

Interview Questions

For interview with Scott Duimstra, Executive Director of Capital Area District Library, serving the Greater Lansing area in Michigan

1. Can you briefly describe your background and what attracted you to librarianship, especially in the public sector?
2. In my brief experience with various public libraries, CADL seems to be on the leading edge when it comes to their services - a robust website, an app, the Library of Things, a podcast, broadcasting WiFi to a community center. As the executive director, what has been your specific role in moving the library forward? Do you look to other libraries or get ideas from within the staff? What is your thought process?
3. From a patron perspective, CADL seemed to have an easier time pivoting for the pandemic than other businesses and other libraries. I thought the virtual escape rooms were especially innovative. What was your strategy for getting through?
4. As executive director, how do you ensure cohesiveness in service, particularly if multiple CADL areas are involved? For example, I understand that different aspects of digital services are handled by different areas - the website and app are handled by marketing and IT, third-party services like Overdrive are handled by someone else. How do you ensure it all meshes?
5. Personally, I have a bit of a background in user experience, so I would ultimately love to work in UX in a public library setting. My initial research, however, has turned up that UX Librarian positions seem to be most common in academic libraries. Who or what unit handles it for CADL? And do you think there will be space for UX Librarians in public libraries in the future?
6. In my class, we talk a lot about the field's core value of access. What does CADL do specifically to make sure all potential patrons in the library's district can access your services?
7. How does CADL ensure its collections and services are representative of the Greater Lansing community and that they are what the community wants and needs?
8. What are the best and hardest parts of being a library director?
9. What advice do you have for people new to LIS, like myself?
10. Lightning round - which services or programs:
 - a. Are you most proud to be able to offer to CADL patrons?
 - b. Are most popular?
 - c. Surprise patrons the most?
 - d. Are the hardest to pull off?

Interview Summary Script

Intro

I started the process of finding someone to interview for this assignment by reaching out to my one contact at my previous public library in Michigan and telling her a bit about my interest areas within the profession. When it turned out that there were two librarians at Capital Area District Libraries, or CADL, that I might want to interview, rather than choosing between the two, I decided to reach out to the director. That way I could get more information on both areas, other areas, and how they all work together to provide a seamless experience for patrons.

The director, Scott Duimstra, worked in libraries from a young age and after seeing what a positive impact libraries can have on a community, he knew he wanted to go to library school one day. Fast forward and he attended the University of Michigan to get his MLIS. He worked at Ann Arbor District Library during his program, and that is where he first saw some of the really innovative things libraries can do. After a brief stint in LA, he moved back to Michigan and started working at CADL. He has now been there for about 18 years and has had positions as a public services librarian, head of training, head of collections development, and head of programs. Now he's the executive director and it's his fifth year in this role.

Interview Summary

The main topics Scott and I discussed over the course of our interview were innovations in public libraries, the importance of good data, and how COVID-19 has impacted the library, both during the ongoing pandemic, but also into the future.

Innovation

The reason I asked Scott about innovation is because CADL has been on the leading edge of this. Even before I knew I wanted to become a librarian, as a patron I was impressed with what CADL offers and has done. They have a great website; an app; and a Library of Things with some really great items that they circulate, including bus passes. They've been hosting a podcast since before it was popular and they broadcast their WiFi over radio waves to a nearby community center. I asked Scott what his role has been in moving the library forward.

Data

He said that he looks to other libraries to see what they're doing and that he looks to the community. In his time at AADL he saw that they did this really well. They do a great job of matching their library needs to their community. He took that forward in his work at CADL and that philosophy has guided everything he does. He talked about the importance of data in making sure you meet the community's needs. Understanding the community starts with data.

And it's hard data like census information, demographics, and user surveys - not anecdotal data - that helps make sure the library and its services represent the whole community. Throughout the interview, he kept coming back to how important it is to listen to your community, especially the members who don't use the library.

Forward-Thinking

Another thing Scott emphasized as being important to innovation is being forward-thinking. As he put it, "you almost have to be a little bit of a futurist." Many of the things I mentioned earlier came from specific parts of CADL's most recent strategic plan. Again, this comes down to the data. You have to plan in advance to gather data, interpret data, listen to staff, look out and see what other libraries are doing and what the community wants and needs. It all takes time, so it has to be on your radar early. At the same time, Scott discussed the importance of planning for the future, while also planning for the immediate.

A perfect example of this is CADL's curbside pick-up. Believe it or not, this was coincidentally put into place just before the pandemic, in late 2019. Scott of course didn't see the pandemic coming, but he looked at trends in retail. He wholeheartedly believes that you shouldn't innovate just for innovation's sake, but he really examined if there were things from retail that would make sense in the library world. They modeled their curbside pick-up after Target's Drive-Up service. The main audience they had in mind was parents with really young kids who just want to pick up items without having to go through the whole ordeal of getting the kid out of the carseat and everything, as well as elderly patrons and any others who might have physical challenges coming into the library because of mobility issues or, especially in Michigan, bad weather conditions. So while CADL looked to retail and planned ahead to pilot curbside at two of their branches, they also planned for the immediate when the pandemic hit and scaled it up to the whole system.

Pandemic

In talking about the pandemic, I told Scott that from a patron perspective, it seemed that CADL had an easier time than most in pivoting for our new reality. I asked what his strategy was as the director for getting through it. He confessed that it was tough and that he was concerned. Libraries are public services built upon people walking through the door. He also admitted that it was a bit of luck; as I said, they happened to have *just* rolled out curbside. But, that came right from the strategic plan, as did starting to use Microsoft Teams. CADL's first virtual meeting over Teams was in February 2020. While Scott and CADL certainly got lucky, he was adamant that it wasn't dumb luck. It was perfect planning and having all the necessary systems already in place. Through the pandemic, CADL really saw the fruits of their labor from the prior planning and being on the leading edge. They were able to pivot and keep services going a lot better and a lot easier than other businesses.

As awful as the pandemic has been and continues to be, it did give Scott a unique opportunity to collect some really meaningful data. He paid attention to what services patrons were most

often asking the library to bring back. The top service that patrons asked about getting back was circulation. After CADL implemented curbside, the thing patrons asked about the most was browsing, so they implemented a grab-n-go service where the librarian does the browsing. Even after the pandemic ends, Scott will still have the knowledge and data from this time. The things that the patrons asked about the most are a direct window to what their priorities are for the different services. Though it was born out of horrible circumstances, what a great opportunity to listen to the community to meet their needs and wants. Scott said CADL will also take curbside, grab-n-go, and virtual programming forward from the pandemic and into the future. A lot of it was already in the strategic plan to do so, but even if it wasn't, the success and popularity of the services would have led Scott to continue them at CADL anyway.

Wrap-Up

Overall, Scott and I had a wonderful time talking. I learned so many insightful and practical things from him and he told me he really enjoyed getting a chance to step back from the day-to-day and reflect. The three things from our discussion that I will carry forward the most are the advice about being data-driven, the clarification that I should focus on digital services rather than trying to do just user experience since that hasn't entered public libraries that much yet, and the realization that a director position might be a trajectory I want to aim for down the road.

For my interview follow-up, I sent Scott a handwritten thank you note and sent him a LinkedIn request. I also plan to look more into digital services.

Interview Follow-Up

Plan

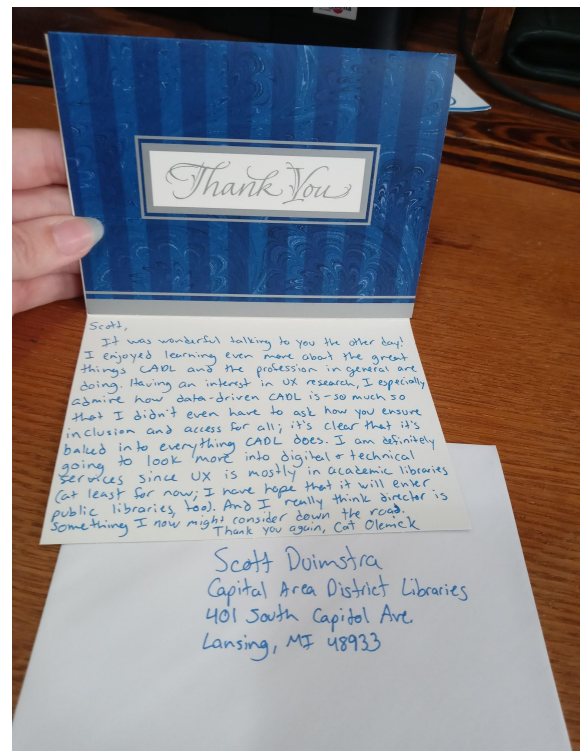
1. Send Scott handwritten thank-you note (see below)
2. Send Scott LinkedIn connection request (see below)
3. Look more into digital services and/or data
 - a. Professional organizations
 - b. Publications
 - c. Networking or Facebook groups
 - d. Informational email to CADL's digital services librarian

Handwritten Thank-You Note

“Scott,

It was wonderful talking to you the other day! I enjoyed learning even more about the great things CADL and the profession in general are doing. Having an interest in UX research, I especially admire how data-driven CADL is—so much so that I didn't even have to ask how you ensure inclusion and access for all; it's clear that it's baked into everything CADL does. I am definitely going to look more into digital and technical services since UX is mostly in academic libraries (at least for now; I have hope that it will enter public libraries, too). And I really think director is something I now might consider down the road.

Thank you again,
Cat Olenick”



LinkedIn Connection Request

“Thank you for meeting with me yesterday. Our discussion covered many of the same things as an article (bit.ly/39WA8Q6) I read: how many opportunities there are within public librarianship, helping people and communities, being forward thinking, and even modeling after retail.”

The article I linked was:

Wilson, P. (2019). Today's public library career. *Public Libraries*, 58(1), 20–23.