

**Elizabeth:** Hello, and welcome to Beyond the Stacks: Innovative Careers in Library and Information Science. I'm your host, Elizabeth Reilly and on today's episode, which also concludes Season 4, I am talking with [Sarah Spira](#).

Sarah joined the [American Cheese Society](#) (ACS) as Content Manager in July 2016. It was through her volunteer work with ACS on its Body of Knowledge project that Sarah began to think about how her background as an information professional could be merged with her cheese experience. She brings a unique combination of knowledge, technical skills, and abilities to ACS, with well over a decade of cheese and specialty retail experience and a background in libraries, archives, and museums. Sarah comes to ACS from Hudson, New York where she was the Retail Manager of [Talbot & Arding Cheese and Provisions](#). Prior to that, she was manager and domestic cheese buyer at [Formaggio Kitchen South End in Boston](#).

Sarah is personally and professionally committed to the advancement of information and education in the cheese industry, and she has developed training programs for cheese mongers, taught many classes aimed at the enthusiastic cheese consumer, and written extensively about cheese for numerous online blogs and publications.

Sarah is originally from Oak Park, Illinois and holds a BA in Sociology & Anthropology from Earlham College, and an MSLIS from Simmons College. When not at work, Sarah enjoys learning about cheese, reading, making art, and spending time with friends and family.

Hi Sarah! Thank you so much for joining me today!

**Sarah:** Thank you for inviting me to participate.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah!

**Sarah:** Much appreciated.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. So just to start things off, can you tell us a little about your educational background, where you went to undergrad, grad school stuff like that.

**Sarah:** Sure. I completed my undergraduate degree at Earlham College, which is a liberal arts college based in Richmond, Indiana. And at Earlham, I studied, their major there is called Sociology and Anthropology, it's a combined major, that's what I focused on.

**Elizabeth:** Cool and then what did you do right after undergrad?

**Sarah:** So I have always been interested in working in cultural heritage institutions. And I at first was interested in mostly museums. So I worked at the Chicago Historical Society Research Center and Collections management department later.

At the same time, I had taken, did a study abroad program through Earlham in London. There I did an internship in the National Maritime Museum.

So really interested in how people tell stories, I guess. And how stories are communicated. How people tell their stories and how people hear stories.

And at the same time, I needed a job one summer and after completing my semester abroad in London, I started working in a cheese and wine store. Which is Oak Park Illinois. So I was thrown into the cheese world in 2003 learning pretty quickly how to tell the stories of cheese makers and share their products with customers.

And I was really taken aback and interested because there was a cheese that I was introduced to that was made not too far from where I went to college and it sort of blew my mind that you could have in this sort of small, Southern Indiana town a very typical French style of cheese. And that's Capriole dairy. They really captivated my imagination and throughout the time I was in college I was always working during the summers selling cheese. And after college I continued to do so. Sort of juggling these internships and work opportunities with what I could make a little bit of money doing working behind the cheese counter.

Eventually I got a job and had interned at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies in Chicago and I ended up working there as they moved the museum from their smaller facility to their new, new and enlarged space and helped them to get that museum moved and set up so I was working as a collections assistant there. And I was able to participate in a program called the Institute in Jewish Art, which was held in New York, at the Jewish Museum.

During this time, I sort of, my focus shifted from museums to being interested in books, and books as objects, historical objects, cultural heritage objects, and I decided while I was working at Spertus that I wanted to go into, to pursue a degree in library and information science. So I moved from Chicago and my job selling cheese there and working at Spertus to Boston where I attended Simmons.

So after I got there, I also needed a job. You know, because a lot of the course work is in the evening, I was able to secure a part-time job in one of the libraries there, in Boston, I was working at the Harvard Business School Library in the Conservation Lab. But I needed something else as well. And being someone who likes to keep quite busy I applied for and got a job at a sort of specialty food institution in Boston called Formaggio Kitchen. They have two stores, one is in Cambridge. I ended up working in the store in Boston's South End.

**Elizabeth:** Oh ok. That's awesome! So have you always liked cheese, like growing up?

**Sarah:** I get that question a lot.

**Elizabeth:** I'm sure!

**Sarah:** I do, you know, I think definitely would be a favorite food but of course I recommend a well balanced diet. But yeah it's hard when you...It's sort of a worm hole where I over time I have come to realize and come to learn more and more about all of the different disciplines that are involved in the cheese industry and there's really no business practices marketing management, of any type of business, whether it's a cheese retail store, producer, distribution network of some kind. To the science behind it from the chemistry of turning fluid milk, well grass into milk and then into a finished product. Just the history of it, it sort of captured my imagination. So yes it's definitely a favorite food and also a subject of great interest.

**Elizabeth:** You mentioned that you started getting interesting in sort of story telling and how people craft and tell stories...so have you, are you yourself a storyteller or did you write stories?

**Sarah:** I've always been a reader, a consumer of stories for as long as I can remember. Definitely a big reader. I enjoy writing. And I enjoy sharing stories as well. But I think that was only a skill I developed a little bit later when I was, I'm sort of a shy person so when I was pushed into the spot light behind a cheese counter and having to sell things was I able to explore a bit more how I like to tell stories and share information and share history with people.

**Elizabeth:** When you were behind the counter, would people ask where the cheese came from or would you offer the stories, or how...?

**Sarah:** Oh yes, oh yeah. And that's I think, you know...even when I was at Simmons and in reference class it's like 20 Questions it's the same thing, the same skills. You know you, someone comes in there looking for something, they're not entirely sure what, they think maybe it had a label that was blue, it kind of tasted like this. It's a matter of trying to figure out as quickly as you can what it is that they want and get it for them and hope that the experience has left them wanting more and wanting to come back. So a lot of at the shops I worked at, we definitely encouraged every customer to taste the cheeses before they purchase them and that's part of the experience is having a shared exchange of you know a taste of cheese, you share a story, you share an anecdote. I've had customers, you know, because they have purchased cheese from you, you get to know them you get to know people's tastes, what their preferences are what they dislike and when special occasions are. You're able to develop a really lovely relationship with people when you're able to share a little taste of food.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, what, what year is it that you started at Simmons when did you move to Boston?

**Sarah:** Um, I moved to Boston in 2008 so I started in 2008.

**Elizabeth:** Ok, and so what exactly drove you to...did someone suggest that maybe you should go to school for library information science like when you were working in the museum? Or what was that moment where you realize that's what you wanted to do?

**Sarah:** Sure. Yeah so I guess I while I was working at Spertus I became you know more and more focused and more and more interested in books and in the archives and paper materials and it was one of the curators suggested to me that I should you know maybe consider, consider looking into a library and archives program. So the more I read about it and the more I learned about the Simmons program it seems like a good fit for me. It gave me the option of focusing on the archives track if I wanted or you know, preservation courses, which is what I ended up doing. You know, really focusing on collections management and collections maintenance preservation and the work experience of course, you know from going behind the scenes of working on the Museum 2 behind the scenes of working at a library I think you can definitely there's so many transferable skills

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. And so I guess you had already been working in the industry before moving into library science school. When you started school what were you hoping to get out of obtaining that degree?

**Sarah:** Sure yeah well, you know I had...I didn't have a specific goal in mind. Or a specific career track in mind. I knew that I wanted to work with Cultural heritage materials. I selected to focus on books, ephemera, paper because having over time my interests sort of narrowed down from when I was younger and in high school when I was looking at programs do I want to start Art history or anthropology so how do I want to approach this? So I decided through books. I came to Simmons with an open mind. And I did the typical sort of base curriculum and tried to put together a diverse suite of skills that you know I could keep in my toolbox for whatever might come down the line.

**Sarah:** I knew that I was interested in preservation. I worked with Dean Cloonan as her research assistant while I was at Simmons. This experience I think was extremely formative for me she definitely I felt wasn't so focused on the book or paper but cultural heritage in general and that struck a chord with me as someone who has an appreciation for the diversity of materials that tell stories in our lives and help us understand who we are better. Though I very well could have ended up working in a medical library. I took a medical librarianship course and I had been working with...my mother does a lot of research and I was sort of corralled by her colleagues and her into teaching them how to use different types of citation management software and helping them with their work.

So while I feel that Simmons gave me a really strong toolkit from which I could sort of then spread my wings and figure out what my next steps were. It wasn't necessarily an easy time when I was finishing up at Simmons to find work. I found that to be quite challenging. I felt like what I was looking for I wasn't finding.

You know, I did a nationwide job search on various tracks and a piece of advice that really stuck with me and I took it. Which is sometimes you just have to be open enough to opportunity to see the one that's in front of you. It might not be the door, it might be a window. You just have to be open enough to see it. I took the opportunity that wasn't necessarily what I moved to Boston and gone to graduate school for. I ended up taking a fulltime position at Formaggio Kitchen, which was an amazing opportunity, and I am forever grateful to Valerie and Ihsan for giving me a chance and they definitely changed my life.

**Elizabeth:** Wow that's really cool! So you took that full time position after graduation or was it sort of at the end of your Simmons...?

**Sarah:** No, it was after graduation. I had been working; I did some short-term contracts with the Harvard business school conservation library their library there and then with the medical school, sort of bouncing around between short-term projects. I just didn't see that as a very good long-term solution for me. I wanted something more reliable and stable. And I decided like I said, to sort of take advantage, I had been working part time on the weekends. And decided to go ahead and take advantage for the opportunity they presented to me. Which you know, I think opened up a whole world of experiences that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, so what did you do for them?

**Sarah:** Well it's a very small business so everyone does a little bit of everything. I was a buyer for them, so various products making sure we had in stock; but my focus was American artisanal cheeses. So managing and selecting inventory for the store, visit producers, sourcing new products, having a presence in the store to sell them to our customers. Teaching classes, writing for the blog. Sort of a Jill of all trades. I was able to travel a fair amount for work at Formaggio Kitchen both around the United States as well as to Europe and be able to see where these products are made and who is doing them in their you know very traditional manners is very moving.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah do you have...I'm sure you have many favorite travels but is there one special story you'd like to share?

**Sarah:** Sure, yeah. I was able to travel to Europe with a co-worker of mine, Trick Nichols and Andrew Clark both from Formaggio Kitchen. The three of us went on a buying trip to Europe. We first went to the Jura region in France to select a cheese called Comte select an age profile, flavor profile that we would bring back and sell at the store. From there we went, we traveled to the Pyrenees, where we drove from Toulouse to San Sebastian, Spain to also meet with, meet our producers, our cheese makers and selected and tasted product. Walking into the aging facility, you know, the caves, just having an understanding that each wheel at least of Comte is roughly 70 pounds and represents you know a day, a moment in time, right? Like it's made from cow's milk out of the village creamery before it is sent to the fruitier, made at the fruitier, and the sent to the athenour to age. Being able to trace that process was really moving and to see the scale of it and

the economic impact I think is you know how many people are employed and how long it's been going on it's just a very moving experience

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, no that's really cool! And did you work there and then go straight to your current position or was there something in between?

**Sarah:** No so I worked in Boston and so yeah I spent several years working for Formaggio Kitchen South End. At the same time I also began volunteering with an organization called the American Cheese Society, which I now work for. And as a volunteer I was working with them on their development on a body of knowledge, which the certification for cheese professionals is based. So I have always been, try to keep myself engaged, I guess when I'm working in a library setting, to always have my hand behind the cheese counter, when I'm working behind the cheese counter, I sort of always have a hand and an eye on what I could do to help the industry. It was sort of during this volunteer work that I was able to see and draw some connections about you know, what I had learned at Simmons how it could potentially be applied to the cheese industry, which I, and education in the cheese industry, which I feel particularly passionate about.

And I was invited while I was working at Formaggio Kitchen to move to help start a new business in the Hudson Valley. Which is, I did, I moved from Boston to New York to help start a small business there called Talbott & Arding Cheese and Provisions which is a prepared food store sort of in the heart of the Hudson Valley. I was there for 2 years, a little over two years, until an opportunity opened up at the American Cheese Society that was somewhat related to and based on the work I had been doing as a volunteer.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah and so what were some of those I know you've touched on it but could you go into more detail about sort of the skills you learned at Simmons that then informed your work as a volunteer with the American cheese Society?

**Sarah:** So Earlham College has a very strong foundation in library instruction and I definitely brought that with me, that experience with me to Simmons so I felt like I could really focus on expanding my technical skills. So the technology courses that I took were extremely helpful you know applying to the work I do know and also just helping me think outside the box. What there might be out there that I could sort of change and tweak a little bit that might help in the retail setting and in the, now in the setting that I'm in managing content for our members. And I think also to add on to that you know which I touched on briefly just the perspective I was able to have working with Dean Cloonan and understanding you know, helping with her research with the preservation of cultural heritage was certainly something I've been able to apply to my work now. And I'd be happy to expand on that later.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah no we can talk about that now, yeah, what that experience was like, what you did, what kind of research you did for her.

**Sarah:** So I worked at her research assistant just tracking down resources, information on all sorts of different topics related to preservation and cultural heritage preservation

but I think it really sort of kick started my drawing a comparison between the preservation of cultural heritage objects: books, paintings, sculptures, cities to what potentially could be lost if some of the traditional cheeses that exist out there are no longer around or the skills to make them no longer exist. So, sort of helped solidify in my mind the connection between tangible cultural heritage and cheese as a cultural heritage object.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, that's such a...I love that connection when I read about that on your website I was like, "that's so cool!" I guess could you talk about that more maybe for people who are like, "What? What is the connection here?"

**Sarah:** Um sure. I'm really interested in the craftsmanship and Artisan ship behind materials and specifically I moved to Boston interested in the book I took classes at North Bennett Street School you no classes with Sid burger and access to him and Dean Cloonan's paper collection it was a very strong you know sort of lesson in the basics of the Elias profession and also the building blocks of how books are made and learning about technology sort of all of this came together you know being drawn to physical books and physical materials it sort of helps me to sort of bring together this understanding of, understanding the tradition of making something by hand whether it's cheese or a book and the way...what's at stake, what could be lost when those skills sort of fade because of our increasing dependence on technology. I felt like that I was determined to find a way to be involved in the preservation of this, this food and practice of making it. Even if I'm not always the one Hands-On whether it's working in preservation in a library setting or with what I'm doing now.

So there definitely has been a rise in artisanal American cheese making and past ten or fifteen years or so which is fantastic but there certainly are techniques and styles of cheese with a falling out of or as a result of the Industrial Revolution and mechanization you know, the growth of industrial food some traditional cheese-making practices and cheeses are you know skill set of being lost so. For example there are very strict rules for certain cheeses such as Stilton or Gruyere, Comte, Parmigiano-Reggiano they have to be made according to regulations set out by the consortium. In order to be given that name they have to be you know made in a specific way from milk within a certain radius of the farm where the cheese is made. And I guess I was just interested and want to find ways to make sure that this, the product survives, that the skills to make the product survive in a world where things are rapidly changing, technology is changing, the way that we eat has changed, the way we are presented with food has changed and the regulations you know regarding raw milk have certainly changed.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah definitely. So what are some of those ways that you're working to preserve the skills and traditions and such?

**Sarah:** Sure well I think I started out you know just by selling the cheeses as an act of resistance to fast food. And that it's really, appreciation of slow food process. So I definitely see myself rooted in slow food movement. You know I think first as someone

who is selling cheese and then someone who is seeking out cheeses and telling their stories and sharing them is the first step.

With regards to what I do now, it's a completely different ball game. I'm in a position where I'm hoping that I'll be able to share a lot, help facilitate the education of not only our members but of our consumers as well. Traditional cheeses, traditional cheese making practice and how it survives and thrives in the United States. Just the act of selling it, the act of educating consumers, educating cheese makers and telling the stories of the people who are behind the products I think is really, really an essential piece of the puzzle and I'm able to with this role take that a step further and connect people with resources that'll teach them to continue to do this.

**Elizabeth:** And I assume that the cheese making culture has deeper roots in Europe, is that true or...?

I think that's definitely an interesting thing to bring up. There certainly are very classic European cheeses and as I said many of them bound by their consortium to be produced by certain methodologies. In the states we don't necessarily have the lengthy history that European cheeses do. It certainly is a story of immigration. People brought their cheese-making tradition to the States when they came to the country so you have some very regional practices. For example in the Northeast and New England there's a very long history of cheddar making, Swiss styles are very prominent in the Midwest specifically Wisconsin and then there's certainly a Spanish influence in California, along the southern coast southern States as well as traditional Basque Spanish cheese-making style in the West. While the cheeses are new and you know there certainly is a long history of cheese making in the states.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, that makes sense. That's cool. In your current position, if can you just remind us of the title of it and what you do, day to day.

**Sarah:** Sure. So I am the Content Manager for the American cheese society, which is a professional trade, non-profit trade association that supports and promotes American artisanal cheeses. The sort of goal of my position there is to take all of the content that ACS has created or collected over the years. It's a 35 year old organization now and to make that more readily available and accessible to our membership and beyond. So the day-to-day activity varies quite a bit but the sort of goal of what I do is really to find creative ways to share information and to help our members, our cheese makers, our cheese retailers and distributors get the information they're seeking when they're seeking it. So it's very I guess I'm kind of like their in House librarian. I answer their questions on all different topics and sort of point people in the right direction and you know it's a new position for them and I'm the first person to hold the role, so I'm able to be creative and how I present the materials and come up with some hopefully interesting solutions for our members.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. Now in the job ad did they ask specifically for someone with a MLIS or did you sort of see a way that your experience could...?

**Sarah:** I can't recall. I can't remember. I definitely was made aware of the posting through my network and I wasn't necessarily sure it was the right move or the right fit but the more I learned about it and spoke with the organization about what their needs were it's sort of seem to be a very natural fit you know bringing together my technical skills industry knowledge and abilities to sort of merge those together to serve our members. So everything just kind of gelled in a way and I think that it just took some time to get there.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah especially I mean if it's a new position you're still, they're still trying to figure out what they want you to do and stuff, I can imagine.

**Sarah:** Yeah but you know they have the materials that we have they vary. There's all sorts of archival materials and that I'm looking forward to sorting through from old newsletters to Industry Publications from correspondence about the founding of the organization. A lot of video, oral histories that were hoping to utilize. As well as conference proceedings data from the annual judging and competition there's a lot of information there so I'm very much looking forward to diving in and seeing what we can, what we can come up with and what we can share.

So we're certainly, you know some of the projects that we started with we're just simply using, put together a little library with some of the books that are out there about cheese, about cheese making, about serving cheese, you know business practices and all of the different science textbooks. So creating a little virtual library for our members, thinking about how to share our Archive of webinars and Conference proceedings as I mentioned with the development of a new website in mind. Because we don't necessarily have, we're a small office. It's not necessarily a library that people can come and visit or a collection that people come to physically. Everything is digital. So coming up with ways to introduce our members to the wealth of information and content that is available.

**Elizabeth:** Do you find it challenging at all to sort of foster a community with only digital content?

**Sarah:** The cheese community is very tight knit; it's a small group. I think that the community is already there. It's a just matter of bringing everything together and introducing it. You know we have every year the ACS hosts a conference. It changes cities based on region every year. And it's just an amazing way to meet people across the industry and to network and connect. And I think that you know, because of that strong connection that people have based on conference hopefully transferring it to the digital world won't be too challenging.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. This is going back to Simmons but so you mentioned that, I mean this makes sense I guess, we were coming out of the recession around the time you were, you finished up, is that correct?

**Sarah:** Mhm.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** Yeah. *[sighs]*

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. But so you mentioned that you were looking for jobs but you weren't really finding what you wanted. So what was it that you were looking for at first?

**Sarah:** I mean this is you know nearly seven years ago. So conceptually what I wanted was a job that would offer stability, growth, health insurance and you know room to continue to learn and grow. I definitely was really, at the time open and you know interviewed for a wide range of positions.

**Elizabeth:** But were you mostly looking in the library/museum world?

**Sarah:** Yes, yes. Yeah I was looking for a job in a library/archives/museum. Anything that seemed interesting to me I guess, that would challenging me. I just wasn't taken with you know, wasn't drawn to what the options were at the time and after a while I felt as though I were pushing too hard. And then...you know I'm sure if I had continued to look I would have found something that would have been just fine. At the time I felt as though what was out there and what I was being offered wasn't gelling with what I felt was the right thing to do so that's why I decided that I should sort of take the risk and even though it wasn't in the library and information science field, I was able to utilize the skills that I have acquired over the years working for a small business you know, working with people, telling the stories of the cheese makers sharing and helping to sort of preserve that traditional cheese making both European and American cheeses as well. Until I figured out what the right thing or the next thing to do would be. Through my volunteer work with ACS I was able to apply my skills and what I have learned in a different capacity so I felt like between the writing I was able to do for them, the travel I was given the opportunity to do and my volunteer work you know, I have found a way to bring together my skills as an information professional and work behind the cheese counter as well.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. Do you know any people you went to school with do you see that they what kind of work have they gone in to?

**Sarah:** Oh sure! So yeah I think you know another one of my one of the best things that I was able to gain from Simmons the networking and the friends, now colleagues. I'd say you know more traditional career paths than I've taken, different maybe not traditional, but different. I certainly you know draw on them and rely on my network when I have questions or if they have questions there's always someone I can turn to, to help me figure something out if I can't figure it out myself. And you know I think that I'm amazed at the diversity of experiences that my classmates have had and where they've ended up from academic libraries to public libraries, small businesses or institutions and yeah.

**Elizabeth:** I'm wondering if so do you still do you refer to yourself as a librarian? When you introduce yourself to people are they like...do they...are they confused that you went to library school but now you're working with cheese! I don't know!

**Sarah:** I definitely confuse people. I do tend to say that I'm a librarian because I think that it gives context to what I do without having to go into the, "Well I also work on this like website stuff and you know help with this publication..." So I think that it definitely...I use it as a very overarching way to describe the work that I do, that's for sure. I feel like I've gone from being a librarian of cheese to being a librarian of actual you know, books, articles, knowledge, content.

**Elizabeth:** Right, yeah.

**Sarah:** Different material.

**Elizabeth:** Do you see any challenges in sort of the...I don't know the broader information field, but like more specifically in cultural heritage?

**Sarah:** Well I think that with any changing technologies...I mean I guess I can only speak from my own experience I don't feel like I can necessarily speak to the industry per se but as a small organization, nonprofit organization that has a good amount of materials in our collection, finding ways to creatively and in a cost-effective way, archive them, make them available. You know, whether it's a working collection or the archival collection finding ways to make them accessible. I guess that is the challenge that I face right now but you know I think that there's certainly solutions out there, it's just a matter of putting the pieces together what will work for us for now making sure that whatever it is that we decide to do we can upgrade it or change it, that nothing is set in stone.

**Elizabeth:** Right. What are some of the technical skills that you feel that are really important to have in this day in age, like stuff that you picked up at Simmons that you're using now in your work?

**Sarah:** I think just...First and foremost, that technology is a tool that, that you know it's always changing there's always new things happening, new things coming out, so just developing a sense of awareness of that? I definitely feel like that there's a lot that I learned how to use and how to use more wisely. Basic HTML, being able to create style sheets, just simple understanding how it works I think is really essential because you never know when you might have to apply those skills. Yeah I guess just you know having an understanding of the fundamentals of the field is just invaluable. You know, there's no one thing that I can pinpoint, it's more that I was able to build a toolkit upon which I can draw when I need to do something. Even if it's not something I use all the time, I know how to figure out because I learned about something in school I can sort of backtrack a little bit and pull it out from my tool kit, and dust it off and figure out how I can apply it to the problem that I face.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah definitely. I mean it's only my second semester but I feel like there's a different, I feel like my classes have just given me a different way of processing and thinking through issues and problems that other people don't necessarily always consider.

**Sarah:** Mhm. I think that library science offers you this intersection of skills you know, that you can really apply towards any industry. I just happen to have been working in cheese and found a way to apply the knowledge, skills, and abilities that I was able to collect at Simmons to an industry that I feel passionately about.

**Elizabeth:** Mhm. Yeah. Is there...you offered a bit of wisdom earlier in the, for the job search process. Do you have any other advice for people who I don't know or maybe are in library school and are looking to do something that's really outside, outside of the library/museum world but don't like, haven't worked at a cheese shop for example.

**Sarah:** Yeah, without the industry, insider industry scoop. I mean I think really understanding what your skills are and what your strengths are as an employee. I highly recommend having a really solid understanding of your strengths. That was an exercise that I found very useful, I know it's a little hokey to take those assessment tests but I found that...there's a book called *Strengths Finder* but I found that the strengths finder assessment really...I'm not very good at selling myself and you know when you're interviewing and writing cover letters that's not always a very natural thing to do and I found that being able to understand how to really identify and verbalize what my strengths are as an employee helped me sort of see how I could succeed in the workplace and what type of workplace I wanted to have. I think that's a very...you know something that maybe we don't always think about. You don't have to take the first job that's presented to you. You want to take a job that's a good fit for you and that'll allow you to have the life you know the lifestyle outside of work that you enjoy. Co-workers who support you, and an environment that fosters continued education and growth. If you know of course if those are things that you value. But yeah I guess just I kind of think that things end up coming together in the end no matter what path you end up choosing. So I don't think there's any wrong decisions one can make it's just making the best decision you can at the time that you need to make it. Keeping you know, an open mind about what an opportunity could be.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. Do you have any other words of advice for current LIS students?

**Sarah:** I would definitely encourage you as much technology as you can. It's I guess like that's the other thing that I think is you know important to remember it's a trade it's a skill and you need to be able to, to do a job and it's I know definitely...I love academia I would have loved to have done a for their degree but it wasn't it wasn't this. This is not a you want to be able to leave with a skill set that you can apply towards a job or potentially a career. I just would encourage anyone to look at real job descriptions and not necessarily look at the job title because job titles because I don't think mean that much, you know, all that much but look at what the actual tasks are and you know, talk to other people who have similar positions to see what...you know, you could even look at

LinkedIn I think and like just look at different skills people have and see what, how they apply them to come up with some ideas.

Because there is so much out there whether you're going to be working for a traditional library, any business, any organization, anyone who has content...an advertising agency or you know, a design company they all have digital content in multiple formats and you know, I'm sure they don't want it to disappear. I'm sure they want to be able to find it. They all have digital content in multiple formats and I'm sure they don't want it to disappear. I think there's just endless opportunity if you, you know allow yourself to see that window of opportunity. It's still using the same set of skills it's just applying them away you know allows you to think outside the box. Ok, so you know here's one last thing do you know who [Twyla Tharp](#) is?

**Elizabeth:** No.

**Sarah:** She's an American choreographer, dancer-choreographer and she's written a book about creativity which I also found like really, really influential. One of, one of her methods when she's creating a new dance or creating something, she takes a physical box and inside of the box she puts everything that she can find all of her like research, you know, inspirational, news clippings, everything goes inside the box and she writes that in order to think outside the box you first have to make the box. You have to see the box and like have the box there so I thought that was really conceptually really helpful for me and understanding what next steps I need to take. In order to do something different you have to first have the building blocks in place so that you're able to then do something, do something creative or I don't know see outside the box.

**Elizabeth:** Is it called *The Creative Habit*?

**Sarah:** Yeah that's it.

**Elizabeth:** I just looked it up.

**Both:** *[Laughing]*

**Elizabeth:** I like that, I like that

**Sarah:** Yeah I think it's something that I think it's just a really useful tool if you can get comfortable enough taking those types of risk you know not feel bound by it. I definitely felt guilty for a long time about having moved to Boston to go to Simmons to become a librarian to work in a museum or an archive or a library, all my sort of fantasies about what that might be and then choosing not to do it.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. That's ok.

**Sarah:** It is okay. It always is in the end. It all comes together. It was a risk that at the time I took and I think that it's proved to be rewarding. Definitely isn't necessary the most comfortable thing or the easiest thing to do, you know.

**Elizabeth:** It's true. I feel like having this job like where I interview people who are specifically not in the library field, like, has made me much more comfortable with, like, thinking of that as a possibility but whenever I tell someone that I'm studying library and information science they're like, "oh you're going to be a librarian at a school or a college?" and I'm like, "well not necessarily there's other things you can do, too!"

**Sarah:** Yeah but yeah I know, that's true. But it gives, being on the other side, it gives people context of what I do. Because it's hard to sometimes explain that there is, there are multiple careers you can have as an information professional not being bound by the word "library."

**Elizabeth:** Also, I usually ask people if they have Twitter or social media that we can follow you at?

**Sarah:** Sure! I have a Twitter account and an Instagram account. They're just my name, Sarah Spira.

**Elizabeth:** Awesome! Well, thank you so much for talking to me today!

**Sarah:** Yeah, you're welcome!

**Elizabeth:** Nice talking to you.