

Question 1: So our first question for you is in the last interview we asked what made you uniquely qualified for the position, but today we'd like to know a little bit about you and why you're interested in this position.

Bradley Vinson: Thank you so much for having me. It's so good to see all of you. I did talk a lot about my background in libraries before I grew up in libraries.

My aunt was a librarian, and I started out getting volunteer hours at a very young age and became familiar with how libraries operated—just the basic ins and outs. And my volunteer hours when I was in high school were in a library in North Carolina, and then that was actually where I got my first paying job after I graduated from high school.

That first summer, I was there to help them transition as they had just gone online with their catalog, and it was a little unfamiliar for them, but I was more familiar with computers and systems and could help out in ways that I think a teenager doesn't always get a chance to help out in.

And then I worked at Strozier's academic library at FSU and got some different experience there and eventually made my way to Pensacola.

My husband and I met at Florida State, and when we got married, I moved here and started working in circulation. And so I worked in circulation and then I started working on my master's degree and I worked as a children's reference librarian on Sundays briefly at that time, and then once I completed my master's I worked in cataloging.

And then after cataloging I went back to being a children's librarian, which actually had been some of the focus of my time in the University of Pittsburgh's master's program. I had actually been not in the complete school librarian track, but a lot of my elective courses were in that school library track. So I had a little bit of time as the children's librarian for the public library system here, and then I decided to move into something different.

I moved into the school system. I was looking for an opportunity to serve a known audience. I had been at the public library, and we had a few regulars, but for the most part, it seemed like we were always chasing different audiences and so I wanted to take a little bit of time and practice my skills with what was essentially a captive audience at a school, and my goal there was to take something that was required for them, which was going to the library and turn it into something that was a joy, turn it into something that they loved to do.

And I think I did that over the time that I was there, and you could see that through just students coming, not with their class but coming by choice, coming to check out more books, coming and following through on reading series or helping their peers to find books to ... They had a grasp of how things operated and then they could help their student classmates to find things as well.

And I think I want to take that to a larger scale. What can the library be? Can we bring that joy to more of the community? We have I think probably a small patronship considering the metro size of our area and I'd like to just see what we can do for more people, more users.

Question 2: Describe a time when your library faced a political charge challenge, could be a book, a policy, an event, or pressure from an elected official. What principles guided your response and what did you learn from that experience?

Bradley Vinson: So in the previous interview, I didn't want to leave this out just in case there was anyone who didn't hear it before. In my current job, I'm the media services coordinator at the school

district, and we do have to deal with book challenges and that's tough. That's been something that's been ongoing for years.

My predecessor in this position left the position in large part due to the challenges and the political backlash that was occurring there. For a while we were on pause with everything because there was a perceived disconnect between the decisions that were being made at either the district level or in committees, and then the decisions made at the school board level, and then we were able to get a review process up and running again.

And I thought that that process was actually a really wonderful process. So we had book review committees. The superintendent helped come up with the composition for those committees.

So we have five school board members. Each school board member had a pool of volunteers who could serve on the book review committees and then we would have, so those five, one from each of their pools and a media specialist and a teacher and a school administrator from the level where the book was present and then those eight people would read the book and come together and they would discuss it with the set of questions that was predetermined.

And I thought that process was amazing, and I did not always agree with where the process ended up, but the way that the community came together and determined so if something needed to be restricted to a higher level, for example, we would move the book up to 11th and 12th instead of all of high school or we might move it from an elementary school to be middle school and higher.

And then we also implemented and encouraged our media specialists to use title specific permission forms, and that is where if a parent has signed off on a student gaining access to a title that's held at a higher level, then that student could get that through HR library loan.

So we thought that was a really, really great solution and I wish it was still in effect, honestly.

The other politically charged challenge I didn't want to leave out, since it is more relevant to the public library. When I served on the public library's board of governance, this was from 2019 to 2023,

There were some issues coming up with complaints about unhoused individuals utilizing the library spaces or spaces around the library and that was a very, very tough time I thought and it was important to me and it was important to the director at the time and important to our board that we remember that the library is there to serve all of our community and to treat them with dignity and respect and to just do the best we can.

The balance that we have to strike is to remember that we're a library. We can only provide the library services that we provide. There are certain things that are outlined in the rights and responsibilities policy related to that time, like no bathing in the facilities, no bags larger than a certain size could be brought in, and I thought that that was a decent balance as far as finding a solution that would recognize that we are a library and we needed to serve all different kinds of people to the best that we could in library services.

Question 3: If morale and staff turnover became problems, what three things would you do and why?

Bradley Vinson: I don't know if you all, I can't read my notes. So I would have an open door policy and in fact there's another question I want to answer later that talks a little bit more about making myself available to others for communication, but sometimes you need an opportunity for people to let you know anonymously how they're feeling and so definitely I would have periodic times when I would look for an anonymous survey and then meet to discuss and to determine what the actionable things are that

we could do to address some of the issues that I'm sure would come up through that. So that's one thing I would do.

Another thing I would do would be to find ways to lean into the professional expertise of our staff. I think sometimes people start to feel stymied or stuck. They feel like they're not valued and maybe they need something that they are passionate about.

Maybe they need a little more free reign to determine; maybe a new program that shows off their own skills and also provides them an opportunity to grow what the library is offering.

And the other thing I would also want to do is offer not only more opportunities for professional growth but also possibly community engagement. I don't know if we have an existing program where we offer time for mentorship or participation in things like Habitat, but I think sometimes getting back out into the community is a great way to remind our staff that they are a part of this community. Sometimes when you're feeling trouble you want to look for the helpers and I want my library staff to know that they are the helpers.

Question 4: Okay. Tell us about a time when your staff gave feedback about a plan or a policy you implemented. How did you respond and what changed due to that feedback?

Bradley Vinson: So one thing that is tough working in the school system is that we are all in our separate spaces all the time, and it's hard to get away. You can't get a sub; you can't get together and meet very frequently. So I was offering weekly or biweekly meetings for librarians to get together.

Sometimes it was a smaller group. It was just the middle school or just the high school. There was one particular meeting that was more of a loose agenda. It's a, "Oh, we're going to go over how to do this and the catalog."

But oftentimes, we would only have maybe four or five people who could attend and then it would turn into more of an office hour session, and I got feedback from someone who had come hoping to do the catalog work and found out, "Oh no, this is getting sidetracked very quickly."

So we ended up turning that into more of a on your own the catalog work. We have what was called a trail mix where they could complete certain things independently, and then I turned the office hours into more of an official offering and said, "Please just contact me. "I told them how to search for open time in my calendar and said, "Grab 15 or 30 minutes with me, and we'll do a Google Meet."

We'll have that time that's similar to what we were offering and that regular offering, but allowed for people who didn't need that face-to-face time to not take that time.

Question 5: If the Board of County Commissioners and the Library Board of Governance gave you conflicting goals or priorities for the library, what would your process be for resolving them?

Bradley Vinson: Here's where I hope I can read what I wrote. So I was looking at one of the county's goals to provide efficient, responsive services that enhance the quality of life, meet common needs and promote a safe and healthy community.

And I thought, gosh, isn't that what the library's all about too? I can't imagine that we would be in conflict with each other. However, if both of those bodies are looking at a library issue, I would recognize that it is a need a serious issue and the first thing that I would do would be to reach out to the county administrator, and I would ask for their take on it.

I would try to find a different perspective and an understanding of it from that other angle and then after that, if we couldn't come to a plan together, then I would further want to reach out to the members of those governing bodies and try to gain a deeper understanding of those individual positions as well so that then when we do come together as a body, maybe we can work it out with perhaps me acting as a mediator.

Question 6: What is the recent decision you made in your current job that you now wish you made differently?

Bradley Vinson: So again, our school system, we are all spread out, not only in the schools, but in our administrative offices, and I was at the McDaniel building. So normally I'm a Spencer Bibbs, which is over at Jordan and then I was over at the McDaniel building for a meeting and ran into a friend in systems integration, just sitting outside working at one of the picnic tables after my meeting and I sat down with him for a little while.

He had one of those fun little folding side screens so that he could spread out his work and he said, "Have you thought about doing what I'm doing, but just at all the schools so that I could be out in the schools more?"

And I have kind of thought about it, but at the time I still had another person in my office who was able to go out and make school visits and so it wasn't top priority for me, but I think what I wish I had done was I wish I had done it sooner.

Since we are in a hiring freeze right now and the person who was immediately supporting me has moved to support her parents

I'm trying to get out more. I'm trying to be more visible and in part that's because I want to combat the idea that I'm too busy to help. I am busy, and I will take my work out when I go there, but I'm not too busy to help. They are still my first priority and I want to be sure that I'm visible and that they know that I'm there and I'm available. So I wish I had done that a little sooner ago.

Question 7: How would you align friends or foundation fundraising with a library strategic plan?

Bradley Vinson: There were two things I was curious about with this question. First I was wondering what's foundation in this context? Do we have a library foundation?

County Staff: Yes.

Bradley Vinson: I know we have the Library Board of Governance. I just didn't realize there was a fundraising foundation. Okay.

I'm very familiar with the Friends of the Library, and I was thinking that with as tirelessly as the Friends of the Library have advocated for library services over the years, over more than 50 years at this point, if there was something that were out of alignment, I would be surprised and I would wonder is there something we need to be refocusing on that maybe we've lost along the way.

The other thing to remember though is that the Friends funding. I mean if they really want to support something very specific like children's programming; I mean we have a very large budget and what we get from the Friends is a small amount, and I think that when people come to the library and they want us to support something specific that we should recognize that and thank them for that and put that where they are hoping to see it.

Question 8: How would you reach out and serve residents who don't use the library?

Bradley Vinson: That's a tough one. That was a really tough one. So I do think the library has a lot of great existing partnerships. I mean when I was at the Bellevue Library today, I heard that the symphony was going to be performing there later and that I love the symphony. I'm actually part of the symphony advisory council.

I have seen all sorts of wonderful partnerships come in for some reading programs, and I know that things like our program for offering food to students over the summers is a great way to get new faces through the door.

Maybe they're coming for something different, but then they get to enjoy having library services as well. But I think it's possible we would need some different perspectives. We would need some sort of committee. We would want community volunteers to come in and offer their suggestions for how we reach people we aren't reaching.

We probably want to take a deep look at our active patrons and see if we can tell some things about where they're coming from and then start to explore how we reach the people that we're not currently serving.

Question 9: How would you partner with community organizations to increase library services?

Bradley Vinson: I would need to do my homework and learn what their missions are and then could craft ways or learn what ways our strategic goals can align with their missions and it's all about listening to and communication. I just need to make myself available as a library representative to those organizations so that they know we are seeking those partnerships and then hopefully the rest will fall into place.

Question 10: If we called your last supervisor and ask them about your leadership style, what would they say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Bradley Vinson: I think they would say that I'm very knowledgeable, and I work through challenges step by step. Eating that elephant one bite at a time.

I'm always focused on moving forward. When we face a setback, I am looking for what we can do so that we can continue to move forward in small steps while we figure out how we're going to get to what we want to do.

I listen so that I can best support those that I serve and those who work with me and if I had to say what my greatest weakness would be, I'd go back to when I first started working in the school system, behavior management.

Behavior management is tough, but again, that goes back to instead of having strict procedures that we were following, I was focused on making the library a more welcoming place and I was really leaning into students wanting to be there in order to make everything work. It probably would have been more smooth if I had those strict procedures though at the beginning.

Question 11: Have you ever procured a service for a library? What was it for? How did you prepare for the process or negotiations and what was the result?

Bradley Vinson: So I kind of went back and forth on what I might say in answer to this one too, because when I think about procurement, the big thing on my mind right now in my current job is textbooks

And I'll talk about that when I talk about the budget as well, but I guess I would talk too about we have had a guest author come in the past and it was something that an outside organization was willing to fund, but there are all sorts of hurdles that have to be met with risk management and getting the person cleared to be on campus, all sorts of forms and certain things that you have to do and then of course organizing schedules with different schools that are also going to be compatible with the schedule for the guest author.

That was something that ended up being very successful. We had John Patrick Green come and the librarians did a great job of bringing in classes so that as many students as possible could see him and we were able to have some other schools that he couldn't have the time to visit all of them, but they could join remotely and it was just a really wonderful event.

Question 12: What emerging risks do you foresee for public libraries in the next five years and how would you prepare for them?

Bradley Vinson: So for public libraries in general, I think funding is always going to be number one and I think we're very fortunate here in Escambia County to have our MSTU established because prior to that there were ups and downs and emergencies 30% cut in hours or staff, it was very challenging and it was not stable and I do think that there are lots of public libraries still facing that kind of instability.

In addition to funding, so I want to talk about AI just a little bit. I serve on the plan board, which is the Panhandle Library Area Network, the cooperative libraries in this region and one thing that came up at our recent meeting was watching out for AI generated books, content and books. So you want your vendor to be able to tell you if this nonfiction book is written by a person who had a process and research or was it something they plugged into ChatGPT and then self-published and now this unvetted product is available for sale to you, lucky you.

So watching out for that I think is very important. I think young people, especially maybe not just young people, have a hard time distinguishing misinformation and when it's in print, I mean it seems to me we've always trusted print. Print is always like fact, right? But if it's not anymore, we just really need to be very cautious about that.

And then of course censorship, censorship is a big one. I think that we would benefit from always being transparent in our actions. If we've received a challenge, I think we need to let people know what challenge we received, and I think we need to have a process in place and somehow involve the community in making the decision as far as what we would then do with that material.

In many cases, it might end up moving to a higher collection, in which case I would want to be sure that our patrons know how they can allow access to, you know, if they have children. Say they have young adults who want to read books that are now in the adult section. We want to make that easy for them if that's their choice.

Question 13: What is the largest annual library budget you have successfully implemented?

Bradley Vinson: So implemented by myself, I had a small library, but in my time on the Library Board of Governance, I was involved in approving the budget, which was probably between \$9 and \$10 million for the years that I served on the Board of Governance.

And then currently, I do support all of our school librarians who have about \$153,000 in district funds for purchasing library books, and then I'm also responsible for the textbooks, and textbooks this year are going to cost us about \$11.2 million. So that would be the largest budget that I've had to work with.

In order to do that, I have to work with multiple departments. I work with the ELA department. They did the adoption this year and so they have a process that's put in place with a lot of guidelines from Florida state statutes and then as we go through that review process and publicly notice things as we are supposed to, once we get to a point where we are recommending and then taking that recommendation to the school board, they have an approval process, there's a period to contest which we're currently in and then we work with procurement, we work with our warehouse staff to be sure that the volume of materials that's coming in is going to get where it needs to be and then of course we have to work with all of the admins at all of the schools and we have over 50 schools in order to properly quantify what the orders will be.

They have to predict how many students they'll have in the coming years and then I have to vet that information so that we don't overspend.

Question 14: What system or method do you use to rank your financial priorities with finite library funding?

Bradley Vinson: So I look first at, how can we avoid impacting the community's access? How can we keep the lights on and the doors open for the same hours if at all possible? That's priority one.

That means that some other things, I mean there could be staff cuts that happen without the hours being cut, but before staff cuts, I would look at cutting the budget for things. That would be books, that would be any new equipment we might have been considering purchasing.

If there are other things, if we could run the courier less, and it would save us any amount of money. If there are things we can do that don't impact staff, those, of course, would be the things that I would have to look at cutting first.