



# THEY LET US TEACH ADU



# Making the Leap from Pre-K-12 to Higher Education

# LTS?

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Even within the school library profession, everyone follows a different professional path and reaches different milestones. As we journeyed through stages as school librarians, we found ourselves making transitions that took us on new adventures. Our paths eventually ended up in higher education where we teach people to be school librarians—a profession we both love. We will share with you the challenges and pleasures of making this leap into the world of higher ed.

## How We Got Here

**KARLA:** The choice to transition from Pre-K–12 schools to higher ed was simple for me but not without its challenges. I always saw myself teaching at a college, following the path laid by my education professor father. Every time he left in a state car to visit student teachers, I imagined myself doing that same thing. My teaching career in Pre-K–12 schools was varied and ever-changing, but two things remained constant—I loved the students, and I loved making an impact on their learning and on their lives. In a school library, I was able to follow students through the years and get to know them differently than as a classroom teacher. As a school librarian, I often served as the mentor coordinator for new teachers in the school. It was exciting to work with brand new teachers, and I discovered it was time to share with future teachers my experiences and what I had learned. I also found myself feeling antsy and ready for a job in which I could visit different schools and see what was going on in different places, not work in the same school every day.

**JEN:** I never expected to be teaching in higher education. I was a middle school educator through and through for twenty years. I loved being a school librarian and could not imagine doing anything else. The

energy of my students was contagious, and my colleagues were incredibly supportive collaborative partners. As my years of experience progressed, I received more and more requests to host student teachers, practicum students, and observers from inside and outside of education. The energy I got from excited future librarians was contagious, and I enjoyed sharing my knowledge and experience. I took pride in the programs these aspiring school librarians developed once they had received positions in the field. My desire to use my experience as a practitioner to advance the field of school librarianship by training future librarians increased.

**KARLA AND JEN:** Since transitioning to teaching people to do the jobs we loved for so long, we have discovered benefits and challenges, as would exist with any job transition.

## Flexibility

**KARLA AND JEN:** An obvious difference in the move from Pre-K–12 to higher ed is the increased flexibility in the workday. Our program teaches in a hybrid model with all of our classes taught on Saturdays. During the typical work week, we might have meetings, grading to do, and classes to plan and monitor, but we are in charge of our schedules. While this might seem like a dream to someone who must check in each morning and sign out before leaving the building during the day, the flexibility was not without challenges, especially in the beginning. For an elementary librarian on a fixed schedule, every day is scheduled with little to no flexibility. The librarian determines how the time is organized, but the schedule is set. Any time without scheduled classes is used for library administrative tasks and collaborating with teachers. With flexible schedules at some elementary, middle, and high schools, the

librarian has more control over the daily schedule, but flexibility is still limited.

**KARLA:** I was woefully unprepared for making a schedule that would maximize my productivity and include all parts of my job requirements: teaching, scholarship, and service. In the mindset “the students always come first,” I found that I was spending the vast majority of my time planning my classes and grading assignments. Most of my other time became reactive, not proactive. I eventually set up a schedule for myself that included time each day for each of my job responsibilities so nothing would get pushed to the side. I have to say, it is glorious to walk out of the office building at lunch without having to ask the secretary, sign out, or report to anyone where I am going.

**JEN:** I have reveled in the new flexibility of my schedule. I’ve always been a self-starter and coming from a library that was on a flex schedule, I was used to scheduling my time well. After completing my first year in higher ed just a few months ago, I have found there are flaws in my process that I need to work out. Because of the new flexibility, I find that I have a difficult time separating my workday from my personal day. Because there is no official start or end time to my day, I tend to work from very early in the morning to very late at night. I feel guilty when I’m not working and guilty when I work nonstop. Balancing work and my personal life is my biggest challenge, especially since we teach all day on most Saturdays.

## Teaching, Scholarship, and Service

**KARLA AND JEN:** In higher ed, faculty are expected to attend to three different areas of responsibility: teaching, scholarship, and service. The college or university

often determines the emphasis that is put on each one. For example, Longwood University is known as a teaching institution, meaning that a strong emphasis is put on teaching, while less weight is put on the other two responsibilities. At an institution with a strong emphasis on scholarship, to achieve promotion and tenure faculty are often expected to publish their research and be awarded grants. In addition, there is an expectation for service on many levels: at the college, state, and national levels as well as in the community and in the profession. Finding the right balance between these three responsibilities is a new challenge when moving from Pre-K–12 to higher ed. The greatest challenge is determining exactly what is expected at the specific institution and carving out the time to dedicate to each responsibility.

**KARLA:** When I began teaching at Longwood, I was still completing my PhD dissertation so I was still deeply into the research for that project. The balancing act came when I completed the degree and needed to find new research projects. I found that I was great at developing ideas for research, but the challenge was in finding time to write up my findings. I began to overcome this by presenting my research findings at conferences, then writing articles based on the presentations. This was a huge change for me because I was petrified to speak in front of people when I began the job.

**JEN:** I had not expected to begin teaching in higher education before completing my PhD. However, due to an unexpected opportunity, I landed in my new profession eighteen months before completing my doctorate. As I am in the final semester of completing my dissertation, I am looking toward what will come next. In discussions with Karla, we have developed some great

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ideas for research we would like to conduct. It has been difficult not being able to jump in and get started with our ideas because first I have to finish my dissertation. Balancing the dissertation with working full time, presenting at conferences, writing articles, and being involved in both national and state organizations for service has been challenging but exciting at the same time.

### **Am I Still Impacting the Students?**

**KARLA AND JEN:** In a Pre-K–12 school, educators work directly with the students. You get to see the lightbulbs go off, and you can directly observe and measure students' learning. In higher ed, you do not see the direct results on young children. You still get to see lightbulbs and measure learning in your adult students, but it is different. In fact, your impact is bigger. Each time students taking classes in our program learn new skills to use in their future libraries, they have the potential to impact the learning of every student in their schools. While our impact on young people may not be direct, it is exponential. When we teach collection development, we are not developing a collection for one school, but we are influencing the collections of the twenty schools where our students will one day be librarians.

**KARLA:** What a responsibility! I feel the pressure to get it right like I never have before. What I teach or don't teach will directly impact what our future librarians know and do in their schools. There are so many things to teach, and so many new things to learn. I constantly find myself balancing between covering too much of one topic and missing another equally important topic. I love to hear stories from current and former students who have an opportunity to implement something that has been taught in a class I am teaching. I know what I am doing is trickling down to the young people in the schools.

**JEN:** I believe we are definitely still impacting Pre-K–12 students. Just as I took pride in the programs my student teachers went on to create, I also look forward to the school libraries my current students will go on to create. Our school librarianship program is rigorous, and our students leave prepared to affect their future students in many positive ways. I feel we are responsible for a piece of that.

### **Seeing Best Practices in Action**

**KARLA AND JEN:** One of the best parts of teaching in higher ed is the opportunity to visit students who are completing their clinical experiences. Our students are required to complete a specified number of hours in school libraries and, as part

of their clinical experience, they must teach a collaborative lesson that we get to observe. Through these observations, we learn about what is current in school libraries and current best practices in the field. Our candidates are teaching what we taught to them, but they are also using their own experiences—and the experiences and knowledge of their cooperating librarians—to teach these lessons.

**KARLA:** I take advantage of school visits to look around and see what is new and to talk with the librarians about innovative practices. When attending librarian conferences, I purposefully choose sessions related to current practices so I can hear about what school librarians are trying and which tools and strategies are working in their libraries. It is sometimes difficult to hear about something great but know that I do not have my own group of young students with whom I can try the new ideas. Instead, I listen and learn, then share the ideas with my students hoping they will tell me about their successes.

**JEN:** I'm looking forward to beginning my first observations this semester. Currently, most of the classes I teach are held in school libraries. I love seeing how libraries are set up and what kinds of activities and makerspaces the school librarians have developed. Each library is a bit different, and I love seeing the innovative touches in each of them. It will be great to be able to see students in action!

## Keeping in Touch with the Real World

**KARLA AND JEN:** We have probably all had a professor at some point who did not seem to have a handle on what was currently going on outside of the

college classroom. To teach current practice using current and ever-changing technology and techniques, it is imperative for a library educator to keep current in the field. Professional reading is just as important when teaching in higher ed as it was as a school librarian, but it can't stop at reading. It is important for library educators to be around current school librarians, listening to what they are talking about and how they are teaching. This includes attendance at conferences in the state and at the national level.

**KARLA:** Long before I made the transition to higher ed, I knew I wanted to strive to remain current in the field. It was a personal goal to keep up and not be the out-of-touch professor. However, I found it challenging to keep up with the professional journals when I was out of the library. It was also challenging to keep up with the literature. Without the day-to-day contact, keeping current was something else that needed to be scheduled into my flexible but filled week. I love it when practicing librarians think about sharing something new with me, and chances are I will share the new idea in an upcoming class.

**JEN:** I find it's extremely important to keep up with the practitioner side of school librarianship. I love conducting research and developing new ideas for school libraries, but I never want to lose sight of what is realistic. Keeping current with journals and blogs is important to me. Attending conferences on regional, state, and national levels is also important. Part of the scholarship component of teaching in higher education is to present at multiple conferences. In addition to presenting, though, I make sure to attend sessions of practicing librarians and engage in discussions with them as well. As far as keeping

up with literature, I have rediscovered audiobooks since I am on the road so much!

## Creating a New Professional Network

**KARLA AND JEN:** As library educators, we've met a whole new group of people and found a whole new purpose in attending conferences. There are conferences that consist of research presentations, panel discussions about current trends, and teaching ideas for higher ed. Deciding which conference will meet our greatest needs at a particular time can be overwhelming and daunting. In the context of the three main responsibilities of instructors in higher ed, we read about conferences related to all of them: teaching, scholarship, and service. It is not possible to have enough time or money to attend them all!

**KARLA:** I have never been to so many conferences in my life! When I was a school librarian, the school system would not often pay for conferences, certainly not for those out of state, so I did not attend. I certainly did not offer to present at a conference! Since going to Longwood, I have become active in ALA and AASL, among other professional organizations. I find each conference to be a welcome opportunity to meet new people and make new connections.

**JEN:** In the past, my conference attendance was limited to places that were close to where I lived. I was very active in our state association and went to its annual conference every year. I would also attend the national Computers in Libraries conference in the Washington, DC, area each year as it was close to home. Taking days off for additional conferences was never something I was willing to do when I was a school librarian. I wasn't willing to leave my students

and staff. Now, I have more flexibility and have been able to attend AASL and ALA conferences. It's been great fun meeting and building relationships with educators who publish many of the articles and textbooks I read. To quote the catch-phrase from *Wayne's World*, I often look around and think, "I'm not worthy!"

## Lessons I Have Learned

**KARLA:** My time in higher ed so far has been a time of great growth. I would not be the same school librarian if I went back today as I was when I was in Pre-K–12 schools. I try to keep that in mind as I teach and avoid teaching from the ivory tower. I want to keep it real. However, my job is to teach best practices in school librarianship. Our class discussions include many that focus on the reality of the school library job and the decisions these grad students will have to make. We role-play a book challenge so they have practice saying the words they will need to say to an upset parent. We talk through scenarios about difficult students or teachers. We set up realistic collaborations and talk about the lack of time in a school library lesson/schedule. We read and discuss literature. We do all of this through the lens of a school librarian, which is often very different from that of a classroom teacher.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that schools are different in different parts of the state and that our Pre-K–12 students are often defined by where they grow up. The courses that are available to students varies greatly depending on the school system. For example, some school systems offer a wide variety of elective and vocational classes while others offer very few options. The racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences within the state are noticeable and often extreme. In one

part of the state, students are in class with learners from thirty different countries. Students speak many languages, practice many religions, and see many custom differences each day. Other parts of the state are extremely homogeneous. Some school libraries have budgets of tens of thousands of dollars while other school librarians are given no budget and must raise their own money to purchase new books for the library. Facilities and resources are not distributed equitably throughout the state, but this was apparent to me only when I had the opportunity to spend time in various school libraries around the state.

**JEN:** I'm still in the very beginning of my time in higher education. I have many lessons ahead of me. One great lesson I have learned is that some school librarians have great autonomy and are able to experiment with new ideas and build school libraries that are sensitive to the needs of their respective schools. Others have very limited flexibility in what they are able to do based on the structure of the school system for which they work. Regardless of the environment one of our aspiring school librarians ends up in, positive

change can always happen. Even in an environment in which the school librarian has little autonomy, it is important to note that even baby steps can eventually add up to a giant leap.

## Conclusion

**KARLA AND JEN:** As educators and librarians, we all transition through a number of stages. We start out in our jobs as apprentices and novices, then begin taking on more responsibilities as we become more confident in our jobs. Making the transition from Pre-K–12 to higher ed is no different. While we were both at points in our careers at which we were comfortable and felt good about our abilities, we were ready for new challenges. Higher ed has certainly provided that! We are constantly humbled by the responsibility and the opportunities we have been given. We are still school librarians at heart, but our reach is even greater in our new positions.



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Virginia. She serves as chair of the Virginia Association of School Librarians (VAASL) Scholarship and Awards Committee. She also serves on AASL's Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee. In 2011 she was named Hungary Creek Middle School Teacher of the Year, and in 2012 VAASL gave her its School Librarian of the Year Award. She is the author of *Multimedia Learning Stations: Facilitating Instruction, Strengthening the Research Process, Building Collaborative Partnerships* (Englewood Pearson 2015).



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