



Professional Portfolios for Librarians

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ABSTRACT. A portfolio is an invaluable tool for librarians in any stage of their career. A portfolio can be used to document skills and accomplishments, and give managers tangible evidence of a librarian's strengths as a professional. The development and maintenance of a professional portfolio can be employed as a job-hunting tool, as documentation to support performance evaluation or promotion and tenure review, and as a personal reflection tool to encourage professional development and career growth. With a little time and self-discipline, a librarian can use a portfolio to advance throughout a career, and to make one stand out from the crowd. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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At your annual performance evaluation, your supervisor asks how you met the past year's goal of increasing workshop attendance through better marketing. On a job interview for a reference and instruction position at a university library, the search committee wants proof of your performance as a teacher, or examples of your communication skills. As a seasoned professional, you could certainly devise an articulate answer to these questions. You might describe some of your more inventive marketing efforts and quote workshop attendance statistics in the first instance. In the second instance, you might talk about lesson plans that you created, and relate some of the positive feedback you received from faculty and students after an instruction session. The only problem with this scenario is that you will sound just like everyone else. Remember, your supervisor is probably evaluating several of your colleagues who are doing very similar work to yours, and they will be quoting the same statistics. Likewise, the hiring committee at a job interview will talk to any number of candidates who will all claim to have excellent communication skills, outstanding interpersonal skills, and superior teaching abilities. Imagine how much more of an impact your answers would have if you had a collection of documents to support you in these situations, perhaps copies of the evaluation forms or letters of thanks from faculty regarding instruction; or the actual ads that appeared in the student newspaper for your workshops—in other words, a portfolio.

A portfolio is an organized collection of documents that showcase a person's work, skills, and career progression. Once the domain of teachers and artists, portfolios are becoming popular across many other professions as a way to actively demonstrate work-related skills and career growth. The development and maintenance of a professional portfolio can benefit academic librarians in any number of ways: as a job hunting tool, as documentation to support performance evaluation or promotion and tenure review, and as a personal reflection tool to encourage professional development and career growth.

As a job-hunting tool, a portfolio can help one candidate stand out from other applicants by giving the search committee tangible evidence of the otherwise unsubstantiated claims on a resumé. Search committees face a number of challenges when trying to evaluate candidates. One problem is that any viable candidate will have the amount and kind of experience called for in the job description, meaning that most of the resúmes received

are going to be relatively similar. Thus, it can be difficult for a manager to differentiate one candidate from another. It can be equally difficult to gain any real understanding of a person's job performance and skill level from the laundry list of duties and responsibilities that make up a resumé. The list of duties under each position held will give the manager some idea of the candidate's experience—for instance, whether they've ever taught a class or administered a budget—but it doesn't tell them how well the candidate performed these tasks. Moreover, most resúmes contain a "skills" section, where a candidate lists such qualities as communication and interpersonal skills. These are generally listed without any explanation, and often there is no detail in any part of the resumé to confirm such abilities. A portfolio can help an employer fill in the blanks left by a resumé, and give them a fuller understanding of a candidate's strengths. Imagine that one of the candidates applying for a reference and instruction position submits a portfolio that includes a printout of the PowerPoint slides used in a BI class, as well as evaluations from students who attended the session. In addition, there are several excerpts from a reference policy manual written by this candidate. The portfolio might also include certificates of completion for continuing education classes, thank-you letters from students and staff, and the results of any complex or very in-depth research projects. Now, instead of the usual list of job responsibilities, the search committee has the documentation that was the outcome of those duties. Instead of just knowing that a candidate taught 50 library instruction sessions over the course of a year, the committee can see the content of the class, how it was arranged, and what type of teaching methods were used. The evaluations will also give a sense of how well the candidate related to her students, and might give some sense of the candidate's teaching style. Certificates from continuing education or professional development classes can show a commitment to lifelong learning, while the excerpt from the policy manual acts as a writing sample. In other words, the search committee will have a much more thorough knowledge of this candidate than any others and, assuming the portfolio is well organized and the documents are professional and well chosen, this candidate will very likely stand out from the crowd. In creating a job-hunting portfolio, the job seeker should try to keep the major requirements and qualifications of the position in mind, and organize their documentation around those particular areas. For instance, if communication skills are necessary, then writing samples, marketing materials, and evidence of public speaking or presentations will all be important to include. If the job is more technical in nature, evidence of computer skills, including specialized certifications, would be appropriate.

Portfolios have another advantage for job-hunting librarians. According to Powell and Jankovich, preparing a portfolio helps candidates prepare for an interview by allowing them to review their accomplishments, and to identify the examples that best demonstrate their abilities. Moreover, the use of a portfolio generally increases the candidate's self-esteem. Employers report that when they review a portfolio before an interview, the interview is usually more effective and the candidate is more confident (Powell 1998, 72).

A portfolio can work just as well for a librarian trying to progress in a current job. Whether the librarian is trying to increase job responsibilities, negotiate a raise, achieve a promotion, gain tenure, or get through an annual performance evaluation, a career advancement portfolio can help make a stronger case. Many professional librarians perform their jobs with little or no direct supervision. Their managers are generally aware of what is being accomplished day-to-day, and what the successes and accomplishments are. At the end of the year, though, it may be hard for a supervisor to recall these accomplishments in any detail, especially if they have several supervisees. If a librarian is going to use an end-of-the-year review to negotiate a raise or a promotion, they will not want to rely solely on a supervisor's memory of their work as the basis for a decision. In this case, a portfolio functions just as it would in a job interview, supporting claims of skills or tasks accomplished. The documents in a career advancement portfolio can show a manager not only what new skills the employee learned, but also how well those skills were applied in their current position (Kimeldore 1997, 77). Also as in a job interview, the librarian who submits a portfolio at a performance review will stand out from other supervisees who rely on anecdotal evidence and verbal descriptions as proof of their work. No matter how well informed a manager may be about her staff's daily activities, she will still appreciate some tangible proof that can help to remind her about specific strengths and accomplishments. The portfolio provides concrete examples on which a personnel decision can be based.

Finally, a portfolio can serve as a personal professional development tool for its creator. Most librarians do not build time within their busy schedules to reflect on their daily work. A portfolio of projects and accomplishments can serve as a reminder to librarians of their progress. By reflecting on the documents in a portfolio, librarians can identify trends in their career progression and pinpoint areas of strength and weakness.

In their article, "Creating the Developmental Teaching Portfolio: A Great Tool for Self-Assessment," Ann Lally and Ninfa Trejo describe their experience at the University of Arizona in which a group of instructional librarians created portfolios as part of a doctoral research project. The ultimate purpose of the portfolios was to "assess our growth, provide us with a mechanism for reflection, and point us toward areas for improvement" (Lally 1998, 776). Each portfolio included an updated curriculum vitae and a statement of teaching philosophy as well as lesson plans, evaluations and assignments, and written reflections. Over a period of months, this group met regularly to reflect on their work and to discuss their progress. As they reviewed their portfolios they were able to see what went well, and to identify areas in their teaching that could use improvement. As they reflected on different documents, they asked themselves what did not work so well, and why. Overall, the authors agreed that the use of a portfolio offered "a more holistic approach to the continuous improvement of teaching" (Lally 1998, 777).

Lally and Trejo's experience was very structured, and they were offered ample support in creation and use of their portfolios. However, any librarian who understands the benefits can set aside time to create and use a portfolio for self-assessment purposes. To begin the process, the librarian should start to keep samples of documents that represent major job duties, as well as examples of special projects. When compiling these documents, the librarian should keep in mind their job description, any skills that are required for the job and skills that the librarian is interested in developing or improving. Although the portfolio is in no way comprehensive, and cannot include all work done by the librarian, it should represent the quality and scope of work accomplished and should be continuously updated. The librarian then must make a point to review the portfolio periodically, perhaps once a semester. In the review, the librarian should be asking certain questions, such as "What do these documents reflect about my current skill levels?" "What am I doing well?" "What needs improvement?" "What can I learn from this?" (Lally, 1998, 777). Once comfortable with this reflective process, the librarian will begin to identify strengths and weaknesses, and ideally, will develop ways to improve. Thus the professional development portfolio becomes a tool for continuous growth.

Once a librarian makes a commitment to maintain a portfolio, the next step is to compile and organize one. The format of the portfolio will depend at least in part on the type of portfolio. If the portfolio is to be used mainly for job hunting, then the "employer's needs should be

the primary driver of the portfolio content” (Powell 1998, 73). In other words, the job seeker should identify the main skills and qualifications of the desired job, and then include documents that demonstrate those qualities in their own work. This will be most important, and impressive, to the employer. Likewise, a career advancement portfolio should be arranged around the librarian’s current job responsibilities, giving her the opportunity to demonstrate how well she fulfills or exceeds job requirements. Finally, a professional development portfolio can be organized around any areas that the librarian wishes to explore. These areas might be the major duties of the job, or they might simply be areas that the librarian wants to focus on for her own personal growth. In other words, the professional development portfolio is more personal, and therefore more flexible as to content.

Almost anything can be included in a portfolio. Especially for a job-hunting or career advancement portfolio, rely on documents of high-quality, without typos or poor quality graphics. The point of these portfolios is to demonstrate skill and ability, so all components should work toward that end. The librarian does not have to include every piece of work ever produced, or every supporting document of a project. Instead, select examples that are representative of accomplishments in various aspect of one’s work. For instance, an instruction librarian does not have to include every lesson plan ever written, but choose a selection that are particularly good, or that feature interesting or novel ideas. A cataloger might include examples of original cataloging, or samples of bibliographic records for particularly complex items. Any portfolio should also include an updated version of the librarian’s resumé and/or curriculum vitae. Both Greg Smith and Martin Kimeldore offer solid advice for compiling a portfolio (Smith 2001, 24) and (Kimeldore 1997).

The organization of the portfolio is very personal, but some general guidelines apply. A common approach is to arrange a portfolio around major job functions or skills. There might, for instance, be a section on instruction and teaching, a communication section including marketing materials, articles and policies, and a technology section highlighting software and hardware skills. Most librarians will also include some sort of accolades section, featuring recommendations, letters of thanks and other praises or awards received from colleagues or clients. Although these do not replace references in a job application, they will certainly help bolster the references, as well as the librarian’s self-confidence. Finally, it is important to remember that an effective portfolio is not static. It is never a finished project. In order to reap the most bene-

fits, especially in terms of career growth, the professional should continue to add to her portfolio throughout her career.

A portfolio is an invaluable tool for librarians in any stage of their career. Although the initial creation of a portfolio may seem time-consuming, the benefits derived from a well-organized portfolio are worth the effort. Whether newly graduated and just beginning the job hunt, or a seasoned professional applying for tenure, a librarian can use a portfolio to document her skills and accomplishments, and give managers tangible evidence of her strengths as a professional. With a little time and self-discipline, a librarian can use a portfolio to advance throughout her career, and to make herself stand out from the crowd.

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