Library of Congress Main Reading Room Interview

I contacted the Library of Congress Ask A Librarian Services for my special librarian interview. I was matched with one of the heads of the main reading room onsite at the Library of Congress. The main reading room is reportedly the largest public reading room in the library. This part of the library serves general collections. The library is divided into approximately 15 different reading rooms. Each room has a different format focus, country focus, subject focus, or language focus.

The main reading room covers these general collections: History, Humanity, Social Sciences, and Geneology. The two subject areas of focus in this reading room are Humanities and Social Sciences. A co-head handles History and Geneology. They manage many other reference librarians onsite.

Advice for Special Librarians

They recommend attempting to avail oneself of as much information as possible within the subtype of librarianship that one is interested in. If one has the opportunity to shadow, intern, volunteer, or chat with folks in those areas, do as much of this as possible to gain experience. Once one finds the area they're most drawn to, within that area there usually tends to be a niche or a wave to carve out space for oneself, they report. They also suggest that bringing experience from outside of the library world can be helpful, including personal experience with technology.

Favorite Thing(s) About the Library of Congress

They reports that their favorite thing about the Library of Congress is that no two days are the same. There is so much diversity in the patrons served and the projects worked on. They never know what they and their fellow librarians might be called to do regularly. Although their position is supervisory, they still have the opportunity to perform special projects, create displays, and do reference work. They love the day-to-day changes and the controlled chaos that comes with these changes. They also enjoy the diversity of their team and other staff members.

Special Collections at the Library of Congress

Their favorite collection(s) include rare books. The Library of Congress has a collection of Harry Houdini's materials and other artifacts that fit into the "strange and unusual" category. They describe a unique collection with many occult items, such as tarot cards, Victorian occult ephemera, and unusual manuscripts. "We have so many things that I think people wouldn't associate with us, outside of traditional book collections, ephemera, and physical materials," They state.

The Digital World and Emerging Technologies

They came from an academic library before employment at the Library of Congress. They have been with the Library of Congress for 6 years. Before the academic library, they were an emerging technologies librarian, working in online virtual services. This involved a lot of sandboxing projects and coming up with new ways to interact with the public. "Anything to do with the web and online interactions with the patrons, my team was responsible for," they said. This could be something "basic", such as chat or LibGuides. Other ways their team interacted included other emerging technologies, such as social media, QR codes, et. cetera.

The idea is to transfer assets into the Library of Congress. They continue, "It's a bureaucracy and a government agency, but there's so much work [to do] and it's so huge that I can only scratch the surface." They also work with AI and study how the Library of Congress uses these services. They use it to answer questions and to enable research within the collections. In addition, AI is used to compare how collections are used with machine learning and digitizations to make these collections more available and accessible.

Their team takes old printed bibliographies and print guides and converts them into online user-friendly guides. Their team also creates web content and employs the following tools: social media, chat services, Ask A Librarian, and asynchronous and synchronous virtual instructions, including webinars. During the pandemic, the physical building was closed. Their team thus had an opportunity to expand access to digital collections during this period. They and their colleagues are also studying the concept of chatbots for virtual reference.

Programs for Underserved Populations

There are several things that the Library of Congress does for the underserved. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training is now required by all employees and is done yearly. Within its strategic planning and goals and planning priorities, one of the library's goals is to become a library for all, and different departments across the library interpret this goal somewhat differently. For example, programs are available for the blind and visually impaired (BVI) community. Outreach and programming services for the underserved include speaking with student populations (K-12) that might otherwise be unexposed to the Library of Congress, physically or digitally. Their team shows these students what they can do with the library catalog, and what access they can obtain. They also introduce students to online webinars. This information is available for free. Teachers can find primary source documents that can be used to help them build lesson plans for the year. This includes exposing the students to the totality of

American history, for better or worse. They state that the library does not "cherry-pick" information and attempts to expose students to the wholeness of American history whenever possible. Within the various reading rooms, curators of the general collection ensure that the library's collection preserves history and represents the diversity of students and patrons. The goal is for everyone to see themselves within the collections, which is important to them and their colleagues.

In particular, for the BVI community, the Library of Congress helps the blind and visually impaired with virtual reference. Programs are available in which the Library of Congress loans materials across the country to the BVI community. Audiobooks, screen readers, and physical materials are all shared. The library also developed the BARD program, an application on smart devices that allows direct downloads and access to materials. In the digital realm, huge collections of what are referred to as "talking books" are available.

Onsite, the reading rooms have screen readers. The computers available have built-in accessibility in their third-party sites. A dedicated department in the library will work individually with patrons when specific accommodations are requested.

Summary of Interview

Though our interaction was brief, the librarian was helpful and direct in their information-sharing process. The Library of Congress would be an excellent special library to visit in person. It contains extensive collections onsite and digitally. They were an excellent choice for my interview, and I must thank both the librarian I interviewed and the Library of Congress for working with me.

References

(2024, June 10). *Interview by Rae Eggleston [Zoom].*