Graduate Librarian at a Small University: What I’ve Learned So Far

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Christina R. Hillman

ABSTRACT

Learning to be a graduate librarian is an ongoing process. Read about one librarian’s journey from early to mid-career graduate librarian. Lessons learned include understanding technology challenges faced by graduate students, what embedded librarianship looks like at the graduate level, and even when to break patron privacy.

Keywords: graduate librarian, doctoral librarian, lessons learned

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GRADUATE LIBRARIAN AT A SMALL UNIVERSITY: WHAT I’VE LEARNED SO FAR

I’ve been in my current position for nearly a decade. It’s my first professional librarian job, and I’ve learned so much about what it means to be a librarian. As someone who started as a graduate librarian early in my career, and now has moved into mid-career, how I work with graduate students has changed dramatically. I hope the highlights below will help new or experienced graduate librarians as they move through their own work.

To set the stage, my institution is a small doctorate-granting university. We have a strong tradition of undergraduate education, and professional doctoral programs have grown out of our undergraduate professional programs in nursing and education. We have a growing graduate population of master’s and doctoral candidates, largely due to expanding online offerings for an MS in nursing and PharmD. But the university largely still views itself as an in-person, undergraduate-serving institution. This is in stark contrast to how I view myself and the work I do: I primarily see myself as a doctoral liaison for nursing (DNP) and education (EdD), two programs that focus on leadership development.

WHAT I’VE LEARNED

Something I failed to consider early, as someone who grew up using a computer (even in the 1980s), was that not everyone is as comfortable with technology as I am; even if they are, they may not be as experienced with the technology they find themselves using as doctoral students. Whether their discomfort with technology stems from a lack of experience or fear, I need to remember that, while many of these students are more than 10 years out from their last degree program, they are experts in their own professions. Returning to the learner role is hard and can be scary. Being mindful of this as the liaison librarian has been important, especially in the earliest days of my work, when I sometimes found myself teaching a student how to open a new tab on their internet browser or create a folder in Windows Explorer—tasks that I take for granted. I often refer to these doctoral students as the most engaged and eager first-year students you will work with or meet. They need the same level of introduction to database searching and source evaluation as first-year students, sometimes even more depending on how long it’s been since they were in college, but they are eager for what I have to teach them.

Considering their engagement with literature searching, it’s also important to remember that graduate students are busy adults. They are returning students, often working full-time jobs, with families and friends, and their graduate studies are in addition to these other responsibilities. Therefore, the instruction or research support given needs to be timely and
relevant. I’ve been fortunate to embed strategically in the programs I work with. I’m not just offering one marathon library orientation and instruction session at the start of a program. Rather, I lead sessions at strategic moments in the program that align with keystone assignments. And to better support individual needs, I do a robust one-on-one consultation business, averaging 300+ interactions a year with doctoral students.

Consultations! That number above is huge, but what I’ll say about it is that I work with these students in a variety of mediums: Zoom, in person, email, and occasionally phone. I’ve also grown this part of my job through word of mouth: basically, one doctoral student tells another they need to meet with me. It’s a great marketing strategy I had nothing to do with. Faculty often require or recommend students meet with me, but most of my business is from repeat students and recommendations from classmates. For the doctoral programs I work with, individual consultations are by far the most effective instructional opportunity I have. These students, while working on similar projects, each have very unique topics, skill levels, and backgrounds. Individualized instruction offered through consultations allows me to tailor the learning to what someone needs in the moment, whether that’s how to submit an interlibrary loan request or how to run down citations for their theoretical framework. Spending time marketing and building consultation services might be one of the best ways to support student learning for graduate students, but it’s a big change from the mindset I had when I first started.

As a newly minted librarian, I was under the impression that embedded librarianship looked like a librarian going into the classroom. Yet, for the programs I work with, that isn’t the best use of my time. It took time to realize embedded librarianship can look many ways, and at the graduate level it often looks like hundreds of consultations and regular communication with faculty to understand program changes and updates (ideally getting into faculty committees working on program updates). It also looks like understanding the coursework and assignments students are working on and how best to support their research needs for those assignments.

I’ve done a lot of professional learning and development around the support needed for these students. Some of the professional development is more standard, like educating myself about systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and copyright transfer agreements. But a lot of the professional learning is what might best be described as experiential learning, and I do mean that in the academic definition. I know how to search for possible theories for a dissertation because I’ve done it more times than I can count, but 10 years ago, even five years ago, the same search would’ve taken me twice as long. The speed with which I can work through more challenging queries is partially due to all the experience I’ve had doing
this work. For example, these days I can often read a student’s topic and problem statement and offer two to three possible theories, whereas even five years ago this type of consultation would have been difficult for me. In other words, as graduate librarians we might compare ourselves to colleagues who work primarily with undergraduate programs—and embedded librarianship at that level might look like going into classes and scaffolding learning into courses—so it might feel like we’re doing something wrong or missing an opportunity. Consider the different ways librarians can embed into a program based on how best to support student learning and make the best use of your time and expertise.

Maybe the most important realization for me was recognizing when it was okay and appropriate to break patron privacy. This might be controversial for some librarians reading this essay; it was definitely hard for me personally and professionally to come to terms with. I have two core memories that led me to my new understanding. The first was having a better understanding of the open communication channels between doctoral students and their committee members. Basically, the students didn’t have an expectation of privacy with the faculty on their committees. This led students to be under the impression their faculty would let me know when they’d been told to reach out for research support, including sharing what support was needed. This allowed for a little flexibility in my own approach when working with students. In particular, if I had a repeat patron who wasn’t making progress developing their topic and search strategies, or if I was offering support that was out of my scope of practice, I felt comfortable reaching out to their faculty to (a) let them know I’ve been working with a student and I had concerns about their progress; or (b) let them know I’ve had to offer repeated support on something (e.g., internet, word processing) out of my scope of practice.

The other event was more obvious: faculty just emailing me, with the student copied into the email, indicating that the student needs to meet with me before moving forward with an assignment. This last example might be familiar to others, but it was a helpful reminder that, while I want to respect patron privacy, open communication with faculty about when I meet with a student is not the same as disclosing the details of an interaction that might be sensitive to the student.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

My professional growth as a graduate librarian is like the research process: iterative. I might take a few steps forward, and then I need to circle back to learn more about how to approach a research practice in order to keep moving forward. I could offer at least 10 examples for how I learned about researching a theory from this iterative process of my
professional learning and development. One of the most valuable was rebuilding a library
guide about researching a theory. This included moving from a single page of text to a
robust guide that emphasizes the learning process and includes example searches. In order
to build this guide successfully, I needed to spend time understanding the assignment’s
needs, what information students already possess, and what steps might be taken during
the research process. Understanding how best to support graduate students sometimes feels
like a moving target, but it’s a rewarding experience, in part because these students are so
eager to learn what we have to teach them about library research.

I’m still learning and developing as a librarian, and truly embracing that I’m not just an
academic librarian, but a graduate librarian. The landscape of academic librarianship is
ever-changing. New technologies, such as ChatGPT and other AI tools, challenge our
methods of teaching. Also, our institutions evolve and grow, with new programs or strate-
gic priorities, and we learn to adapt. Graduate librarianship will look different for everyone.
For me, as a doctoral-focused graduate librarian at a small university, graduate librarianship
looks like hundreds of consultations each year, attending faculty committee meetings to
stay current, and recognizing the individual support needs of my liaison students. It’s also
fun—for someone who loves learning about new topics, every student consultation offers
me a glimpse into a new area of research.

My hope for this essay was that new, and even experienced, graduate librarians might ben-
efit from what I’ve learned over the nearly 10 years I’ve been doing this work. While our
institutions might differ greatly, I do believe we can learn from each other’s experiences.