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Renee D. Carey
Faith Bible College

Jon Jones
Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary

Laura M. Ladwig
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

J. James Mancuso
Northeastern Baptist College

Deborah H. McConkey
Epic Bible College

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Flying Solo



Renee D. Carey, Librarian, Faith Bible College

**Jon Jones, Director of Library Services,
Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary**

**Laura M. Ladwig, Library Director,
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary**

**J. James Mancuso, VP of Library Services,
Northeastern Baptist College**

**Deborah H. McConkey, Library Director,
Epic Bible College**

*Be strong and courageous for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go!
Deuteronomy 31:8*

ABSTRACT

This article is designed to assist solo librarians in thinking through their libraries, responsibilities, clientele, support personnel, and work habits in order to determine best practices to maximize their professional and personal effectiveness.

Flying solo can be exciting. Just you and the wide-open skies. Riding through the white fluffy clouds to see the vast horizons beyond. You are in total control of your aircraft, and the sky, literally, is the limit. But flying solo as a librarian may not feel as liberating. Your skies may be full of monstrous thunder clouds pouring directly onto your desk that is cluttered with donations to process, requests to fill, and reports to write while administration's thunderous demands are popping your ears. Your plane is off course and you could crash and burn if you do not take corrective measures. It is not too late! Let us offer you some navigational tips to right your plane and once again enjoy your journey.

The American Library Association (1992) states the following:

Library and information studies encompasses information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, selection, acquisition, organization and description, storage and retrieval, preservation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination, and management.

And we wonder why we are busy, especially as solo librarians! But that is why we want to encourage you. We are like you. CLOSE (Consortium of Librarians Operating in a Solo Environment) is a small group of solo librarians who get together to brainstorm ways in which we can help other solo librarians, supporting each other in the process. Solos, for our purposes, include librarians who run their libraries by themselves or librarians who are the only people with library degrees running their libraries with only a handful of student workers and/or volunteers. Although Jim Mancuso and Deborah McConkey have been faithful to strategically map out our desired destination, the group and its focus each year fluctuate. We vary in experience, presently ranging from 5 years to 42 years, totaling 104 years of total flight time! Let us help you identify areas that may perhaps assist you, our fellow solos, to navigate the skies with success.

You're the pilot!

Laura M. Ladwig, Library Director, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

Pilots and library directors...what do they have in common? The necessity of minimizing distractions and knowing the “tools of the trade” are good places to start. For solo librarians especially, the demands on our time and the number of interruptions we face seem to surpass all reasonable limits at times. How about the following for a good rule of thumb regarding how to handle distractions or interruptions: let the complexity of the task you are currently performing dictate whether you delay interruptions or not. For example, if you are in the middle of a brain-intensive task, it is wise to get to a good stopping point or even finish before answering a student. Most people do not mind waiting for a minute if you tell them, “Let me finish this item quickly first, and then I can give you my full attention.” Give yourself the freedom to do that! You do not need to drop everything whenever someone approaches you for help. It is easier on your brain and more efficient to finish one complex task instead of stopping halfway, which necessitates picking it up again halfway through and reorienting your brain for that process.

Let the tools of the trade work for you and not the other way around. We have all heard the stories of pilots-in-training who must learn to trust their instruments instead of their instincts. How could that apply to librarianship? In the area of organization, perhaps? Organization describes us as librarians, for the most part. We love to organize information, books, and sometimes even people! (Dare we admit that?!) Organizing our own workflow and personal workspace can further maximize efficiency, but it is sometimes a case of “the dentist’s children have the worst teeth” wherein we ignore our own space while tending the space of others. For example, why not try opening the tabs you use daily in the same order on your web browser every day? Then when a student needs your attention that may

interrupt the project you are trying to conquer (which happens frequently), you can easily find the information you need and return to what you were doing without fumbling on the computer. This practice alone can exponentially increase your efficiency in library-related work and reference questions.

Likewise, a former supervisor taught me the benefit of a clean, clear, organized work environment. Rogak (1999, p. 58) in *The Smart Guide to Managing Your Time* agrees, “The key to a clean desk is to take immediate action with every piece of paper that crosses its surface...” When you finish something why not file it or throw it away immediately? If piles are needed, keep them neat and organized. Can you personally function up to your best potential surrounded by clutter? This may require exercise to walk to a different location in the building to put things away or give documents to the appropriate person, but that is just an added benefit, right? No grass should grow under our feet, and a proactive librarian (physically and mentally) is a great asset to an institution.

You have heard the proverb, “A place for everything and everything in its place.” Why not apply that to your work space also? Keep the “tools” we use every day (pens, pencils, rulers, book weight, etc.) in the same place and easily accessible. Rogak (1999, p. 58) writes, “The time ... spent to organize your workspace will be worth every second.” I can vouch for the truthfulness of this statement.

Jim Elliot, the martyred South American missionary, had a way with words. One of his sayings, “Wherever you are, be all there,” has helped me immensely as a person and a professional librarian. As professionals who are pulled in multiple directions, both personal and work-related, this becomes an essential character trait and enables us to give ourselves fully to the place and people who surround us at any given moment. It definitely requires discipline and its challenge is compounded when deep, personal trials are present. The pursuit of this goal, however, is of inestimable value.

Knowing how to focus, how to prioritize jobs and workflow, and how to navigate necessary student interactions while balancing your projects at hand is critical to experiencing successful flight hours as a solo librarian. At all times, seek to have a prioritization of major projects and workflow for you and your staff. Helping students and all other daily maintenance tasks then fit around this workflow. It is important for our personal well-being and our professional out-put that we know when to say to a student or a faculty member, “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Your plane

Renee D. Carey, Librarian, Faith Bible College

Flying a Cessna 162 Skycatcher is different than flying a Navy C-130 Hercules. Our aircraft as solos are most likely smaller than those of our multi-campus colleagues. Even so, that does not make all our planes the same. We can fly our planes best by knowing what is unique about our aircraft.

A Boeing 747 is not necessary to shuttle a group of passengers between local airports. It may be appealing to want a huge physical collection with two hundred databases. Does that support your institution? Is that what your patrons need? What do you say when your library has been graciously given a full-fledged current collection of nursing resources, but you do not offer any sort of nursing course? If saying “no thank you” is not an option, do you spend hours unloading and creatively storing boxes of books that may never see your stacks, or is your time better spent finding a college or business that could benefit from their use and that the donor will appreciate? (By the way, you may want to revisit your donation policy to make sure your patrons realize you have the right to keep or pass on their books.)

As solos, we feel we have to be all things to all people, and in fact, that is true to a certain extent. We may be the only plane in the hanger, but that does not mean our craft is designed to succeed in all circumstances. Identify what your library does, who it serves, and what its strengths and limitations are. If you are asked to go beyond those parameters, figure out what the issues are and be willing to address them. A plane without anti-icing fluid should not fly over the Arctic!

Instruction and training

Deborah H. McConkey, Library Director, Epic Bible College

You may encounter situations that need clarification. ACL provides a Librarian’s Manual that may answer questions concerning your aircraft (library). *The Librarian’s Manual* (Hardy, Lambert, & Weimer, 2008) is a text for beginning librarians, especially those with little or no training. The goal of this manual is to teach a high standard of library practice, yet be usable by people who know little about libraries, work in less than ideal situations, and may or may not have a fluent knowledge of English. It has been used in training workshops in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

Gain technical support from the ACL listserv and learn from those with in-flight experience. For new librarians, the ACL mentor program is a terrific way to connect with another librarian who can help you with the questions you may not feel comfortable asking others. Get involved with the mentoring program as a mentee.

(See information under the “get involved” tab of the ACL website.) Who owned your plane before you? Did they leave you an owner’s manual? Forward progress is necessary, but by looking at what was done before you, you may find some idiosyncrasies and perspectives about your particular craft that may be helpful in keeping your plane in mint condition.

In his article, McMahon (2004) explores ways that the librarian can partner in professional development with faculty by participating in curriculum planning and educational assessment. He also states that faculty priorities and library concerns are best seen as complementary, rather than competing. Most librarians recognize that the prospect of playing a part in the educational process has often been an important factor in their choice to work in an academic setting, but to make this partnership fruitful; it is librarians who will especially need to lead the effort to develop a more reciprocal relationship. The need to increase awareness and reputation of the library to combat declining budgets and to overcome charges of irrelevancy demands that librarians begin to act as stakeholders in the institution, rather than as spectators. McMahon identifies five areas for improved collaboration:

- teaching/instruction
- information services
- information technology
- research
- collections

All of these contribute to the teaching and learning endeavor and should be considered together in collaborative partnership. As librarians, we should be asking: “What knowledge and information do we have that can benefit teaching and learning on the campus?”

Routine maintenance

You probably know your library better than anyone else. Go through your checklist. Are you working on all cylinders? What needs maintenance? Maybe a new software program has made some of your previous duties unnecessary or has altered how they need to be done. Maybe you can no longer do some of the routine maintenance because of added responsibilities. Do you need a volunteer or student workers to help you? Yes, it takes time to train folks, but it may be worth it in the long run. Bedard (2015) states that recognition and appreciation are invaluable for volunteer satisfaction and retention. Three practices were found to be particularly helpful for motivating volunteers: (1) words of thanks, (2) perks, and (3) celebrations. Informal recognition is “one of the strongest forms of recognition” (Bedard, 2015, p. 276). We thank volunteers in person during each shift and in all email communication with them. We also have tea and coffee for volunteers twice a month at the end of their

shifts. It is a great time to chat, build friendships with and among volunteers, and thank volunteers for the work they have done that day. When thanking volunteers, we aim to be specific, explaining why their work is important and how it contributes to the overall work of the library (Bedard, 2015, p. 276).

Are you spending time on the ‘majors’ or have the ‘minors’ crowded out your day? Do your responsibilities need to be adjusted or do you need to redesign your checklist? Have you consulted with others? Jordan (2001) speaks of building libraries with consensus and collaboration. Identifying what is off is the best way to address the issue(s) and get your plane back in the air.

Air traffic controllers

Who are your air traffic controllers? With whom do you need to communicate? The Academic Dean or Provost? The President? If you are having technical difficulties, they may not know unless you tell them. Likewise, they may have a broader visibility than you and may help you see from a broader vantage point. Communication is vital. Evaluate what your tower needs to know and what you need to know from them. Blossom (2015) says communication helps boards understand the library, and it helps librarians to keep the institution’s strategic goals in focus. It is good to be included regularly in faculty meetings and librarians are encouraged to identify ways the library contributes to effective teaching and learning.

Flight plans

J. James Mancuso, VP of Library Services, Northeastern Baptist College

Things change. That is a fact. Are you able to make needed adjustments? Although we have constants in our jobs, we always need to respond to variables. For example, the original purpose of this article was to demonstrate that we can develop as solo librarians, including in the area of professional development such as publishing articles, through collaborative efforts. This article was to support what we hoped would be a breakout session; however, that was not possible for us this year. We changed our flight plan to a poster presentation based on the idea of maintaining balance while flying solo. We hope that our original intention regarding collaborative efforts is still a benefit to you, even though our original flight plan needed to be rerouted.

What is the purpose of your library? Even if you have been in your job for decades, your college may have made changes in their focus or priorities, or may have added/changed their programs. Have you verified recently that your flight plan is heading in the same direction as that of your institution? Taking a little time to rethink your purpose may be a great perspective builder and may help you get back on course.

For instance, my college recently made a mid-flight course change. We decided to no longer offer a music major, but rather concentrate our instruction in a few small targeted areas regarding praise and worship music being performed in contemporary church services. This change causes me as the librarian to rethink the usefulness of a collection of mid-20th century books focused on training people for large church choirs with organs. So, when my college changes course, I have to respond with a new collecting strategy in the library. I also have to start weeding out materials that are no longer of any interest to our users.

Flight attendants

Who helps you maintain your library? Are you totally by yourself? Do you have any student workers? Do you have volunteers? How can they best help? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? We all know that good intentions may be wonderful, but if you have to ‘clean up’ after good intentions, you may want to consider in what other ways folks can be of service.

Local volunteers, temporary mission team volunteers, and student workers are a great resource, if you play your cards right. On the positive side, these workers are willing, eager to be helpful, motivated, available right now, for the most part, teachable, and well-meaning. But, bear in mind that they are unskilled, so you might end up having to re-do some things. Mission team volunteers expect training that is immediate, fast, and very simplistic. Some students may still be too young to have developed a strong work ethic.

So, here are some examples of bumpy weather that your plans may encounter as you utilize these workers:

1. Unobvious Complexity of Books

To a trained librarian, printed books are very complex, individualistic, problematic, and inconsistent. A worker wants a 5-second explanation of what to do to process a book. In our flight manuals, a long time ago we learned how to navigate tricky skies filled with monographs, monographic series, and multi-volume sets; volunteers have never even heard these terms. Training a volunteer – especially a temporary, short-term mission volunteer who wants to be handed something fast and easy and simple to do – to accurately handle the full array of all kinds of books becomes frustrating for all right off the bat. The volunteer wants to do the same thing to stacks and stacks of books and feel she has accomplished something. You have to explain 101 exceptions to the rules you give. How do you solve this? Here is what I did for our library:

- I created a handout that is just a few pages long, but it explains the basics.
- We have a pile of example books to use for training volunteers.

- We tell them to do all the ones that ‘fit the mold’ and just hand me back all the hard ones.

2. Speaking the Same Language

A naïve volunteer may call a spine label, its protective cover, an adhesive backed barcode, or a piece of blank adhesive-backed white paper a “sticker.” She may also call the pre-existing barcode on the book donated from another library, as well as the UPC printed on the back of the book, the “barcode.” One can readily surmise what mishaps may occur when she uses the ‘sticker’ to cover up the ‘barcode.’ And, of course, any volunteer will look at you dully and ask, “What’s a Cutter number?”

Solution: Aim your DART at the target

- (D)ocument all your processing activities. Think out why, when, where, and how you do everything you do to a newly acquired book in the library’s Technical Processing Room.
- (A)nticipate problems. Try to pre-explain as many of the complications and exceptions that you know the worker will encounter. This is a narrow flight between two sharp mountains: you must keep it simple enough to not overwhelm your volunteer, but complete enough to cover what they will encounter.
- (R)ecord all this information in a manual, on handouts, on cheat sheets, or on papers posted in the workroom. You want to create a fight plan that outlives your time in the cockpit.
- (T)rain the workers. Spend the time up front showing them everything they need to know to do the job right the first time.

Passengers

Renee D. Carey, Librarian, Faith Bible College

Who are your patrons? Since our purpose is to support our institution by assisting those who need services, it would be useful to know who is on board. Just like parents with infants and seniors with walkers may need assistance, knowing those for whom we serve and their unique needs may help us make their journey a smooth one. Freeman (2005) discusses the future of libraries as more than just a place with resources and research assistance, but an area where people come to meet and think through issues and collaborate on projects. Even for those of us with smaller facilities, it may be beneficial to keep our eyes and minds open to creative ways to use our physical spaces, along with our electronic resources.

- Are you the only library in a rural town? Then you may merit having a broader selection of resources for a broader range of community patrons. Perhaps it would benefit them to offer your library space for community-related projects.

- Are you a nonresidential college with nontraditional students? Then your patrons may be working day jobs and studying at night with their kids. You may consider arranging your primary availability around class times and making sure you have easy procedures to best accommodate their hectic schedules.
- Are you an online college with global students? Then your library funds may be better spent on databases, e-books, and possibly shipping materials, instead of new study carrels.
- There may be small but active groups that frequent your library. Do you have an active home school community who frequent your library? Are there young parents looking for a quiet climate-controlled environment who spend their afternoons with you? Although we all need to be aware of ADA requirements, are there particular families/groups of hearing impaired or deaf? Not only could your collection benefit from some additional resources in these areas, maybe you know folks who could design a program for them or work with community leaders who already work with them to see if they could use your space every month for something special.
- Most likely, your budget is limited, which is not just a solo problem! Need to make a change? Take surveys or polls. Ask questions. By knowing your library's purpose and patrons, you may make better decisions with your resources, which will help your administration realize (and hopefully support) your future needs and will undoubtedly influence how you spend your limited time fulfilling multiple roles.

Layovers

Jon Jones, Director of Library Services, Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary

You may remember a while back when air traffic controllers and pilots were up in arms about their schedules. They did not have enough time between shifts/flights to get the rest they needed. They were less effective in their jobs and, in their cases, that could mean danger. In fact, in a 2019 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* we are told “that 71 percent of workers who take regular vacations reported being satisfied with their work, versus 17 percent of workers who don't (Kim Pang, 2019, 52).” The article also suggests that workers who neglect vacation time are more likely to experience things such as exhaustion, marriage and family problems, burnout, depression, and health issues. Layovers are important and should not be underestimated.

Look at your Departures and Arrivals board. Do you have layovers between your flights? Are you running from meetings to the front desk to orientations to lunch, which included answering emails at your desk? You need down time to regroup. Here are some ideas that you may consider to break up your hectic day:

- Take an actual break. Eat your lunch away from the building or off campus, if possible. If you cannot get off campus, walk around it. Eat in the student center. You will enjoy being around the students, and they will enjoy being around you.
- Read a book. No, really. But read a book for sheer enjoyment that has nothing to do with work. What subjects interest you? It may be about a subject you want to know more about, or it may be a historical fiction book that can take you to times and places unlike your own. Maybe use your Netflix or Amazon account to stream a television show that interests you. But...do not forget to go back to work.
- Do your eyes need a break? Listen to an audiobook – again, not work related. We encourage our students to discover something new. Let's try it ourselves!
- If you need to stay at your desk, let your phone go to voicemail or answering machine. Stay off your cell phone unless it is to call a spouse or family member before you go back to work. Do not check your email. Turn your computer off if it is too tempting!
- Plan some vacation time with family or friends. If a vacation is not in your budget, plan some back to back days away from work at times.
- Plan some time with other librarians. If possible, go to the ACL conference. Find like-minded librarians to talk with throughout the year. This CLOSE group works together throughout the year and comes together physically at the ACL Conference. The ACL conference is a fabulous way to build relationships, to further your professional development, and to connect with various groups within ACL, which can further your growth as both a librarian and a Christian.

Librarians, especially solo librarians, have many tasks to juggle. Our daily routines can become hectic and even overwhelming. To prevent exhaustion, burnout, diminishing job performance, depression, and even issues away from work, we must learn to take deliberate actions that result in taking both breaks at work and breaks from work. These steps are vital to both your physical health and your spiritual health. So, take a break, relax, and take a deep breath. Your joy will increase and you will be able to glorify God by doing your very best.

Back at the hanger

If you would like to discuss any of these areas with a group and are not already a part of our solo librarian group through ACL (SLIG), please feel free to contact Jim at jjmancuso@earthlink.net. Collaboration can be a major element of survival. Come fly the friendly skies with us! ✈

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Renee D. Carey is Librarian at Faith Bible College in Norfolk, VA. She can be contacted at rcarey@faithbiblecollege.com.

Jon Jones is Director of Library Services at Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary in Springfield, MO. He can be contacted at jjones@gobbcc.edu.

Laura M. Ladwig is Library Director at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI. She can be contacted at laura.ladwig@prts.edu.

J. James Mancuso is Vice-President of Library Services at Northeastern Baptist College in Bennington, VT. He can be reached at j.mancuso@nebcvt.org.

Deborah H. McConkey is Library Director at Epic Bible College in Sacramento, CA. She can be contacted at library@epic.edu.

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