Interview with Bradley (Brad) Podair
Library Specialist in the Department of Resource Services at Wake Forest University
By Michael H. Rubin

MR: Brad, first of all…tell me your age, a little bit about your background, where you grew up and we’ll just start from that point.

BP: That sounds good. I appreciate you taking the time to interview me and for letting me be a part of this project. I am 28 years old. I am originally from Statesville, down the road from here. I grew up in Statesville, went to college in Greensboro at Guilford College. I was a political science major at Guilford. I wasn’t expecting to end up working in a library or in academia necessarily. I thought I’d probably be in Raleigh or DC. I had an opportunity when I was in undergrad as a work study student to work for the Technical Services Department over at the Guilford College Library. I enjoyed that work, and that was a good fit for me.

I graduated college back in 2004, and I thought that might be one of the industries to pursue and get into for my postgrad career. I took a job working at the N.C. A&T in the Government Documents Department. I worked there from 2004 until 2007, and in June of 2007, I took the job over at Wake Forest in the Professional Center Library. That is the other library on campus that services both the Law School and the MBA Schools of Business. I worked there until just a few weeks ago. I currently work at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library, the campus library, and have been working there for about two weeks. I am just starting out and the work is a little different than what I did over at the Professional Center Library, but I’ve enjoyed the change. That’s a little bit about my professional experience in a nutshell.

MR: So you are how old now?

BP: I’m 28.

MR: You got your undergraduate degree at Guilford prior to your coming to WFU, and you started working following graduation at N.C. A&T, and from there you progressed to your affiliation with Wake Forest. Tell me a little bit about your growing up experiences in Statesville. You went to high school there also?

BP: Yes, that’s correct. I grew up there and went to high school there.

MR: Tell me a little about your family, parents, brother and sisters. What kind of work did your parents engage in? Tell me about your siblings—where they are living and doing, and what they think of what you are doing?

BP: Originally, even though I grew up in Statesville, I was born in Rock Hill, SC, which is suburb of Charlotte. My dad was in the radio business for many years. He no longer is. Before my parents had children, they traveled around the country quite a good deal as a result of his radio career. But once my parents decided to have children, they settled down and they’ve been
living in Statesville since 1986. And as I was saying before, my dad was in the radio industry. He worked 25 years and then decided to change careers somewhat and is now exclusively in sales. He works as an independent contractor for several companies in Charlotte and one in Statesville. He felt that was a better fit for the family--more stability than the radio industry.

    My mom is a teacher. She is an elementary school teacher who has taught in a variety of schools. In Statesville for a while, she was teaching at a Montesorri School. For the past fifteen years or so, she has been working in the public school system--primarily first grade, but she has worked with a few other grades. Currently she is a fifth grade elementary school teacher. I enjoyed growing up in Statesville.

MR: That’s interesting. My mother was also a school teacher. It seems to be a very demanding profession. When she retired, she was ready. Now your dad was in radio…was he in the broadcast part of radio and was he also a college graduate like yourself?

BP: Yes, both my parents were college grads. They are both originally from the New York area. Both were born in New York City. My mom was born in Brooklyn. My dad was born in Queens. Professional opportunities took them down to the south. In radio, Dad did a little bit of everything. He was on the air. He also worked as a general manager. He supervised a lot of the folks actually working on the air. As his career progressed, his work became more focused on sales, and that became one of his strong points. He ended up continuing to do that for the rest of his career. So yes, both of my parents were college grads that met in New York, and my dad’s career took him down south. They married and a number of years later decided to start a family in the early ‘80s.

MR: That is interesting. Both of my parents were from New York and also moved south after the war. What about your siblings? Tell me a little bit about where they live and what they do now.

BP: I have one other sibling. I have a younger sister, and her name is Elizabeth. She is 24. She was born in 1986 and grew up in Statesville as well. She went to the same high school that I attended. I was older and we were not in school at the same time. After high school, she went to college in Charlotte at Queen’s University. She became a corporate communications major and graduated college in 2009, just about a year and a half ago. Since then she has been working in Charlotte for a variety of public relations companies, and she has also been doing some freelance work. She’s a freelance journalist for the Charlotte News & Observer as well as the PR career, so she keeps very busy there.

MR: This is interesting. Both of you are almost equidistant from where you grew up, and you’ve stayed in North Carolina. My best friend in college was a potter who taught at Queen’s College for 33 to 34 years and just retired last year. I’m curious. Did your sister ever mention taking a ceramics class with Rick Crown?

BP: I don’t think that she ever took any ceramics classes because her major was more on the liberal arts studies, but I’m certain she was familiar with him because it is such a small university. I’m sure she would know the name.
MR: He is a character. What type of work during your childhood did you think you would enjoy doing? What kinds of activities during your youth led up to your occupation now?

BP: When I was a child, like a lot of children, you have a conception of what you’d like to do and that changes throughout the years. I remember when I was very young I wanted to be an astronaut. And at a young age, when the Challenger explosion happened, I remember watching it or being aware of it as I was 3 ½ or 4 years old. I remember from then on of not wanting to be an astronaut. I don’t know if it was as impactful for me as school children watching it in school, as I was too young to be in school, but I remember of being aware. I don’t know what my conception of being an astronaut was, but I knew that it was a high risk occupation and that was something I wanted to avoid. As I got older, I was always a very big sports fan. I thought I would love to be a baseball general manager. My dad is still a very big baseball fan. That was something I inherited from him. I was interested in the behind-the-scenes aspects of sports and baseball more specifically: prospects, salaries, general management, and things like that. I remember hearing that some folks had gone to Ohio University which had a very strong sports management program, and those folks had become major league general managers. I thought, “Oh, that’s the thing for me.” I’d go to Ohio University and be a major league general manager for the Cleveland Indians. That obviously didn’t end up working out. I realized that the market to become a professional general manager is very competitive. That is something that is not for everyone. When I was in college, I was more interested in politics and I thought I’d end up in Raleigh or DC. Post-graduation I realized the market for that is not as stable as I wanted, where you can find a job, but it may be just for a few months. I realized that I had some background in the library, doing that as an undergraduate study student. I was a big reader and enjoyed computers, and my personality is a little more introverted, and I thought maybe that was a better fit for me.

I guess I never thought that I would continue to work in libraries, but now it has been for about seven years, and I’ve worked in a few different organizations. In the future I’d like to get a master’s degree and become a librarian as my permanent profession. But that is something that I didn’t think of as a child or teenager that would become my career. But over the years I’ve found that it is a good fit for my personality and for my skills, and there is market for people with those skills.

MR: It sounds like that your love of reading in your childhood and your comfort in the library had a great deal to do with what you are doing now and what you also plan to pursue in the future. Don’t despair with your general managership of a major league baseball team. I think Brian Cashman for the Yankees is on the banana peel if he doesn’t produce this year.

BP: Absolutely!

MR: How do you feel your job fits with a major university of Wake Forest? I know that you went to a smaller undergraduate school and of course Wake is a university with graduate schools and a little bit different workplace. How do you feel that you function in making this university run fulfill its purpose?
BP: I think my job itself you can say is very small, but if you look at the bigger picture, the department that I work for and the type of work that we do and what the library does is very important in the running of a university. The work that I do more specifically is important because I work primarily with serials so we are talking about magazines, periodicals, academic journals, newspapers, and we have folks who are members of the faculty and the community that use a lot of those resources to do their own research to write dissertations to expand their knowledge. And I know that the work I do in receiving those publications and ensuring that they are checked in and accessible to the professors and that they are put on our online databases is very important. If they can’t have easy access to the research materials that they need, then Wake Forest as a university would diminish because the library in many universities, and I think it is true at Wake Forest, it is truly the heart of the university.

I think the goal at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library is for our library to be the intellectual hub of the university. I think we’ve done a good job in succeeding with that mission that we provide so many different services for the faculty, staff, students and community, that we can really be the go-to place to acquire knowledge anywhere from a technology perspective. If a student needs to go to The Bridge and they are having an issue with their ThinkPad or they want to check out a new e-reader, or a professor wants to acquire material by interlibrary loan that might be difficult to locate. Or if you have a freshman coming in to college who doesn’t know a lot about services that the Library provides and they enroll in one of our Library 100 courses taught by the Reference staff. I think if you look at the whole picture of what we do, it is very important. The work that I do of course with the periodicals is more specialized and important as well so that if we don’t have the resources that we need for folks to succeed, then we are not fulfilling the mission.

MR: It sounds like you are a very important link as a facilitator in providing faculty, students and researchers the things that they need to continue in the academic pursuits. I’d also like to congratulate you and the library for the recent award that I read about in the newspaper. How do you feel about Wake Forest’s recent library award?

BP: I think it is a wonderful accomplishment. It is funny for me because the day that I started working here a couple of weeks ago when they had announced the award so I know that personally I didn’t have a lot to do with it because I was working at another library on-campus. But it makes me feel that I’m part of a great organization, and I see how hard the one I work with...how hard they work to accomplish that. I guess it makes me feel very proud and that I’m in a great place and made a good decision to work at the library. It makes me feel that the library is fulfilling its mission: that everything that everyone does from the most minute to the most public obvious activity is succeeding and you are looking at that from a national perspective. And a national organization is saying the library is successful. We are the top library in this category, and we are really there for the faculty and staff. I was taking a look at the same article as well and to know that in the past the libraries that won that award are much larger—they would be your typical university library that maybe had 40,000 undergrads and the support of a huge public university system. Yet at Wake Forest…we are a small private liberal arts university, and the fact that we can compete with that type of university is very prestigious and speaks volumes of the support the University has given the library and what the staff and librarians have done here.
MR: All of this makes you think that because of Wake Forest’s size that it actually has some advantages in furthering the mission of the library and to provide the innovation that it has. I noticed that although these innovations are in the spirit of academia per se, the library has also become a comfortable place not only to do your research but to also simply enjoy [yourself]. Bringing that to mind, what brought you specifically to Wake Forest University as opposed to other opportunities that came up…did other opportunities present themselves?

BP: When I was working at N.C. A&T, I had been there a few years and enjoyed my work. I was looking at other positions. A lot of it had to do with logistics. When I was working at A&T, primarily my hours were second-shift hours, so I was working from early in the afternoon to very late in the evening. And that worked okay when you were right out of college, but eventually those types of hours are tough. They are tough on your personal life. It is tough just because we are living in a world where most things revolve around folks that work eight to five. It is tough to get things done. It just wasn’t a very good fit for me. I’m more of a morning person, so late night did not work well. I was looking at positions that had similar work but with more traditional hours. I saw a few positions and had a few interviews. I had an interview over at the Professional Center Library, and I thought that would be a good fit for me. A lot of it had to do with Wake Forest because I did have other opportunities, but I just knew the reputation of Wake Forest in the Triad, in the state and of course nationally as well. I felt that it would be a good place to work. I felt that the life-work balance and the benefits that they offer to staff were very good. I just knew that whenever you tell anyone that you work for Wake Forest immediately they make a very positive association with the University. It’s a prestigious place to work, and a good place to advance myself and advance my career.

MR: And again, you have been here how long?

BP: Four years in June. So about 3 ½ years.

MR: So that is a pretty good track record…and you feel that you are in the right place now that you’ve been here for this length?

BP: Yes.

MR: That’s great! Did you receive any advice from anybody in particular in your undergraduate days or in your work experiences in the summer or at your home and community about going into this type of work?

BP: Well, when I was an undergraduate at Guilford, I had a mentor who was my student supervisor in technical services, and she was very helpful because I told her that I might be considering library work upon graduation. She told me about libraries and universities that she thought might be a good fit, good places that she had connections with, places that would be a good place to work. Back then, several years before I started at Wake Forest, she talked about Wake Forest as a very good place to work. That the Z. Smith Reynolds Library was ahead of the game in the type of engagement that they had between faculty and staff in making the library the place. I think that’s a challenge for libraries in the 21st century. With technology, everyone thinks
that you don’t need a library anymore. You work with physical materials in your job that are relevant. But I guess it [the library] really isn’t [irrelevant] because with online databases and the type of work that ZSR has done with making the library feel like a place, the third place, the same philosophy that Starbucks has from their corporate entity of making it a “third place”, and they’ve really done that in making it relevant. I had heard very good things about Wake Forest over the years and my mentor in undergrad was very helpful in making sure I was staying on the right path, and she thought it would be a good career choice for me.

MR: Now as you’ve been mentored for what sounds like your college days and [as you’ve gone about] selecting your line of work, do you have advice for other people who might consider this as their occupation?

BP: Sure, I think that to get into the library world and become a librarian, it is a great career. I think what libraries have done is that they’ve really taken technology to the next level. They’ve managed to stay relevant in the 21st century. I think it can be a great career if you are interested in new technology. I think if you are interested in learning and doing a variety of work, and a lot of times it can be very fast paced, and working with a variety of people, I think that it really can be for you. The right type of person that is interested in learning, in information gathering, if they are interested in technology, then it can be the right type of career. For someone who is in high school or even college, I would recommend for them to volunteer at a public library in a page program or to volunteer at their university or community college library to see if it is a good fit for them. It is an expanding career. The work is very different than it even was ten or fifteen years ago, and certainly fifty years ago. I think the stereotype of the library and the librarian, of the librarian as the old woman who is telling everyone to be quiet…I think that stereotype isn’t true anymore. Librarianship as a career and as a profession has been able to get rid of that stereotype; it has made libraries a very positive place, and also a career for the 21st century and beyond.

MR: It sounds like you see doing library work at every level as an evolving profession. Is that fair? Where do you think you will be and how your job description itself will change in the next ten to fifteen years?

BP: I think that library work is evolving because of the technology that we have. Library support staff and librarians are doing complicated work and increasingly using programs that unless you are very specifically trained to use them they are not for everyone. So I think in the future in the entire industry you are going to see more educated workers who are working in libraries. I think you are going to see workers with greater technology skills, and I think you are going to see people who have very good customer service skills as well. I think more specifically I think in ten or fifteen years the type of job that I do will exist but I think the trend is for everything to be more electronic. We have several people on staff whose main work is working primarily with electronic databases. I think you will have more of those types of people who help to maintain the electronic databases that the university has, and in some ways managing the electronic databases can be much more time-consuming and complicated than if you were just working in print, physical material.
**MR:** Certainly. Now that you have been a member of the Wake Forest community for the past four years, what do you like most about being here at Wake Forest? Include anything from your job to what the university campus has to offer.

**BP:** I think I enjoy working at Wake Forest for a variety of reasons. I’ve enjoyed the work that I’ve done. I’ve been able to do a large variety of work and worked with a lot of good people. The work/life balance is very good. It is nice being on the campus. The campus for faculty and staff offers a lot of opportunities; you are talking about dining opportunities, opportunities for the arts, to see some of the speakers that come to campus, to take advantage of some of the programs that are on campus, and there are some nice perks working at Wake Forest. For example, if you are a member of the faculty or staff, you have access to the University library for your own personal use. You can check out a wide variety of publications, you can use some of the electronic resources, you can use movies, and some of the other cultural opportunities are nice as well. [It’s nice] to be able to go to the Reynolda House, and take advantage of what they offer there for yourself and a guest. It’s a picturesque campus. After work you can take a walk in Reynolda Village or the trails, or you can have something to eat and go to one of the arts events. Athletics, of course, so you feel that when you are on campus, you are not working in some office park that when you leave you want to get away as soon as possible but you feel you want to stay and be part of the campus because there is so much going on. They’ve done a very nice job maintaining the campus so you want to spend time there and come back even though you may not necessarily be working.

**MR:** It sounds like in addition to being your workplace, it [Wake Forest’s campus] is a cultural and recreational destination also. In fact, have you taken in some of the plays and ballgames? What about Reynolda Village and other ancillary benefits? Any that you can describe?

**BP:** I’ve been able to do a variety of things personally which is very nice. I was active with an exercise group where we actually would meet at Reynolda Village after work. There were some that worked at Wake Forest and some that worked close to campus. I’ve been able to attend some plays. I’ve attended some basketball games and football games. I’ve attended some lectures. I got to see Spike Lee speak and John McCain speak, to name a couple of folks in the last few years. It was really great to be able to do that at the same place that I work and have access to those types of speakers.

**MR:** Well that is great to hear your enthusiasm especially since the athletic programs have been slightly down this year, [which is] different than what we’ve been used to in the past five or six years. Tell me, are you married? Do you have a family of your own? What is your personal life [like]?

**BP:** I am not married currently. I am dating someone. My girlfriend lives in Asheboro. She is a special education teacher. We’ve been dating for about a year. In June she’s going to be moving to Winston-Salem, which will be really great. I’m looking forward to that. She’ll be getting a job working with the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools as a special ed teacher, and in the future, we hopefully will expand our relationship and be engaged and start a family in the future. I told her a little bit about working at Wake Forest and the community, and she looks forward to (when she moves to Winston in June) doing things that the university has to offer that
are not only good for the employees but also the community. The speakers and some of the athletic events she is very interested in as well.

MR: It sounds like she will be not only a good fit for you but a good fit for the community, and I’m sure that her talent will be appreciated. Do you have any social hobbies or interests, and what are they?

BP: There are a few things that I’m interested in and passionate about. I’m a big sports fan. I’ve always enjoyed watching and playing sports. Currently I’m a member of SABER, which is the Society of American Baseball Research. It is a national baseball organization out of Cleveland, Ohio, and I belong to the Central Carolina Chapter which is the chapter for both North and South Carolina. We meet on a quarterly basis, and that is something I enjoy very much with my dad. We meet other interested baseball fans and attend a game during the season. I also enjoy exercising, like walking and running. I like to take advantage of some of the parks in the area. Sometimes in the colder months, I exercise inside. I’m a big movie buff, and am happy that Winston-Salem has the Aperture and independent cinema. I’ve been able to check out some movies there. I keep up with current events and the news. There are definitely a variety of different venues and things to do. I like listening to new music. I enjoy going to some concerts and am looking forward to Ziggy’s reopening here in Winston-Salem. I think that will be a boom for the area. I think that will bring some eclectic shows that will be good for myself and the community. Those are a few of the hobbies and interests that I have.

MR: It sounds like your affiliation with SABER is something that I’d be interested in. I’m a long-suffering baseball fan and can’t wait until spring training begins. We’ve gone through most of your situation here at Wake Forest and your personal life. Let me ask you a question about the “American Dream.” What in your estimation and analysis is the “American Dream”? Do you think you are living the “American Dream”?

BP: I think in my opinion, the American dream is having opportunity. In a lot of other countries, societies, and time periods, an individual may not have had the opportunity to make different choices in his or her life. I think that is definitely living the American dream. I, as an individual living in America, have the opportunity to make a choice with what I want to do with my life; what type of educational path I want to pursue; what type of career that I want to pursue; what friendships, personal relationships and hobbies that I want to have, that isn’t dictated by anyone or the circumstances to which I was born, geography which I may be born into, my particular sex,…that is all definitely part of the American dream. And it is part of my family experience where my mother was a first generation American. That is something that is very important as well. My father’s parents--my grandparents--were born in Germany. My uncle, my mother’s brother, was born out of the country as well. After the second World War, they immigrated to America, and they took advantage of the American dream to find a better life for themselves. They had already had some family living in America, and that was a great opportunity… they had the ability to transform their lives because they were living in Germany during turbulent and difficult times. They didn’t have the option to choose, so I think that they were able to live the American dream for themselves and [were] able to live the American dream for their family. For my mother, being a first generation American, she talks about that experience and how powerful it was for her growing up in America and even though she was
born here, the first language that she spoke was German. Her parents’ experience was the immigrant experience, and she and my uncle were really the generation to help them transition to life in America. Sometimes that created some cultural issues as well. She considered herself definitely an American, and they considered themselves definitely German immigrants. Sometimes they felt that maybe she took for granted some of those opportunities. When I speak with her, I realize how lucky I am to have been born in America in this time period with a lot of choice and opportunity, so I feel that I am living proof of the American dream as a result of her experiences and my experiences as well.

MR: The idea of the American dream obviously changes from generation to generation. It seems to me that acquisition of materials—houses, cars, wide flat-screen televisions, etc. has influenced a lot of your ideas (and probably my ideas too) of the American dream concept. What do you think about the acquisition of material wealth as part of the American dream?

BP: I think it is unfortunate that we do live in a society where everyone is interested in “keeping up with the Jones.” I definitely think that is not part of the American dream. I think that people who think it is part of the American dream are unfortunately misguided. I think they have lost sight of what the American dream means…it is the opportunity to do different things, not to be opulent and showy in your wealth. If you are able to—through hard work or circumstances—to come into a lot of financial wealth or material gain, I think that is wonderful. But at the same time, I think that we live in a world where we have a lot of people who are less fortunate. Then you see someone like Bill Gates, for example, who as a result of hard work and circumstances became wealthy, but you see he and his family have a foundation for helping others. So I think someone like that is the ideal, that even though they are truly living the American dream both in success and real wealth, they are able to give back to the community, to help others, and attempt to make other people’s lives better. I think that is the point. You want to help your community somehow through your circumstance. You are able to have material gain and I think that is fine but unless you are really helping the people under you, then you are only lifting up yourself and not everyone else. That’s part of the American dream: to help those around you and improve your community as well.

MR: It sounds like that you really look at the American dream as opportunity and should fortune come your way, you have a responsibility to your community to continue to extend this idea. Brad, it was wonderful talking with you and having the opportunity of you giving me this very succinct oral history. It sounds like are on the path you want to be on and in the place you want to be. I hope the future is as bright for you as it appears to be. Thank you very much for your help and assistance.

BP: Thank you.