

Annie Pho and Dustin Fife

# The cost of librarianship

Relocating for work and finding community

**A**cademic Library Workers in Conversation is a bimonthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors, and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the frontlines. This issue's conversation addresses relocating for work and the problematic norms that librarianship and higher education reinforce.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Annie Pho (AP):** I've been a librarian for a decade and I've been reflecting a lot on my career so far. It's wild to me how much has changed in the profession and my life over the last 10 years. I've moved to four libraries, three states, five cities, and seven apartments. That is enough uprooting and changes for a lifetime, and I can't say that it didn't take a toll on my personal life. But I remember being told when I was in library school that to actually get a job in an incredibly competitive field with a limited number of positions, I had to be willing to move anywhere. At the time, I really bought into that narrative and found myself applying for jobs across the country. I had felt I put too much into getting my degree financially to not be able to have a job at the end of it, so I was very open to moving anywhere. I applied for more than 60 jobs before I landed an offer for my first position at the University of Illinois Chicago. From there, I ended up moving to Los Angeles and then to San Francisco. As a person of color in my MLIS program, I did feel isolated and put up with a lot of microaggressions, so I was relieved to not only have a full-time position but to also be moving to a larger, diverse city. I have felt fortunate to have worked in cities. That has worked for my career and personal needs.

Dustin, what was your professional journey, and did you ever receive similar advice?

**Dustin Fife (DF):** Annie, you've truly been on a journey, and I'm excited to discuss libraries and living situations with you. I have had to move repeatedly to advance my career, and while I haven't covered as many miles as you, I have come to believe that librarianship does not do enough to mitigate this reality. My movements were different from yours in at least one sense: on several occasions I moved to rural and remote areas of the world. Places that I am not sure I would have considered if I hadn't wanted a job in a particular professional field. I, too, repeatedly received the advice that being able to move was essential to a

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successful career in librarianship and took it to heart. However, the more I think about my professional path, I realize how problematic that advice is and how it re-creates privilege in our field, especially on the academic side of librarianship. My positionality—as a white, cisgendered librarian in management positions—has allowed me to thrive in these situations, but I know that others have been kept out, and I wonder how we can move away from some of these practices.

Annie, what do you think of that advice now that it has helped shape such a big chunk of your career?

**AP:** I look back on how much moving to new states and cities has taken a toll on my personal life, but I am also grateful to be where I am now with my career and where I live. I'm glad you mentioned your positionality and privilege in being able to move to more rural areas. That advice to move anywhere for a job could take a very heavy toll on someone to be the only person of color in their library, and then when they leave work, to be in an area that might be hostile towards BIPOC, trans folks, or where women have limited autonomy over their own bodies. That's one of the wildest things that I did not expect to happen over my library career, to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned and now see the impacts on women in states with laws that outright limit and punish reproductive rights. So no, this advice definitely does not apply anymore.

On top of that, we are also seeing states that punish schools and libraries for teaching critical race theory and African American history. Things are not safe for people who hold marginalized identities, so now I would caution new professionals to make sure wherever they go, they have a safety network in place or a community to support them.

With all of this in mind, how would you approach advising new librarians in their job searches?

**DF:** Truthfully, Annie, I would advise people to consider whether relocating is a realistic professional step they can commit to before ever joining librarianship. I know that is not always possible, but especially true for people who want to work at colleges and universities. If relocating multiple times is not something you are able to do, you must be prepared for limited opportunities.

I am not saying this to deter folks, but to beg library administrators and managers to consider the reality of working in libraries and to try and make things more accessible for the next generation of library workers. We need to ask ourselves several questions, and this list is by no means exhaustive. How are institutions supporting pipelines through tuition support and waivers? How is the profession creating development opportunities for people already working in libraries? How is the profession recruiting from within our communities to support compositional diversity and community connection? What supports are we providing for moving assistance, housing assistance, and so forth? Librarianship and higher education are built upon predatory practices that see labor, and especially women's labor, as inherently replaceable, and that is why there are so few individual solutions.

With all that said, I enjoy my work and I am not someone who believes I would be fulfilled doing any nine-to-five job. I have a passion for librarianship, so I have accepted the reality of how advancement (at least the type of advancement I relate to) works. I just hope to use my privilege and positions to move the needle at some level to change these dynamics.

Annie, with all that said, what has been your experience adjusting to new cities, states, communities, and institutions?

**AP:** In a lot of ways, I went into librarianship a little naive. I felt very willing to leave my hometown because I grew up in a smaller, suburban area and my family had moved away to another state after I graduated from high school. My parents are refugees, so I was raised with this mindset of “move for opportunities. Home is where you make it,” so I went to library school in a mid-size city in another state because I graduated from undergrad during a recession, and I felt stuck in my smaller town. At the time, I really needed a change. For the last decade, my life has been a series of moving cities or apartments for career or for personal reasons. It’s been a lot!

Because I have moved so much in my life, I also feel like I know how to put down roots fast. I always work on unpacking my boxes and making my new place feel like home immediately. Unfortunately, I also feel like moving around is how a lot of people can move up in their positions. It seems rarer that someone is promoted within their library by staying in one place. This seems true for all industries, not just libraries. I have preferred working in institutions located in diverse cities because I am an Asian American woman. I feel more comfortable being able to access my communities and have access to cultural institutions. In some ways, living and working in bigger cities has made it a little easier for me to build relationships and community.

I know some people look at librarians who seem to only know other librarians as friends, but truth be told, it is really hard to make friends as an adult! Most of my newer friends have been either through work or through professional networks, and now I’m happy to have friends all over the world. I’ve also tried building community by volunteering with local organizations and taking classes in things I’m interested in.

I’m curious about your take on this. What would you say to being friends with a lot of library people? Or do you find a way to balance that with your personal life too? What is the cost of this professional advice to move around for career advancement?

**DF:** Annie, moving has taken a toll on my personal life as well. I have had trouble maintaining long-term friendships because I have moved every three to six years since joining librarianship. This is partially a personal failure and choice, but some of it is built into the structure. Friends in libraries have been very consistent for me as local relationships have fizzled. I think the most important thing here is just saying some of these things aloud and admitting where and when it has been a struggle. Wrestling with what the profession has and will ask of each of us. There is no one “right” way to do this, but there are common experiences. Some people have many library friends, and that is fine. Some people have no library friends, and that is also fine. Finding your community (in-person, online, on a riverboat) is an important thing I’m hearing from you, and I couldn’t agree more.

Remembering that not everyone needs the same thing is what I want to add to your advice. The thing that has helped me the most has been finding mentors and colleagues that have supported me since before library school and have had honest conversations with me about all these professional experiences.

However, there can be no doubt that we must do more to support folks if we want library workers to thrive. Moving stipends are essential. Tuition support for local community members seems like a no-brainer. Internal mechanisms for advancement and growth can and should be strengthened. Librarianship can ask a lot of library workers, but others need not be as naive to these complexities as you and I. I do not regret my choices. Moving to rural areas has strengthened me professionally. However, I want librarianship to support more

library workers, many who have not been given the opportunities I have, so moving should be one way for advancement, not the only way.

Annie, any final thoughts or words of advice when it comes to moving and building community?

**AP:** Reflecting on this conversation, I think it's important to acknowledge that every single person in our field has their own journey and needs, whether that's wanting to live in a big city or preferring a more rural setting. There are pros and cons for each. But really, we don't talk enough about the emotional impact that uprooting your life and moving for a career has on people. Not only is it really expensive financially, but there is also a cost if you are moving to a place where you don't have a community. I don't think people should have to suffer through this silently, and I hope as a profession we start talking more openly about this reality to challenge this norm. My hope is through having more open dialogue, we can also begin to build community and hear from other folks who have been through similar experiences. Home is where you make it, but for me, there is no home without community. ✂