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No JD? No Problem: AALL Annual Conference Review

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PROGRAM REVIEWS
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NO JD? NO PROBLEM. NAVIGATING LAW LIBRARIANSHIP WITHOUT A LEGAL EDUCATION

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I was thrilled to see this session description leading up to the virtual conference. I was the target audience: new to the profession (I didn't start in a librarian position at UGA School of Law until 2018), without a JD, and managing "imposter syndrome" (of course who among us doesn't tick that last box?!). How refreshing this session was, as I am only one of two professional librarians at my law library without a JD. Although (as the speakers point out) it is becoming more common for law librarians not to have a JD, it is still more likely that they have one than not. In fact, I have yet to meet other law librarians in person who do not have a JD, with the exception of my own position's predecessor and one other colleague. When I do hear about other non-JD law librarians, they tend to hold the types of positions I am in (technical or otherwise specialized).

The presenters of "No JD? No Problem" confirmed this observation, sharing that they too are in non-JD (but no less professional) librarian positions where certain skills and experience are very common. For example, tech-centric positions (technical services, electronic services, computing services, and systems)—or other niche positions where non-law backgrounds are highly beneficial (such as archives, art, history, English, and public relations)—seem to be the most likely job descriptions that do not require a JD. This combination of experience-based skills and specialized non-law backgrounds was a recurring theme throughout the panel of speakers. They shared their personal backgrounds a bit, as well as some techniques they have picked up along the way. A huge factor panelists and attendees shared was "luck," based on unique experiences that were not necessarily planned out. For one panelist, an internship and then a different job at an organization led to her current position within the same organization.

A big eye-opener for me came from the data panelist, LiMin Fields: According to the 2019 AALL Salary Survey, there are actually far more non-JD librarians in this profession than I would have expected—43.2% held an MLS or MLIS and no JD. However, among academic law libraries, only 31% were JD-less. The AALL Career Center statistics were just as eye-opening: between January 2018 and February 2020 more than 37% of law librarian positions required only an MLS or MLIS—outnumbering dual-degree requirements (less than 36%), and JD-only (less than 5%) positions. Just seeing these stats was huge for me, and instantly made me feel less alone. The data really break the category of non-JD jobs down, indicating far more positions related to "Operations" and "Professional Legal Management" are available without a JD than positions in "Legal Education."

Some other big takeaways for me were about overcoming initial learning curves when entering a new position. This advice could apply to anyone who is an entry-level law librarian, someone changing careers, or just taking on a new role at a different institution. Several excellent examples were given about shadowing others and learning from individuals at other libraries to better understand your own role and gauge expectations. The live discussion was also helpful, with other attendees chiming in to share their own tips— including non-JD legal education programs, or auditing courses.

Some reassuring notes in the discussion from JD law librarians brought home the fact that we all have imposter syndrome: "Even those of us that have JDs don't know a lot either…." One of my favorite moments in the session occurred when the panelists discussed the challenges they have had to overcome in not having a JD. Panelist Sharalyn Williams confesses it is her own fear of not knowing the subject matter as well as her patron or colleagues that is often the biggest challenge. She advises a strategy: create a research guide—for her, the process is as much a tool for herself as for the audience, in that just creating one helps her better educate herself on both the subject and the resources. She also recommends that you realize and keep reminding yourself: "You know more as a librarian than 1L students know about law … I'm not teaching them a subject. I'm teaching them about the databases ... I just need to be able to teach them how to manage and navigate these resources."

One of the best parts about attending this session, although virtual, was the organic networking that took place during and after the stream. As with many other sessions from AALL2020, members in attendance were live-tweeting and sharing takeaways on social media just after the session. I "met" two other non-JD law librarians this way literally during the session. It was wonderful! There were even chats in the discussion thread about the idea of a non-JD caucus floating around! (*That would be sweet, by the way.*) If it had not been for tuning into "No JD? No Problem," I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet these individuals. Now I am excitedly following them, and look forward to continuing to explore and expand this circle of non-JD law librarian colleagues. //