

Learning, Listening, and Leading

A Systems Librarian's First Year

Amber Wu

INTRODUCTION

Starting a systems librarian role can feel like being dropped into the middle of a complex board game with half the pieces missing and no instruction manual. When I joined California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly Pomona) as the systems librarian after a multi-year vacancy in the position, I quickly discovered that success in this role required much more than technical know-how. This column reflects on that first year—what I learned, the relationships I built, and how I navigated both the challenges and opportunities that came with rebuilding a systems position from the ground up.

LEARN WHILE DOING

At Cal Poly Pomona, the polytechnic experience is central to our educational philosophy, encapsulated in our “Become by Doing” motto that guides student development. The motto also, as it turns out, perfectly captured my experience stepping into the role of systems librarian after a multi-year vacancy.

The reality of joining a library as its systems librarian means embracing a steep learning curve while also making sure that critical library services remain up and running. In my first weeks, I prioritized learning our core platforms—Alma and Primo VE—which touch virtually every aspect of library operations, from acquisitions to circulation and public discovery. Pursuing Alma & Primo VE Administration Certification gave me not only a solid foundation but also some institutional credibility when collaborating across departments.¹

What stood out right away was how quickly learning turned into doing. Within days of certification, I found myself troubleshooting display issues with faculty, adjusting search parameters for research services, and helping access services staff resolve circulation quirks. These day-to-day interactions helped reinforce my technical skills while also building trust with colleagues who had been managing without dedicated systems support.

For other new systems librarians facing similar circumstances, I'd recommend focusing initial learning efforts on the platforms that most directly impact patron experiences and staff workflows. The technical environment in academic libraries can feel overwhelming. Focusing first on the systems that affect user experience the most helps you contribute right away and builds a foundation for future growth.

While that foundation of technical knowledge helped me contribute right away, it quickly became clear that systems work didn't stop at the library's door. To fully support our services, I also had to understand how our systems connected to the wider institutional landscape—people, policies, and processes beyond our immediate control.

About the Author

Amber Wu (amberwu@cpp.edu) is Head of Library Technology Services, Systems Librarian, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. © 2025.

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UNDERSTANDING THE INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

One of the trickier parts of stepping into a vacant role was figuring out how library systems intersected with university-wide platforms and decision-making structures. These connections weren't always well documented or intuitive. Instead, they were often shaped by relationships, historical workarounds, and institutional memory (which I didn't yet have). So I started with what I could do: I set up a series of meetings with people across campus IT, enterprise systems, and other key departments. My goal was to introduce myself, understand their work, and begin building relationships that would become essential down the line.

I approached these early conversations with a simple strategy: listen first. Rather than show up with a list of requests or questions, I asked about their teams, their challenges, and their past experiences working with the library. Some of those initial meetings were awkward—people weren't always sure who I was or why I was reaching out, and I sometimes worried that I was taking up their time without a clear ask. But the awkwardness was part of the process. Those conversations still uncovered valuable context—pain points in past collaborations, areas of shared responsibility, and occasionally, opportunities we hadn't seen before. Don't be discouraged if those first interactions feel a little unnatural. They're still worth having.

Of course, the focus on building these relationships didn't replace the need to also advocate for the library's unique needs. In some cases, we had systems or workflows that didn't fit neatly into campus-wide approaches. Learning how to communicate those needs in terms of shared institutional goals (not just library-specific ones) was key. It helped me frame requests in ways that made sense to IT colleagues while still pushing for the flexibility we needed.

This time investment paid off when technical issues cropped up or cross-campus projects emerged. Instead of starting from scratch, I already had the context and contacts to move conversations forward. Understanding how systems are governed, who makes decisions, and where the library fits into those processes gave me a better ability to represent our needs effectively.

A practical tip I'd offer to others: create a living document that tracks key campus contacts, their roles, the systems they manage, and any insights from your conversations. Keep it updated. Over time, this kind of resource becomes essential—not just for troubleshooting, but for making decisions that align with broader campus priorities.

CONNECTING WITHIN THE LIBRARY

As crucial as broad campus relationships are, the relationships within the library itself are even more vital to success in the systems role. In my case, stepping into a long-vacant role meant other library departments had developed workarounds and ad hoc processes in the absence of systems support. Approaching these conversations with curiosity—rather than critique—was key to building trust.

In my first month, I scheduled a library “listening tour”—a series of informal conversations with department heads, librarians, and staff members—where I aimed to learn as much as possible about their work, their pain points, and how technology could better support their objectives. Through this “inreach,” I was able to learn what systems were most crucial to each department's daily operations (largely as anticipated), what workarounds or modifications had become normalized (which revealed some unexpected adaptations!), and what frustrations or issues

needed the most immediate attention. More importantly I gained some important perspective about how each department viewed and used technology in their work.

These discussions also revealed how interdepartmental dynamics shape system use. Sometimes a change that streamlines one area creates extra work in another. Knowing these relationships helped me anticipate challenges and communicate more effectively across teams. Regular check-ins—whether in meetings or over coffee—have helped keep those lines of communication open. This practice makes sure that systems decisions are never made in vacuum and are always informed by the needs and experiences of those who use these tools daily.

For new systems librarians, remember that you're not just managing technology, you're supporting colleagues who depend on the technology to perform their work. As Janet Guinea observed in her article "Building Bridges: The Role of the Systems Librarian in a University Library," systems librarians often serve as "bridge builders," translating between the technical and non-technical and fostering communication across departments.² The tech matters, but it's the human side of the work that determines whether systems are truly effective.

GROWING INTO THE (GROWING) ROLE

Stepping into a systems librarian role often brings unexpected leadership responsibilities, particularly when joining an organization during periods of transition. At Cal Poly Pomona, my arrival coincided with significant changes in library administration, creating both challenges and unique opportunities for growth.

What surprised me most was how quickly my role expanded beyond technical system management. Within months, I found myself serving as the unit head for Library Technology Services, responsible not just for systems but for managing staff, establishing departmental priorities, and developing long-term strategic goals. For someone who had previously shied away from leadership positions, this rapid evolution pushed me well beyond my comfort zone—but in very rewarding ways.

This transition taught me that technical expertise often serves as just the foundation for the broader impact you can have as a systems librarian. While my technical skills gave me credibility, effective leadership required developing an entirely different skillset: communicating vision, advocating for resources, mentoring staff, and aligning departmental goals with institutional priorities. As Ping Fu notes in *The Journal of Library Innovation*, "Systems librarians are increasingly expected to take on roles beyond technical troubleshooting—including project management, policy development, and strategic planning."³ That observation echoes my own experience: the systems role demands not only technical fluency, but also the ability to navigate organizational complexity and lead change.

To support this professional growth, I've joined an on-campus Faculty Leadership Community. This opportunity will connect me with colleagues across disciplines who face similar challenges, providing both practical strategies and necessary perspective as I navigate my evolving responsibilities. I'd encourage other new systems librarians to seek out similar leadership development opportunities at your institutions—the time investment is well worth the effort as you grow beyond technical expertise into strategic leadership.

What I've learned most clearly in this transition is that while technical proficiency may get you hired, it's your ability to communicate vision, advocate for resources, and align technology priorities with institutional goals that will ultimately define your impact. The systems librarian

role offers a unique vantage point at the intersection of technology and organizational needs—one that positions you to shape not just how systems function but how they advance your library's broader mission.

MAKING SPACE FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

At Cal Poly Pomona, the systems librarian role is tenure-track (something that isn't always the case at other institutions). That structural decision reflects the recognition that systems work is not only technical but also scholarly and strategic. It's what prompted me to think early on about how to plan for professional growth, not just react to daily demands.

Much of my first year was spent building stability: learning platforms, documenting processes, and troubleshooting issues as they came up. But I quickly realized that if I didn't carve out space for research and reflection, it would be too easy for those priorities to fall away. The pace of systems work doesn't slow down on its own. To maintain momentum on scholarship, I had to be deliberate.

I now block dedicated time for research every week, treating it with the same level of priority I would a systems upgrade or departmental meeting. I also plan my scholarship intentionally around the work I'm already doing. Questions that arise from platform configuration, user experience, or data workflows often spark ideas that can be explored more deeply through research or writing.

My involvement in an Ithaka S+R cohort on AI literacy and participation in a linked data working group have helped bridge the gap between daily operations and broader scholarly conversations. These opportunities let me stay connected to current trends while producing work that contributes meaningfully to the profession.

For tenure-track systems librarians, the key is not just finding time, but making it, and doing so with purpose. When research is built into your rhythm, it becomes part of the role rather than something extra to fit in.

LOOKING AHEAD

The first year as a systems librarian presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities, particularly when stepping into a position that has been vacant. The technical learning curve can be steep, the institutional relationships complex, and the leadership responsibilities unexpected. But these challenges are what make the role so rewarding.

What I've discovered in this journey is that success isn't defined solely by technical expertise, though that of course remains the foundation. Success is instead found in the integration of technical knowledge with relationship building, strategic leadership, and ongoing professional growth. These elements work together, each reinforcing and enhancing the others.

For those beginning their own systems librarian journey, remember that the position offers a distinctive perspective at the intersection of technology, user needs, and institutional goals. As Ratledge and Sproles observe, "systems librarians... are becoming more integrated with other parts of the library rather than working in isolation behind the scenes."⁴ The position no longer fits a single mold—some roles now resemble library IT management, others blend deeply into digital initiatives, and many continue to evolve. As technologies shift and institutions adapt, so too will your role. Approaching that evolution with curiosity and purpose will help ensure that your first year (and beyond) isn't just about surviving, but thriving.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Several certification opportunities exist for library systems platforms. Ex Libris offers the Alma & Primo VE Administration Certification through their online Learning Center, which requires completing approximately 15 hours of self-paced courses followed by a comprehensive exam. Other major ILS vendors like OCLC, SirsiDynix, and Innovative offer similar professional development paths.
- ² Janet Guinea, "Building Bridges: The Role of the Systems Librarian in a University Library," *Library Hi Tech* 21, no. 3 (2003): 325–32, <https://doi.org/10.1108/07378830310494508>.
- ³ Ping Fu, "Supporting the Next-Generation ILS: The Changing Roles of Systems Librarians," *The Journal of Library Innovation* 5 (2014): 30–42.
- ⁴ David Ratledge and Claudene Sproles, "An Analysis of the Changing Role of Systems Librarians," *Library Hi Tech* 35 no. 2 (2017): 303–11, <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHT-08-2016-0092>.