer, a rank that I held for two years, with the understanding that I would enroll in a doctoral program. I began my doctoral studies in the fall of 2002,
and my rank was "upgraded" to that of instructor. The following year, 2003–2004, I was placed on tenure track, and the clock began to tick. In higher education, there is a specified period of time in which one works for tenure (typically six academic years), and high expectations are set for quality teaching, service, and scholarship. Tenure review is a one-time process, so you either make it or you do not. Failure to earn tenure is a career death sentence. Truly, the pressure was on.

Longwood is traditionally a teaching institution, so exceptional teaching is an expectation. There is also the expectation that faculty members serve (on department, college, and university committees and in professional organizations at the state and national levels) and that faculty members add to the scholarship in their field through research, writing, and publishing, and through presenting at state, national, and international conferences. Accomplishments in these areas are evaluated annually by the department promotion and tenure committee, the department chair, the college dean, and the vice president for academic affairs.

As I neared completion of my doctorate, my rank was "upgraded" to that of assistant professor for the 2007–2008 academic year. In November 2007 I earned my PhD in education. The 2008–2009 school year was my "P and T" (promotion and tenure) year, my sixth year on tenure-track probationary review, and I earned both tenure and the rank of associate professor.

Rewards: earning a PhD just a few days shy of my fiftieth birthday; working with absolutely the best students in the world—teachers who become school librarians and then go on to share their love of reading and pursuit of information, and knowledge with the teachers and students in their schools.

Challenges: pursuing a doctorate while teaching full-time; the pressure to excel in teaching, service, and scholarship to earn tenure and rank.

Advice: Go for it! If there is a better job than being a school librarian, it is teaching those who want to become school librarians!


So what pushes some of us to make the move outside the bounds of the school library? In my case it's a combination of factors: curiosity, passion, intensity.

by Robin Bolz, UNC-Chapel Hill

As I continued my journey through the doctoral program, I fretted over which topic I would choose. And then my topic chose me.

by Renee E. Franklin, Assistant Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University

The Full Professor—The Voice from the Top
by Carol Doll, Professor, Old Dominion University

As a building-level school librarian in Montana, I enjoyed working with both students and teachers. The work was challenging, exciting, and rewarding. Then, through an unexpected series of events, I was offered a full scholarship if I would go back to school for a doctorate. So, in 1977 I left the building-level school library and returned to school at the University of Illinois to earn my doctorate. I finished my PhD and began teaching at the university level in 1980.

The real question is, why have I chosen not only to enter but to continue my career in library and information science education? There are a number of reasons: I believe in school libraries, and I believe that school libraries have the potential to dramatically impact education in a positive way. I enjoy teaching, and it is a pleasure to help my students get ready to become the school librarians of tomorrow. In many ways, I have a lot of flexibility this job is primarily self-directed.
and I have the freedom to choose when and how I work, and what I do. For example, I am expected to research, but I choose what I will research. And, I enjoy the chance to work with junior faculty members, and I learn a lot from them.

There is no typical day or week in my job. Instead, there are several constants. I know I will be teaching and working with students. Part of teaching is the design and delivery of classes. Part of it is working with students to teach them the basics of being a school librarian and to share with them the excitement of that job. Part of teaching is staying in touch with building-level practitioners and other experts in the field to ensure that class content is focused on the skills, dispositions, and knowledge that school librarians need on the job.

I know that I need to be an active and productive scholar. This includes doing research and publishing refereed journal articles, practitioner articles, and books. Also, in today's academic climate, it is important to secure outside funding—and it takes a great deal of time to write a grant. I also collaborate with junior faculty and learn from them while we explore topics like games and gaming in libraries, or graphic novels, and then publish or present our findings.

I know that service is an important part of my job. This involves service to my department and to the university. Serving on committees and being actively involved in the interview process for an open position are examples of university service. I also am active in both regional and national professional organizations. Right now, that includes the Virginia Educational Media Association, and the American Library Association and three of its divisions. I have chosen not to run for office but I avoid the "Ivory Tower Syndrome" by serving on committees and giving presentations regularly.

Finally, as a full professor, I am expected to be more and more involved in administrative duties. In addition to advising students, I may be asked to schedule classes, write reports or create documents for accreditation visits, oversee curriculum changes, work with adjuncts, and accept other responsibilities that keep the program running smoothly. While junior faculty need to focus on writing and research to get tenure, it is the responsibility of senior faculty to perform some of these administrative tasks.

While there is no one typical day or week, I know that I will be juggling teaching, research, service, and administration. At times, the balancing act can be challenging—but it is never boring. Overall, for me the rewards of being a university professor outweigh the difficulties.

Carol A. Doll, professor at Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, has written and published on collaboration, collection development issues, and the history of children's and youth services. She has been active in both AASL and ALSC, and is currently serving on the Sibert Award Committee.