

## Outside Our Wheelhouse: Reflections from Technical Librarians Serving as Interim Public Services Managers

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### Abstract

Libraries often utilize interim leaders to fill essential vacancies. Most literature on interim leadership focuses on the top library administrator position and relatively few articles address the experiences of interim middle managers or discuss the value of librarians leading departments outside their areas of expertise. In this article, a systems librarian and a special collections and archives technical services librarian discuss how they leveraged their technical knowledge and soft skills while leading departments that were not within their fields of expertise. They explain how serving outside their wheelhouses benefitted the organization and enriched their job satisfaction.

### Introduction

Academic libraries often utilize interim leaders to temporarily fill critical positions expeditiously and effectively. Interim leadership roles are significant because they “have the opportunity to make a positive impact on their department or organization even in a short time frame” (Farrell 2016, 997). During the 2020/2021 academic year, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas University Libraries (hereafter UNLV Libraries), placed two technical librarians in pivotal public services leadership positions. Feedback from the Dean of UNLV Libraries, Access Services staff, Safety and Loss Prevention staff, Computer Help Desk staff, branch librarians, human resources staff, and the majority of personnel reporting to the technical librarians indicated that the technical librarians had a positive impact during their time as interim leaders. They raised morale by empowering staff, listening to staff and patrons, documenting concerns, and acting thoughtfully to address issues. They fostered collaboration by creating a safe space for candid multidirectional communication. They utilized technologies to strengthen communication, services, and workflows. In this article, the technical librarians discuss how they leveraged their outside perspectives, soft skills, and technical backgrounds to manage public services, an area well outside their fields of expertise.

## Literature Review

Literature about interim library positions largely focuses on top leadership. Several authors describe their experiences as interim dean/director, provide perspectives on the challenges and rewards of being the “final decision maker” in the library, and discuss the organizational costs and benefits of utilizing internal interim leaders (Munde 2000; Dewey 2012; Bielavitz, Lowe-Wincentsen, and Read 2018). In addition, a national survey of 108 interim academic library deans/directors suggests that utilizing interim leadership to fill staffing gaps in libraries is a common practice (Irwin and deVries 2019, 250).

Libraries often utilize interim middle managers as well as interim deans and directors (Benaud and Null 1991; Weingart 2003; MacAyeal and Ryan 2017). The expectations for interim middle manager roles are different from the leadership responsibilities of interim library deans/directors. In general, “leaders focus on high-level initiatives and managers focus on granular initiatives” (Thomas, Trucks, and Kouns 2019, n.p.). This is especially true for interim manager positions in that an interim is rarely expected to develop long-term goals or high-level initiatives due to the short-term nature of the position (Munde 2000; Weingart 2003; Dewey 2012). Few articles focus on middle manager experiences, and none discuss temporarily working outside one’s primary area of expertise. For example, Weingart, a Science Reference Librarian who served as Interim Head of Audio-Visual Services, shares insights gleaned from several interim department heads who served concurrently at Utah State University Libraries but does not address the experience of temporarily working outside her permanent area of responsibility (2003).

## Background

During the 2020/2021 academic year at UNLV Libraries, 3 out of the 5 division director positions and 6 of 14 department head positions were filled by interim leaders. Kristen Costello and Cyndi Shein (hereafter *we/us/ours*) ventured outside our technical librarian domains to temporarily serve as middle managers in public services. Costello served as Interim Head of Access Services. Shein served as Interim Associate Dean/Division Director. While Shein’s Associate Dean duties were administrative, her Division Director role included administrative and middle manager responsibilities, including supervising Costello. We were appointed by the Library Leadership Team following a transparent, standardized process that began with a library-wide call for volunteers.

*Costello: I am the Systems Librarian in the Library Technologies Division. My primary responsibilities include serving as the central administrator of the UNLV Libraries’ library services*

platform (Alma/Primo) and several associated systems: Google applications used by library staff, Uniprint for public printing, and ILLiad for interlibrary loan. I served as the Interim Access Services Head from May 2021 until July 2022. I was responsible for providing leadership and management for Access Services operations—circulation, reserves, billing, technology lending, stacks management and the automated storage and retrieval system—and overseeing a team of 6 full-time library staff and up to 30 student employees. As is common for interims, I retained responsibilities from my home department (Benaud and Null 1991; Weingart 2003; Irwin and deVries 2019). I fulfilled the duties of both jobs simultaneously; only a few of my responsibilities were temporarily distributed to colleagues in my home division.

*Shein: From 2014 to 2022, I was the Head of the Special Collections & Archives Technical Services Department. My primary role was managing the technologies, workflows, and personnel that conserve, describe, and arrange archival collections to ensure they are discoverable online and accessible to researchers. I directly supervised four full-time employees and oversaw a team that included multiple temporary employees and student assistants. For the 2020/2021 academic year, I served as Interim Associate Dean/Director of Research & Education. In this role I oversaw public services operations at four branches of UNLV Libraries, including access services, computer help desk, makerspace, safety, instruction, outreach, and the liaison program. While in my temporary Associate Dean role, I directly supervised 6 department heads and oversaw a team of 38 full-time permanent employees, multiple contract employees, and up to 60 student assistants. Due to department head turnover, I concurrently acted as head of two departments that reported to me until interim or permanent managers were selected. Given the broad scope of the Associate Dean/Interim Director position and the extra demands of the pandemic, the Dean asked me to focus entirely on my interim role. My primary role was assumed by a colleague in my home department.*

Librarians accept interim roles for a number of reasons and approach those roles with different management philosophies. We were motivated to serve in interim roles in two ways: by a desire to lend a hand during a time of great organizational need and by a desire to grow professionally as individuals. We approached our interim roles as a means of supporting our colleagues and strove to practice servant leadership, which embraces participatory decision making and “is strongly based in ethical and caring behavior” (Spears 2010, n.p.). Our conversations with the personnel we temporarily supervised revealed that some of the management qualities they value most “include dedication, communication, and caring for colleagues and subordinates” (Thomas, Trucks, and Kouns 2019, n.p.). We found that the servant leadership approach engendered transparent communication, mutually respectful relationships,

and better-informed decision making—all of which contributed positively to our teams' progress. We also felt that employing a servant leadership approach alleviated some of the awkwardness that can arise for a supervisor temporarily supervising peers who did not have a voice in their selection.

In addition to a servant leader management style, the support of individuals at every level of the organization contributed to the success of the departments we led. The Dean vested us with the full authority of the positions in which we served, supported the decisions we made, and provided invaluable guidance. Her unwavering public endorsement of us set the tone for how we were received by the teams we temporarily oversaw. The majority of individuals we supervised were experts at their jobs, executed their responsibilities with little or no direction, supported us and their peers, and were wholeheartedly dedicated to serving our patrons. Behind the scenes, the business manager for UNLV Libraries walked us through budget details, the safety team provided gate counts to inform evolving staffing needs and library hours, and the human resources team guided us through unfamiliar personnel situations such as reassignments, disciplinary actions, and, sadly, the death of a team member. Our colleagues' support contributed significantly to our ability to successfully transition from technical roles to interim public services positions.

### **Organizational Benefits**

In general, the benefits that interim managers brought to UNLV Libraries were similar to those experienced at other libraries (Munde 2000; Dewey 2012; Bielavitz, Lowe-Wincentsen, and Read 2018). Appointing internal staff to interim roles allowed UNLV to quickly fill vacant managerial positions, which ensured continuity of operations without a gap in leadership and provided significant salary savings to the organization. As internal candidates, we already knew the personnel, organizational culture, technical infrastructure, and overall workflows, and could hit the ground running (Farrell 2016). As interim managers, we offered a fresh start and acted as change managers. We set aside the management practices of our predecessors and tried to move our teams past any difficult interpersonal histories. Like most interim managers, we strove to lay the groundwork for a smooth transition to the incoming permanent department/division leaders (Bielavitz, Lowe-Wincentsen, and Read 2018).

As interim managers, our main concern and priority was to bring stability and reassurance to our colleagues during times of change. Public service environments are high-volume and fast-paced, and they can be stressful even in the best of times. Given the added anxieties related to leadership transitions, staffing shortages, economic uncertainties, social injustice, health

concerns, and the emotionally charged environment of the times, low morale and burnout were a genuine concern. Glusker, Emmelhainz, Estrada, and Dyess note that being a supportive manager is central to high library staff morale (2020, 176). As managers, we demonstrated our support by fighting for our staff, listening and responding to their concerns, and proving we were trustworthy (Glusker et al. 2020, 166).

As outsiders, we had no part in past interactions that might influence our judgements. We intentionally leveraged our impartiality to eliminate favoritism and foster an environment of fairness, which has been shown to lift morale (Glusker et al. 2020, 172). Because we were not experts in public services, we welcomed and relied upon input from staff. We intently listened to and acted upon the feedback of individuals on our teams, regardless of where they were in the organizational hierarchy (Spears 2010; Meulemans and Matlin 2020; Alexander and Wakimoto 2020). By “centering the perspectives of staff, listening to them, and acting on the ideas they share[d]” we improved staff morale (Glusker et al. 2020, 182).

Listening closely to staff did more than boost morale; it moved us forward. Not knowing previous practice in public services allowed us to ask staff “Why?” or “Why not?” in contrast to predecessors who had told them “No.” In areas where staff had tolerated inefficient or ineffective practices, we collaborated with them to identify and implement solutions—or empowered them to implement solutions they had previously identified. Because we were empowered, we were able to empower others.

*Costello: As Interim Access Services Head, I introduced new technologies and raised the technical skills of the staff with respect to the Library Services Platform and the university's electronic scheduling and communications environment. Because Access Services interacts with a variety of patrons (undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty and staff, and members of the public), there are many nuances in the services offered. For example, undergraduate students are responsible for paying late fees, but graduate students and faculty accounts are not subject to late fees. As a result, Access Services staff couldn't always explain why a fine was a certain amount or why an item had a specific due date. As a technical librarian, I was able to explain how the system applied the fines and which loan rule was used. By sharing technical knowledge, this empowered the staff and positioned them to provide better customer service.*

*Shein: My technical background prepared me to quickly evaluate and greenlight the implementation of technologies that improved virtual services and communication, which was critical when the majority of our students were taking virtual classes due to the pandemic. My openness to the public services teams' ideas during my time as Interim Associate Dean/Director of Research & Education also enabled improvements to onsite operations. Prior to my service as*

*interim, branch managers and the main library staff had voiced a desire for cross-training in order to cover staff absences at the branches. I empowered staff to develop guidelines and training for branch coverage, which allowed the UNLV Libraries to keep all branches open even when individual staff were forced to quarantine or isolate for extended periods due to COVID-19. Even the safety team voluntarily learned circulation desk basics in order to assist in an unexpected staffing shortage. I also obtained Library Leadership's permission to empower branch managers to use their own judgement to enact emergency closures in the event of sudden absences, power outages, or other unavoidable circumstances*

In addition to empowering our teams and sharing our perspectives with them, we also gained new perspectives about public services that will benefit the organization after our interim service is complete (Farrell 2016; London 2020). When we returned to our home departments, we brought with us a much deeper awareness of how our technical roles can support public services more effectively. Going forward, our work will be informed by a deeper understanding of the needs of the users we serve and the pressures experienced by front-line staff. Furthermore, we are confident that the staff we worked with in public services areas will remember that we are their allies and continue to engage in dialogue with us, which will strengthen collaboration and productivity across the organization for years to come.

### **Challenges and Rewards**

In alignment with the experiences described by other interim library leaders and managers, we found that our interim roles brought manifold challenges and rewards (Benaud and Null 1991; Munde 2000; Dewey 2012). The timing of our interim service coincided with the COVID-19 public health crisis and subsequent economic downturn, both of which added complexities and challenges to our experiences. During this time, we found that supporting the well-being of our colleagues was as important and difficult as managing operations.

Instead of managing personnel and operations in a known environment, we had no blueprint to follow, and circumstances demanded that we do more than maintain the status quo as we implemented protocols to reduce the transmission of the virus. Due to the economic downturn that accompanied the pandemic, hiring freezes left vacancies open longer, library patrons and employees were edgy due to the many uncertainties in their lives, and frontline library employees took on the added responsibilities of extra cleaning, quarantining material, restricting access to the building, implementing curbside service, and ensuring patron mask compliance. We were short staffed, some library employees were working entirely remotely, and public services employees on the frontlines were stretched thinly. As managers, we focused on creative ways to

fill vacancies, providing stability, supporting staff, and practices that moved our teams in a positive direction. To cover vacancies, we created temporary lines and hired former student workers who had graduated and knew the jobs and environment. We also successfully advocated for temporary pay increases for existing staff who covered duties outside their classifications to help with vacancies. Both these actions helped alleviate pressure and combat burnout.

While our interim experience was a bit unusual due to the pandemic, the challenges and rewards we experienced were not unique. One of the most complex challenges of an interim role is balancing the short-term nature of an interim position with making decisions to resolve immediate issues that could impact the department long term (Munde 2000; Weingart 2003; Dewey 2012). Although not ideal, interim manager positions inevitably require some decisions and actions that affect long-term operations (Weingart 2003). During our time as interim managers we faced many urgent issues, primarily related to vacant positions, personnel issues, and pandemic protocols, which could not wait. We approached major decisions—such as hiring, termination, and organizational restructuring—with gravity. We made major decisions judiciously and sparingly, and then only in consultation with the departments most affected by the decisions and with approval of the Library Leadership Team. We paused any conversations and decisions that could wait for the incoming permanent leaders.

In contrast to interim managers working in their primary fields, working outside our domains brought distinctive challenges for us. The demands of managing humans and their emotions were very different from our technical jobs. In our technical roles, problem solving is within our control to a large degree; once we complete a migration, customize an application for local use, or troubleshoot a problematic piece of code, we can mark that task as successfully completed and move on. Humans are more complex. We found that our ability to resolve performance issues or interpersonal conflicts was far less within our control than fixing a computer problem. Addressing morale and personnel issues is messy, ongoing work. We found that frequent and candid communication helped us identify and address potential areas of concern before they grew into larger problems. Another adjustment we faced as interim managers in public services is that we did not have a finished product or project milestones as we often do in the technical arena; this made it difficult for us to measure our own progress. We derived our sense of accomplishment from witnessing the professional growth of individual staff and helping our teams advance.

We also experienced challenges directly associated with middle management positions. Successful middle management (interim or otherwise) requires respect and trust from above and below. It was sometimes challenging to navigate issues when the expectations from above and

below did not align. Fortunately, we each felt the full support of our immediate supervisors as well as the support of public services staff, who appreciated our willingness to take on extra responsibilities. They expressed their gratitude that we listened to their concerns and advocated for them, even if we could not produce every outcome they desired. For example, when the Fall 2021 Semester began, the main library's hours of operation returned to pre-pandemic hours. The first few weeks saw very little foot traffic in the building, leading some staff to question why upper management insisted that the library stay open till midnight. This was especially challenging for night shift staff, who had changed their schedules to day shifts the previous year when the library limited its hours because of the pandemic. After discussing these concerns, we reported the gate counts to upper management and asked them to consider earlier closing times for the 2022 Spring Semester. We were unable to offer staff an immediate solution, but they could see that we were listening to them and bringing their concerns before the decision-makers in the library.

Although the challenges of serving as interim managers were considerable, so were the rewards. As others have noted, we found that the financial rewards of our interim roles were insignificant compared to the most meaningful rewards, which were intrinsic (Weingart 2003; Farrell 2016; Irwin and deVries 2019). One of the most noteworthy rewards we found in our service as interim managers was that working with public services raised our own morale. We were extremely grateful that the public services personnel warmly welcomed us, and we experienced a true sense of belonging. Being an integral part of the frontline team during very difficult times gave us a strong purpose. We experienced some of our most rewarding moments while resolving issues or identifying ways to help a team find its way forward.

*Costello: Systems Librarian work can sometimes be a lonely endeavor, toiling away in an office tucked back near the server room. The camaraderie of being part of a public-facing department was completely opposite from the nature of my job prior to the pandemic. After working remotely for more than a year, I had craved the connection of working closely with people, and this experience did not disappoint. I was extremely fortunate to be a part of a team who opened up to me, told me what they needed and wanted, and, I believe, trusted that I would do my best for them.*

*Shein: Like many people across the nation, I felt isolated and helpless in the face of the pandemic, particularly during the four months of state-mandated remote work and the temporary closure of university buildings. Stepping into the Interim Associate Dean/Director of Research and Education role as the buildings reopened boosted my morale because it gave me an opportunity to do something very tangible, which reduced my sense of helplessness. I could help re-open the building, expand access to educational resources, and make decisions about protocols that*



*supported the well-being of our patrons and library personnel. While my technical work may impact a myriad of online users, these users are at a distance and feel somewhat abstract to me. The interactions in public services made the users very human and provided me with an additional source of job satisfaction.*

## **Impact**

*Costello: During my tenure as the Interim Head of the Access Services Department, my colleagues in the Library Technologies Division absorbed some of my Systems Librarian work. For example, when mandatory updates to the Google environment required thorough research and troubleshooting before implementation, colleagues in my home division filled in for me. Luckily, the Library Technologies Division has remained fully staffed in recent years, and its culture of respect and collaboration ensured the projects moved forward without delay. I believe the impact of extending my responsibilities across two departments was beneficial to both units because they overlap in several areas. Because of my expertise, I was able to resolve many technology issues in the Access Services Department immediately, such as problems with printers, iPads, and laptops; therefore, fewer help requests were escalated to Library Technologies.*

*Shein: My service as Interim Associate Dean and Director of Research & Education supported UNLV Libraries during a time of critical need but it came at a cost to my home department. Due to the large portfolio of the interim position, which entailed managing six public services departments and four branches, my permanent position in Special Collections & Archives (SCA) was backfilled by a capable colleague who then had to juggle the duties of two jobs. At the time, the SCA Division had three vacancies, and it lost two more employees while I was in the interim position. Before I began the interim position, I worked with my home department, SCA Technical Services, to reprioritize our goals and place some initiatives on hold. I believe the upside of the situation was that my absence accelerated the professional growth of the librarians who reported to me in SCA. They rose to meet increased demands and new responsibilities while I served in the interim role. They developed closer collaborations and learned to trust their own professional judgment when faced with decisions, which will bring long-term benefits to the department. While I was serving in the interim role, the experience accelerated my own professional growth as well as that of my colleagues. The experience prepared all of us for my departure from UNLV. Shortly after serving in the interim role, I accepted an administrative position at another institution, where I am applying what I learned from my interim experience.*

## Conclusion

Interim leaders and managers can have an enormous impact on an organization and, when successful, are instrumental in supporting the health of both the organization and its personnel. A number of variables influence the level of success an interim leader experiences (Irwin and deVries 2019). With regard to any positive impact we had while serving as interim managers, we credit our servant leader approach, the expertise and dedication of the individuals we oversaw, and the support of colleagues at every level of the organization. Because the Dean empowered us to fulfill the responsibilities of our interim positions, we were able to help move our teams in a positive direction, not just hold the reins until permanent managers arrived.

As technical librarians from within the organization who served outside our domains, we feel that we brought distinctive benefits to the organization. Our familiarity with the organization and personnel enabled us to immediately focus on urgent issues and begin advancing departmental goals. Coming from outside public services gave us a fresh perspective that helped us transform our teams' ideas into action; it also afforded us a relatively unbiased perspective when mediating conflict or making difficult decisions. Our domain knowledge informed decisions to implement technologies that improved communications and patron services, and it also enabled us to level up the technical skills of our teams. Going forward, we expect the organization to reap continued benefits from our technical librarian/public services cross-pollination.

When recruiting interim managers, we recommend that administrators expand their candidate pools to include librarians from outside the department in need. Evaluation of candidates for interim positions should consider soft skills as well as domain knowledge. Depending on the circumstances, soft skills can be more important than core competencies in a specific field because "the staff in the department know their jobs very well and will perform admirably...The manager's job is to represent them to the library administration, bring the administration's views back to them, and form some coherent synthesis of the two" (Weingart 2003, 240). Characteristics such as flexibility, resilience (particularly under stress), self-efficacy, self-confidence, ability to set and maintain priorities, positive relationships with colleagues, and willingness to delegate are central to the success of interim managers (Weingart 2003; London 2020).

Notably, these soft skills and characteristics that Weingart and London cited as key to successful interim managers are remarkably similar to the personal qualities of service, wisdom, intelligence, and influence that have historically been attributed to strong leaders (Silva 2016). While much of the literature may present very distinct definitions of management and leadership on paper, the lines between the two are not as tidy in reality. Our interim positions were

responsible for services and operations. We found that strong management skills, including organizational skills, time management, critical thinking, and tactical planning, were required to manage logistics. Our soft skills and leadership characteristics enabled us to bring together, support, and lead the people who were delivering the front-line services and carrying out the operations.

Our experience required us to lead *and* manage in order to effectively fulfill our responsibilities. As interim middle managers, we did not lead long-term initiatives or strategic planning from our short-term positions, but we acted well beyond the limited scope of management expressed by Thomas, Trucks, and Kouns (2019). We exercised leadership as we built consensus, motivated people, and influenced processes that led our teams closer to reaching shared goals, and made major decisions that will have lasting impact on the organization (Silva 2016). Although the challenges we faced were amplified by the pandemic, they were not unique. Reflecting on our experiences, we agree with the 90% of interim library leaders surveyed in 2019, who found interim service to be a worthwhile undertaking and would consider serving as an interim leader if presented again with a similar opportunity (Irwin and deVries 2019, 250). The intense demands and challenges of our interim positions were balanced by the intrinsic rewards we reaped, including an increase in our own morale, a renewed sense of purpose, and the trusting relationships we established with colleagues.

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