

Rhonda Huisman

## Lifelong learning

### Moving beyond the library degree

**A**mere four months into my new position at a large state university (4 months, 13 days since I graduated with my second master's degree), I had already begun to explore the option of continuing my education. A third master's degree? Out of the question. The only reasonable step is considering a doctoral degree. The obvious question is: Why can't I be satisfied with being "done" with my formal education?

I started my journey to librarianship in a round-about way, similar to many of my colleagues. Having children and getting married at a very young age (and the financial burdens that come with it) contributed to my stop-and-go journey through my undergraduate degree. After ten years of taking one class at a time, nights, weekends, and even a few correspondence courses (before online), I finally finished my bachelor's degree. It was extremely satisfying, and an accomplishment that wasn't without immediate monetary and professional benefits: two weeks before I graduated, I already had a signed contract to teach, and I knew that I could begin to provide more stability for my family. I am a first-generation college graduate—encouragement from my family aside, I had something to prove to myself.

After teaching for a short time, I decided to get my master's degree in education. I left my job, but soon recognized that without a second salary, our family was not going to stay afloat for long. I saw an ad for a library position at a local community college and decided to apply. I ended up staying for six years, and in the duration

I finished my education degree as well as my master's in information science and learning technology. The library bug bit me, and I have never been happier.

Now, with degrees in hand, my kids getting older, and a great new position, what could be holding me back to make that next step? I had made some faulty assumptions about librarians at a large, research university: specifically, attaining a doctoral degree was the obvious educational path that most librarians chose. There were some surprising facts that I discovered about librarians and their doctorates (not just in library science). First, many librarians who have their doctorates obtained them before becoming librarians; it must have been all of those late nights studying and bonding with the reference desk staff that attracted them to the profession. In fact, 72 percent of doctoral students didn't decide to become librarians until they were either in their program of study or shortly after.<sup>1</sup>

Second, according to a 2006 ALA member demographic study, only 5.7 percent of academic librarians hold a doctorate<sup>2</sup> and most library directors/deans do not have their doctoral degrees. ACRL declared that the MLS was the terminal degree for academic librarians in 1975.<sup>3</sup> Many academic librarians hold full faculty status without

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a doctorate, and from my own cursory look at the schools' Web sites in the fall of 2009, 8 out of the 10 "Big 10" schools' library deans or directors do not have their doctorates (the others hold doctoral degrees in business and history). As it turns out, the principal reason that people decide to pursue their doctorate is intrinsic motivation.<sup>4</sup> Not salary, promotion, or job pressure, not even the prestige of having the title or having peer equality. Pure and simple: personal incentive.

This topic came up on the collib-1 electronic lists a year or so ago, and the discussion went on for a least a week, with all types of opinions rolling in, much of it a blend of the professional benefits such as rank, pay, and peer respect; their own personal circumstances for getting (or not getting) their doctoral degrees; in addition, many forewarnings about just how difficult getting a doctorate really is. Trying to juggle a career and family, along with the rigors of research could be daunting for some, if not impossible when you throw in committees, service, teaching, etc.

But, the resounding argument from all of the contributors was this: if you don't really want it for your own personal reasons, think about another path. List member Susan Smith, who received her doctorate six years ago, acknowledged, "Sometimes it was hard and frustrating and I wondered why I was doing it, but I reminded myself how much I was enjoying the subject matter, the classes, the discussion, the feeling of comradeship with fellow classmates and professors and I knew I was in the right place. I did it because I wanted to know more, study something more in-depth, be exposed to ideas and people."<sup>5</sup>

Steven Bell chimed in, as well, inquiring: "...4 or 5 years down the road you earn your doctorate—how will you feel if you don't get a better job, promotion or raise? Will you be disappointed?"<sup>6</sup> That's a lot to mull over, but he's right.

Am I ready for this next step? What are the financial and emotional costs, and what

will this do for my career? I have already proven a lot to myself and my family, but do I need more? Will it make me a better librarian, or who am I trying to impress? I have a lot to give to my students, faculty, and colleagues—but can I do that without an EdD or PhD?

My affirmative answer is yes. I care deeply about my position, the possibilities of moving up the ladder, and having a better salary, but the way I see it is: Would I regret not doing it? My strengths and passion for learning will guide me down the long path to that coveted three-letter title, and something (my intrinsic "mojo") is telling me that there is more for me to study and experience before I hang up my backpack and put away my highlighters.

I enrolled in my first research class last fall. Wish me luck.

## Notes

1. Thea Lindquist and Todd Gilman, "Academic/Research Librarians with Subject Doctorates: Data and Trends 1965-2006," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 8, no.1 (2008): 36.

2. Denise M. Davis, "Keep Out the Hair Dye....Member Demographic Survey Update," ALA Member Demographic Studies. (2006) [www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/membershipsurveys/keepoutthehairdye.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/membershipsurveys/keepoutthehairdye.pdf).

3. Statement on the Terminal Professional Degree for Academic Librarians. Approved as policy by the ACRL Board of Directors, a division of the ALA, on January 23, 1975. Reaffirmed by the ACRL Board of Directors, June 2001 and June 2007. The master's degree in library science from a library school program accredited by ALA is the appropriate terminal professional degree for academic librarians, [www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/statementterminal.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/statementterminal.cfm)

4. *Ibid.*, 38.

5. Susan Smith, post to collib-1 electronic list, August 12, 2009.

6. Stephen Bell, post to collib-1 electronic list, August 12, 2009. ♪