

TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR OWN CAREER

In recent months, the Western Australian library landscape has seen three library professionals move into high profile roles in the state's universities. Edith Cowan University Librarian Constance Wiebrands, Curtin University Librarian Catherine Clark, and University of Western Australia (UWA) University Librarian Jill Benn are in important, influential positions, poised to enable their libraries to 'make a difference' as Jill describes it, and to be, in Con's words, 'a valued partner' for their parent organisations, as well as working together to increase collaboration between WA's universities.

Con Wiebrands has been working in academic libraries for 15 years, and has held a number of roles prior to her appointment as University Librarian at Edith Cowan University in December last year. Catherine Clark worked in public, special and academic libraries for 25 years, before taking up her position as University Librarian and Director of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library at Curtin University last August. Jill Benn took up her present role as University Librarian for UWA in September 2014, and has been working in the LIS sector since 2001.

For a new graduate, the top job can seem a long way away, but everyone has to start somewhere, and these librarians are great examples of the different paths a successful career can take. A lot is said to students and new graduates about career planning, but that tends to assume a new graduate knows from the beginning the direction they want to take. That's not always the case.

While academic librarianship has been Catherine's chosen career from the beginning, she didn't have a detailed vision in place. Her career has included working as a children's librarian in a public library and she's also had a stint in special libraries, including working in London before returning to Perth and moving into the academic library world.

Though never having had a formal five year plan, Catherine does think setting goals is important. 'I am a big believer in 12 month plans – you do need some targets to work towards if you would like to move into new roles and keep your work interesting, she says.



Constance Wiebrands, Edith Cowan University

Jill says she didn't really have a vision either, but she did know she wanted to be a librarian. 'I knew I wanted to make a difference, to deliver a high level of service, and to foster a positive workplace,' she says.

While her library career has been mostly in academic libraries, initially Jill thought she would work in state and public libraries, until, she says, a position at Curtin University made her feel academic libraries would be the career she would pursue. But within a few years of taking up a position with the Law Library at UWA, she found herself seconded to a senior management role. She says she never looked back.

'I find leading people to provide a high level of service the most stimulating, challenging and enjoyable part of my role,' Jill says.

Con says she always knew academic libraries were for her. 'Once I started my first job in a university library (as a trainee librarian at Curtin University), I knew that this was the right sector for me,' she says.

Even so, her career path has not been a straight road. She's also undertaken a chef apprenticeship, and worked as a research assistant, and as an Indonesian and Mandarin language tutor.

Chronic tendonitis put paid to a life flipping pans, prompting Con to revisit her career options. It's been a happy and fruitful choice. 'I love the idea that my work contributes to the creation of new knowledge that might help solve problems and make life better for people,' she says.

Whether you're a secret career plan spreadsheet fiend or tend to just go with the flow, Con, Jill and Catherine agree mentors are important to help you along the way. In all their careers, formal and informal mentors have played a part, including more senior staff in the workplace who have been on hand to support and guide them, helping develop the critical skills needed to progress their careers.

Con recalls her reluctance to take on an acting management role. 'I told my boss that I wasn't interested because I liked getting my hands dirty and doing stuff,' she says. 'He laughed at me and said: 'What do you think managers do?' That made me realise that I was basing my reluctance to step out of my comfort zone on assumptions and that I really didn't know what the manager did.'

So she shook off her previous assumptions, took a chance, and found she loved working as a manager. 'I am so glad he challenged me when he did,' she says now. 'Today I still have, and value, colleagues who question and criticise me, and it's what keeps me constantly thinking, learning and trying new things.'

Jill says mentors have played an extremely important and valued part in her career. In 2010, Jill participated in a leadership program at her university, through which she was mentored by a very senior professional colleague. 'This,' she says, 'has taken my mentoring experience to a new level, challenging me in new ways.' Jill says the experience has been instrumental in developing her understanding of the higher education sector more generally. She is now a mentor herself and says she's finding it just as rewarding as being mentored.

Catherine is 'eternally grateful' to the senior librarians who supported her to develop her skills 'in just the right way at the right time. They have gently steered me towards where I am today,' she says.

Along with the importance of mentors, these three professionals are also agreed on the value of membership of a professional network. All three are Members of ALIA and have been active on various committees, taking on roles ranging from marketing and convening conferences to tutoring, and taking every opportunity for personal professional development they could find.

'ALIA's association with Health Libraries Australia has opened up so many doors for me,' explains Catherine, 'including joint tutoring with health librarians from around Australia and the United States in the Evidence Based Practice for Librarians' Institute.'

Jill says she gained her first web editing experience working on the conference website for the ALIA Biennial Conference in Perth in 2006. She says, 'Thanks to my network of colleagues and a large amount of determination, I successfully managed to design and deliver the conference website. That's what volunteering is all about – working with others, learning new skills, challenging yourself and having fun.'

Con says everyone told her it was important to network when she was starting out, but she had no idea how to do it. She went along to local ALIA events and slowly got to know her colleagues. She especially values these events for the opportunity to connect with colleagues across all library sectors. These days, she adds, 'social media, particularly Twitter, is essential for me to keep up, learn and connect with others.'



Jill Benn, University of WA

INCITE asked Catherine, Con and Jill what the one piece of advice they would give to those starting out in a LIS career would be. Con replied, 'Your qualification is just the beginning. Be prepared to teach yourself new things and to use what you learn to change, and to build new services for our communities.'

'Never say no to an opportunity offered to you because you think you can't do it,' says Jill. 'The person offering it to you thinks you can, and will provide you with support to reach your potential.'

Catherine also believes it's important to avoid being in too much of a hurry to move up the career ladder. As she learned herself when her children were young, sometimes the work/life balance will mean you stay in one job for a time,' she says.

She adds, 'If you do stay in the same role for a while, keep learning from one month to the next to ensure you stay motivated. Finally, don't expect others to plan your future – the good news is that this is all within your control!'



Catherine Clark, Curtin University