Theological Librarianship from a Distance

Abstract

This essay examines distance theological librarianship and the field's suitability for remote librarians. A brief introduction to the landscape of online programs in theological education is followed by an overview of virtual librarianship, and how theological librarians may serve students while working from a distance themselves.

The essay then describes a method for initiating a remote librarian position in a theological library context, and then outlines the steps for determining whether remote work is feasible and desirable at an institution, approaching leadership with a plan, setting up a trial remote work period, and assessing its success.

Particular emphasis is given to communication expectations, modes of virtual reference and instruction, campus committee service, and meaningful ways of remaining part of the campus community.

Introduction

Librarians have played an important role in extending to distance students access to resources that are foundational to a solid education. Through the use of interlibrary loan, e-resources, and virtual tutorials, librarians have adapted to serving students who may never set foot in the library building. Telecommuting in the library field is not new,[1] however. As librarianship progressively moves online, opportunities increase for librarians to work from anywhere.[2]

Remote Theological Education and Librarianship

Theological librarians have faced particular challenges associated with a field of research that has not shifted to online modalities as quickly as others have. Publishers in theological disciplines have been notoriously slow in releasing research materials in digital formats. However, as this is changing, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has opened the door for online programs, and now accredits fully online theological degrees. With theological education increasingly migrating to online environments, librarians in the field may wish to consider thoughtfully full-time telecommuting opportunities. Remote librarianship will never be ideal for every school, librarian, or program, but may be an option that benefits students and faculty when appropriately considered.

Benefits of Remote Librarianship

Empathy

Remote librarianship is an opportunity with many advantages for patrons, librarians, institutions, and the environment. For example, librarians who do most of their own work remotely may have a unique affinity to patrons who rely on virtual resources for their research and learning experiences. A librarian who is completely dependent on digital access for obtaining and disseminating information may well understand what particular challenges confront students and faculty who are in the same position. Experience is a great way to appreciate the time and resource restraints that exist in a field

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[1] Schaffer, Ellen, "Telecommuting," *Trends In Law Library Management and Technology* no. 4 (1995): 4

[2] Smith, Dawn and Teresa B. Van Dyke, "A Telecommuting Interlibrary Loan Librarian's Experience: The Views of Both the Telecommuter and the On-Site Supervisor," *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserves* 18, no. 4 (September 2008): 449-455.

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that continues to rely greatly on print materials. Remote librarians who work alternate schedules may also find ways to expand services through extending virtual reference and instruction hours, and offering new digital resources.

Flexible Work Environment

Remote librarianship enables a librarian to continue working through changes in life circumstances. It is not uncommon for librarians to need to move to find a faculty position that matches their qualifications, and flexibility to move can be hampered by family and other obligations. Historically, librarians who could not find a position in the same city as their spouse would have to consider physical separation or a career sacrifice for either spouse. Telecommuting helps keep families together.

Potential Cost Savings

Colleges and universities also benefit from enabling librarians to work remotely. Remote work cuts costs that schools may incur for moving new faculty or having to hire a new librarian if one needs to move away due to life circumstance. In the same vein, it enables organizations to attract and retain talent they would otherwise lose. Remote work is often associated with a decrease in unscheduled absences and an increase in employee satisfaction, and it promotes a healthy work/life balance.[3] Librarians who work from home save campus space and resources, which in turn saves money while benefiting those who remain on campus.

Environmental Benefits

Finally, remote librarianship is good for the environment. Reducing or removing the commute equals fewer cars on the road, which reduces the impact on natural resources and wear and tear on transportation infrastructure. Reducing the number of cars on the roads also helps to alleviate road congestion and traffic accidents.[4]

Considering Remote Librarianship as an Option

Telecommuting thus offers a broad range of potential benefits, which is one reason it has been on the rise over the past several years.[5] However, remote work is not equally suitable for every line of work, or at every institution, and a librarian seeking to pursue full-time remote work should consider a variety of factors. The following suggestions are developed from a personal experience moving from an on-campus position to a remote position. The recommendations are guidelines that would need to be adapted to individual situations and institutions.

A librarian who wishes to determine whether her position is suitable for remote work might begin by evaluating how patrons' needs are being met at present, and the environment surrounding the library's services. In addition to students, academic and theological librarians serve faculty, staff, and community patrons, and it is imperative that the needs of all of these patron groups be considered when reviewing the feasibility of remote work. As online theological education expands, and librarians strive to provide parity of resources and services to on-campus and distance students, the possibility for effective librarianship and positive value derived from a remote librarian on staff may increase.

A librarian will also want to investigate whether she and her institution have access to the resources necessary to continue effective librarianship offsite.

Consider the following questions about whether your institution is so equipped:

- Does my institution have the necessary technological infrastructure and support for me to work effectively from a remote location?

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[3] Global Workplace Analytics. "State of Telework in the US – Five Year Trend and Forecast," 23. (globalworkplaceanalytics.com).

[4] Ibid.

[5] There are useful data available on the percentage of employers offering telecommuting as an option to their employees from 2009 to 2013. Example: http://0-www.statista.com.library.regent.edu/statistics/256028/share-of-employers-offering-telecommuting-to-their-employees/ .

- Does my library have a strong virtual presence, including a robust website and online research resources?

- Does the librarian have the tools to respond to reference questions from outside the physical building, such as real-time chat services and video conferencing capabilities?

- Does the institution have the equipment for me to participate in necessary functions for my job, such as a Virtual Private Network (VPN)?

Consider the following questions about whether you personally are equipped:

- Do I have the necessary technology to work remotely?

- Am I able to provide resources that are necessary for my job that the university/seminary may not be willing to provide? Examples may include: a computer with a video camera and quality microphone, and a phone where I can be reached by students and faculty during business hours.

- Do I have a stable Internet connection?

- In what ways can I serve my patrons' unique needs remotely?

Devising a Plan

Once one has established that the technological resources are in place, it is also critical to develop a service plan that details how one will meet the needs of patrons from this new service model. This may include listing all of one's position expectations, and explaining how each expectation will be met with superior quality. For librarians who are considered faculty, one must address how service scholarship, and professional librarianship requirements will be met. This may involve itemizing how committee service will continue, how reference services will be provided, and how one will actively contribute to the library field.

One method of evaluating one's specific position is to list all the tasks involved in the position and label each task as green, yellow, and red. Tasks marked green are ones that are already completed 100 percent online and would not change in a virtual setting. An example of a green task would be e-mail exchanges with students. Yellow tasks are tasks that are well-suited to be completed remotely but would require an element of change. For example, one may attend all meetings in person, but arrange to attend future meetings virtually through video conferencing. Finally, any tasks marked red are ones that demand physical presence. An example of a red task may be helping to set up an event that is taking place in the library.

The ratio of green and yellow tasks to red tasks may be a good indicator of whether further consideration should be made for remote work. A librarian seeking to create a proposal will want to address how any tasks labeled red will be handled should she move into a virtual position. This may involve regular or sporadic visits to campus, recommendations to shift around tasks with others who will continue to work on campus, or finding a creative way to work around the challenge. Ultimately, a remote librarian should invite the same level of accountability as librarians who work on campus.

Sharing the Plan

Devising a specific plan enables one to approach leadership responsibly and with confidence. Prior to approaching leadership with a proposal for remote library services, it may be helpful to evaluate whether there are already any precedents at your institution for remote work. Do other full time faculty or staff members have permission to work remotely full-time? Share your own proposed list of tasks and map out how each will be addressed. If feasible, recommend a trial period during which you can demonstrate with specific criteria that remote librarianship is effective in this new setting, and the prospects for such services filling a unique need for the institution. Finally, provide outcomes that explain how your distance work will not just benefit you, but the entire institution.

As mentioned above, a great way to ease into virtual work is to start with a trial period, which will enable a librarian to demonstrate how well her plan functions without requiring up front a firm commitment from the administration.

Consider the following for a trial period:

- Set firm dates for starting and ending the trial period.

- Establish communication expectations, in terms of frequency and method of contact.

- Create a list of goals that are measurable and specific to be completed during the trial period.

- Determine how a negative experience will be handled, whether the librarian will try to adjust the situation, plan to return to campus work, or phase out of her position.

Assessing the Outcome

An effective way to assess the outcome of a trial is to set goals in advance and procedures for reaching them. Goals may include developing new modes of instruction and reference that meet new needs, such as expanding reference hours virtually, taking on new responsibilities that may be completed virtually, and/or increasing scholarship in the library field.

Establish communication expectations with both leadership and your colleagues, as these expectations will likely shift when moving from an on-campus to distance setting. For example, you may need to communicate more often with your supervisor about what you are working on and timelines for projects.

A librarian equipped with a firm plan for telecommuting and who has successfully completed a trial period should be in a solid position to begin full-time remote work. Working from home requires one to be self-motivated, organized, and reliable.

Tips for Remaining Part of the Campus Community

A great challenge associated with remote work is finding ways to be an active part of the campus community. Instructors confront this challenge in online courses through live sessions, discussion forums, and connectedness through social media. Librarians who desire to work remotely do not necessarily have to sacrifice the sense of community that is often associated with a campus presence.

The best way to remain part of the campus community is to be proactive about being involved. Set high communication expectations, and remain fully engaged with the available resources. This may mean becoming adept at attending meetings and events through video chat and phone conferencing. When available, introductory library courses and courses where a librarian is embedded can be great communication tools for connecting with students. Online orientations, research guides, and courses are opportunities to share photos, voice through audio, and written thoughts as a way to connect with others. Librarians who work in the physical library may find that distance students who travel to campus have come to "know" them by connecting through these resources. This works both ways and can be a great tool for distance librarians to know and be known as well.

As many students travel to campus for modular classes and short-term visits, consider whether occasional or even regular visits to the physical campus and library are feasible. Depending on the distance and costs associated with travel, a librarian may need to be extra resourceful in order to make this work.

Additionally, a remote librarian may opt to participate in events that are not specifically required for her position. For example, if a school offers a book club, investigate ways that remote students and faculty can participate and make it a point to join from a distance. Theological librarians may also find it particularly beneficial to participate in voluntary prayer, discussion, or other forums.

A remote librarian need not feel isolated, even if she is away from the campus where she works. Look into local professional library groups to make connections and bring new ideas to the library.

Finally, librarians can connect by reading voraciously. Reading a book is like having a conversation with an author, and is a way to be inspired, to think, and to engage with materials on a variety of subjects. Librarians should make it their aim

to be familiar with works in their field, and also with concepts in other fields. Read widely, read often, and use literature as a way to relate to others.[6]

What it Means to be a Theological Librarian

As with many academic/faculty positions, theological librarians are expected to bring a level of expertise and scholarship to their positions. Rebecca Butler states, "According to the literature, the theological librarian must be theologically trained, professionally engaged, and academically published in order to retain authority within the academic environment."[7] Librarians in a variety of settings have demonstrated that reference and instruction services may be effectively offered in online settings. However, theological librarians have often carried almost ministerial expectations such as providing hospitality, [8] offering a ministry of service, and a spiritual focus. Andrew Keck states, "When theological librarians perceive themselves as being in ministry, there is a theological and spiritual focus to their work that adds to their satisfaction and contentment that they are engaged in both the ministry of their institution and the ministry of service possible through theological librarianship."[9] Thus, the question of whether a theological librarian can effectively serve from a distance has a philosophical as well as a technological dimension.

A librarian who is accustomed to building relationships with students on campus, being an integral part of their spiritual formation, or who thrives on fellowship activities with colleagues on campus will need to think deliberately about how these values can be sustained, and even flourish, in a very different environment.

Ultimately, theological librarians as faculty and as ministers in faith have an obligation to serve their community of patrons. Anthony Elia conducted a study in which he asked students their opinion of what the role of a theological library should be. He states, "Students responded collectively, in a single voice, with three specific ideas: a) resources, especially multicultural and cross-disciplinary, from different perspectives; b) professional and dedicated staff to teach and navigate those resources; and c) adequate and amenable space for study and relaxation."[10] A theological librarian must understand her priorities in her vocation, and the way patrons view her role in their educational and spiritual experiences.

The following questions may help guide one's consideration of the remote librarian option:

- What does theological librarianship mean to me and to my patrons?

- What impact would working remotely have on my role as a theological librarian?

- Do resources exist to help me confront challenges associated with meeting my position expectations from a distance?

Conclusion

Technology has added a whole new dimension to education and the workplace. Telecommuting offers a vast number of opportunities to improve the lives of students and educators, but with these opportunities come certain new challenges as well. Through careful consideration of the benefits and costs, as well as detailed evaluations of expectations and results, a theological librarian can find ways to make the most of these expanding opportunities for her own vocational fulfillment as well as the benefit of the broader community.

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[6] Donald G Davis, Jr., "Reading and the Theological Librarian: Some Musings," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 59 (2005): 39-43.

[7] Rebecca Butler, "Expertise and Service: A Call to Action," *Theological Librarianship* 8 (March 2015): 32.

[8] Herman A. Peterson, "Theological Librarianship as Ministry," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 55 (2001): 237.

[9] John E. Shaffett, "Theological Librarianship As a Ministry," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 67 (2013): 74.

[10] Anthony J. Elia, "On the Hermeneutics of Books: How Seminary Students Read and the Role(s) of Theological Libraries," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 63 (2009): 193.