New Roles, New Expertise, New Hiring Practices
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Amanda French
Alternative Academic Careers for Humanities Scholars
Edited by Bethany Nowviskie

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Bethany Nowviskie
Director of Digital Scholarship at University of Virginia Library

Willard McCarty
Professor of Humanities Computing at King’s College London

Timothy B. Powell
Director, Digital Partnerships with Indian Communities at Penn Museum

Here we frame & introduce #alt-academy — its scope, stakes, & structure — and invite your critical engagement & contribution.

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I. Introduction

As I was walking by one of the main Modern Language Association (MLA) conference hotels in 2008, I overheard a graduate student from my university remark to a friend, “Hey, she’s a librarian. What is she doing here?” My first impulse was to point indignantly to my name in the program and yank out my laminated wallet-sized PhD diploma (if only I had one). I wished that I had followed the lead of my friend Amanda and gotten a “PhD” tattoo on my bicep, so that I could roll up my sleeve and make a doctoral muscle, à la Rosie the Riveter. But then I realized that he was asking an appropriate question, one that I occasionally obsess over and that colleagues across the university probably pose as well.
Of Hybrarians, Scholar-Librarians, Academic Refugees, & Feral Professionals

Introduction

Whenever a humanities scholar reads a document crucial to her research on a computer screen or a microfilm reader, she is very likely profiting from the work of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), a renowned organization that she has probably never heard of. CLIR, which has existed in one form or another since 1956, might be called a library technology think tank. For the last few years, one of the problems it has been thinking about, and acting to solve, is the problem of how to develop future leadership for academic libraries. One of the organization’s strategies has been to encourage new humanities Ph.Ds to consider careers in academic libraries. In 2004, CLIR selected its first cohort of fellows for its newly created Postdoctoral Fellowship in Academic Libraries. The fellowship program’s goals were not only to offer humanists a different career path, but also to bring

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On Ant-Lions and Scholar-Programmers

Contributed by Doug Reside
Digital Curator for the Performing Arts at New York Public Library
May 07, 2011

Part of the Cluster:
Making Room

Alongside the griffins and unicorns in medieval bestiaries frequently appears a fascinating but somewhat less notorious hybrid: the ant-lion, a creature with a magisterial feline head and an industrious, formican body. David Badke’s fascinating online anthology of bestiaries notes that fantasies of ant-lions likely originated with the Septuagint’s mistranslation of Job 4:11 which contains an “uncommon word for lion”[1] that is commonly rendered, as in the King James Version, “old lion” (e.g. “The old lion perisheth for lack of prey”), but in the Greek translation as the “Μυρμηκολέων”—the ant-lion. Although medieval readers (somewhat disappointingly) read a reference to a large, aggressive, and possibly cannibalistic species of ant early Greek writers imagined an actual lion-ant cross-breed which, being the offspring of a carnivore and herbivore, could find no food to eat and so eventually “perisheth.”[2] For my entry in this bestiary of alternative career paths in academia, I would like to turn to analogous hybrid: the scholar-programmer, a beast with the head of a scholar (and likely an advanced degree in a theoretical discipline to prove it) joined with the industrial and practical skills of a computer programmer.
The path I tread to my current position is not one I expected to take, nor is it one, likely, my employers expected of their new Head of Special Collections and Digital Initiatives. I wouldn't go so far as to say said path was circuitous, or even really that severely angled, but it certainly wasn't (and may still not be) traditional. It's in my nature to be suspicious of my own success, so I might have thought that going from English degree to working in a digital library to trying out (and quickly dropping out of) library school to getting my Master of Historic Preservation degree would be a sure way to prevent success. I didn't actively try to sabotage my career, but I figured I was setting myself up for disappointment by following my heart rather than the surfeit counter arguments of librarianship and, in general, getting-a-good-academic-jobship. It seems, though, I was mistaken.

From English Lit to Digital Hit

My paternal grandmother was a librarian and when I began working in a public library, which I did for the majority of my high school and junior college careers, I was told such a path was genetically unavoidable, that I would eventually be a librarian in some capacity or another, most likely in the public sector, offering reference to patrons or maybe running adult services and putting on movie nights. On route to college I put a pin in that idea and pursued an English degree - a rash decision, I know, but I figured it would give me all the basis I needed for a career as a librarian. Books and stories and the odd film, right? Catalog them, shelve them, check them out. That's what librarians did, and I, as an unavoidable librarian, would obliged.

As an English major I studied everything, eschewing the paths offered me by the department (film studies, medieval studies, critical studies, queer studies etc.) and bounced from Victorian literature to Chaucer to Barthes and then on over to Caryl Barks and Donald Duck. This was against the advice of my advisors, who stressed that specialization would help me in graduate school. What did they, know? I was going to be a librarian - obviously - thus I needed to have a broad footing in a variety of literary these-and-those. In fact, my mentor at the time, one of the last good medievalists (who owned more Simpsons memorabilia than anyone rightly should), was convinced of my proficiency in the criticism and tried in vain to cajole me into an English masters program. I was flattered, but librarianship suited me better.

After graduating with my B.A. in English I settled into job-hunting, assuming I'd find something proper for a librarian-to-be in the large college town to which I'd anchored myself. The public library, though large and well-funded, was never looking for new blood. The local jail was more than willing to hire a "librarian" with only a bachelor's degree, but I had more than a few doubts. It was a long-shot application to my very own university that proved successful. Three months after graduating from college I was a salaried employee in the digital library center of my alma mater. Now all I needed was my MLS (or MSIS, or MLIS, or MALIS etc.) and I'd be a proper librarian, able to do all the things librarians do. As it turns out, I really had no idea what things librarians (or even libraries) actually did. In fact, I knew so little that I was instructed by my new boss to quickly forget the little I did know and just "immerse myself in it all, okay?" I nearly drowned that first year, but I'm glad I stuck it out.

The job I'd nabbed (no doubt due to my obsessive tie-wagging and reserved swagger) was as the institutional repository coordinator and general METS hacker for a burgeoning digital library program. Was I qualified to vet and assemble the research of an entire university? Goodness no! But I was prepared for the technological challenges, as I had done what I was instructed to do by my mentor (forget what little I knew, immerse self), and apply the skills I'd acquired through life simply by being born in the 1980s and having a computer-loving graphic artist father. As a coordinator I ingested thousands of PDFs into the digital library's content management system, professionally begged faculty for white papers of their research, and became obsessed with something called Open Access. Before I knew it I was giving poster presentations and sitting at tables with tenure-track librarians, going toe-to-toe on digital management issues and arguing about whether an institutional repository should contain historical materials as well as papers on plant pathology. I was, for all intents and purposes, a librarian, though I was never really regarded as one. Something was missing, something to put after my name on e-mail signatures.

Two Semesters of Library School and Out
CFP: Getting There 2

Contributed by Brian Croxall
Digital Humanities Strategist and Lecturer of English at Emory
May 08, 2012

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