

ChangeMasters All—A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-first Century

An Interview with Maureen Sullivan

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As an independent library consultant, Maureen Sullivan has a unique vantage point from which to view both changes in libraries over the past few decades and the future prospects of librarianship in the twenty-first century. Throughout the years, Sullivan has helped libraries of all types and sizes with issues of organizational redesign, strategic planning, personnel management, and staff development. In addition, she has taught leadership development programs designed to give librarians the skills to evolve as leaders in the profession. It was at one such program, the Mountain Plains Library Association's Leadership Institute at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, that Sullivan shared her less-than-typical career experiences in the field of librarianship from a broad organizational development viewpoint.

As Sullivan tells her story, one is immediately struck by the twists of fate that have charted her course and by her ability to transform one opportunity into the next. Even her initial attraction to libraries seems accidental. In 1971, Sullivan was looking for a job in the Washington, D.C., area while she finished her undergraduate degree in history at the University of Maryland (UM). She recounts, "Almost every job I applied for required typing, and I just made up my mind I wasn't going to go learn to be a typist to get a job. I fell into a page job in the public library system in Prince George's County, Maryland."

It was while working full-time at that position that she got to know some of the reference librarians within the system, one of whom was Lynne Bradley (now the deputy director of ALA's Washington Office). Sullivan credits Bradley with persuading her to pursue a master's degree in library science. Bradley helped Sullivan understand the real work of librarians and exhibited a true commitment to service.

After working full-time for a couple of years as a circulation assistant in a storefront library within the Prince George's County Memorial Library System, Sullivan decided to pursue librarianship as a career and began library school at UM. While she was attending UM, a joint program with the history and library science departments was established so she took courses in history, particularly oral history, and finished the degree thinking she would go into archives work. However, she discovered she had a mold allergy that prevented her from working in archives.

Sullivan notes, "I really went in thinking I would work in a public library." However, the opportunity to move

to the personnel track came while she was pursuing her MLS. Sullivan took two courses that greatly influenced her chosen career path—organizational development in libraries and human relations in libraries. She identifies her involvement in these courses as defining moments in her career. Ed Olson, a faculty member in the College of Library and Information Science at UM and an expert in organization development, asked her to assist him during the class by facilitating group work. Olson subsequently invited her to team teach the course with him the following fall, in the event that she did not find a more traditional library job after graduation. Sullivan credits this as instrumental in shaping her career because it gave her "exposure to the organizational development piece—the training, the experiential learning" and also caused her to take her time searching for a job. She claims that these courses defined her thinking by emphasizing "the importance of really focusing on staff and developing [staff] competencies . . . and thinking of the library as an organization."

During the pursuit of her MLS, Sullivan worked full-time at UM as a nonprint media library technical assistant. While in this position, Sullivan participated in a movement to unionize the classified staff. This gave her a deep appreciation for the different perspectives that often exist between "management" and "staff," and helped her to recognize the importance of seeing beyond titles and categories to understand individual differences. Later, because of her prior involvement with the union organization for support staff, the assistant director of libraries for personnel at UM was wary when Sullivan (with the library director's encouragement) applied for the position of assistant personnel librarian in 1977. Despite that concern, she was hired, then was promoted to assistant director of libraries for personnel in 1979. She served in that position for a year before moving to work for the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

It was while at UM that Sullivan worked closely with two people she now refers to as mentors in her career. The first, Judy Sorum Brown, was in the Dean's Office for Undergraduate Studies and was also the chair of the Chancellor's Commission on Women's Affairs. Sullivan

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served as a graduate assistant working with that commission. Sullivan found this experience encouraging because Brown was “a young, bright woman [in a significant] leadership role in a university setting.” In that respect, she was a role model.

The second mentor Sullivan worked with at UM was Jack Siggins, the associate director for public services. As Sullivan recalls, Siggins “had an active interest in organization development and staff development, and was a very good coach to me in how to deal with some of the situations I faced.” Siggins helped her to see beyond the traditional functions of personnel administration and to operate with an “understanding of the organization as a human system.” He also introduced her to some of the prominent people in personnel work within academic libraries and professional

organizations, such as Sheila Creth and Paul Gherman. This early introduction to broad perspectives on library organizations and the benefits of participation in ALA activities (such as ACRL’s Personnel Administrators Discussion Group) were instrumental in the path of Sullivan’s career.

In 1980, Sullivan moved from UM to ARL. This move marked another turning point in her career. It was at ARL that she gained valuable experience developing organizational training and staff development programs. She also got her first taste of consulting to academic libraries. At ARL, she worked as a management training program specialist for three years under the tutelage of Duane Webster, whom she credits as mentoring her throughout her career. Webster carefully helped her learn instructional design and the basic principles and practices of effective consulting.

Education

MLS, University of Maryland, 1976

BA, History, University of Maryland, 1974

Professional Experience

Assistant Personnel Librarian, University of Maryland, 1977–79

Assistant Director of Libraries for Personnel, University of Maryland, 1979–80

Management Training Program Specialist, Association of Research Libraries, 1980–83

Head, Library Personnel Services, Yale University Library, 1983–91

Organizational Development Consultant, Maureen Sullivan Associates, 1991 to present (Including TALLTexans, MPLA, NELLS, and other leadership institutes)

Selected Publications

“The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations,” *Library Trends* (Summer 2004).

“Organization Development in Libraries,” *Library Administration & Management* (Fall 2004).

“Total Quality Management in Higher Education,” *Journal of Library Administration* (Spring 1993).

“The Changing Role of the Middle Manager in Research Libraries,” *Library Trends* (Fall 1992).

“A New Leadership Paradigm: Empowering Library Staff and Improving Performance,” *Journal of Library Administration* 14, no. 2 (1991).

Performance Analysis and Appraisal, with Robert D. Stueart (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1991).

“Staff Development at Indiana State University: Providing the Competitive Edge,” with Ronald G. Leach, *Library Administration and Management* (Summer 1990).

“Self-Management in Technical Services: The Yale Experience,” with Gerald R. Lowell, *Library Administration and Management* (Winter 1989).

Selected Professional Activities

American Library Association

Member, Core Values Task Force, 2000–2002

Chair, Office for Library Personnel Resources Advisory Committee, 1991–93

Chair, Minority Fellowship Program Advisory Board, 1989–95

Chair, H. W. Wilson Staff Development Award Jury, 1985

Member, Nominations Committee, 1986

Member, President’s Program Planning Committee for the 1989 Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas

Consultant, Advisory Committee to the Office for Library Outreach Services, 1988–95

Member, Hugh Atkinson Memorial Award Jury, 1993–97

American Society for Training and Development

President, Association of College and Research Libraries, 1998–99

Member, Board of Directors, ACRL, 1997–2000

Personnel and Staff Development Officers Discussion Group, 1978–

University Libraries Section Program Planning Committee, 1987

Member, Search Committee for the Executive Director, 1984

Chair, Search Committee for the Executive Director, 1990

Member, Task Force on Vocational Interest Inventories, 1991

Chair, ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute Advisory Committee, 2000–2004; Ex-officio, 2005–present

President, Library Administration and Management Association, 1988–89

Member, Executive Committee, 1987–90

Chair, Personnel Administration Section, 1984–85

Member, Nominating Committee, 1990–91

Connecticut Governor’s Conference on Libraries and Information Services Planning Committee, 1989–90

Member, ALA President Leslie Berger’s Program Planning Committee, 2005–2007

He and his colleague, Jeffrey Gardner, helped her understand how ARL libraries work, to appreciate the special challenges that library directors face, to think strategically, and to coach and guide others as they deal with challenging problems—both at an individual and an organizational level. Even after Sullivan left ARL in 1983, Webster and Gardner continued to send consulting work her way and use her intermittently as a trainer.

From ARL, Sullivan went to work at Yale as the head of library personnel services, where she worked from 1983 to 1991. While in this position, Sullivan witnessed the unionization of classified staff from an entirely different perspective than she had earlier at UM. Sullivan remembers the experience as very stressful and recalls, “I knew that I was part of management, and I knew that there were things that had to be done to secure management rights. But, I also knew that the staff who had voted for the union had real issues and that they were very valid.”

This unionization experience occupied a significant part of her time at Yale. Sullivan had been recruited to Yale because of her blended experience with training and personnel management; she believed her position at Yale would be equally split between those two functions. However, when the unionization process began, her attention shifted almost entirely to the personnel aspect, and she was often called upon to represent management’s concerns for the entire campus during negotiations. She describes it as “probably the richest personal growth experience,” from which she learned much about the real challenges of leadership in a large traditional organization.

While at Yale, Sullivan participated in the movement to self-managing teams within the library’s technical services areas. She worked closely with Gerald Lowell, who was then the associate university librarian for technical services, to plan and implement this major organizational change. Their work was described in the article, “Self-Management in Technical Services: The Yale Experience,” published in the Winter 1989 issue of *LA&M*. This was the first published description of an effort to implement self-managing teams in a library context and a significant landmark in organizational development in libraries. It was during this transition that Sullivan first “recognized the interdependency among the work we do in libraries—from selection to the shelf.” She also learned a valuable lesson regarding human behavior. She notes that “changing the structure enables people to change their behavior. It becomes a means for people to think in different ways about the work and their contribution to the work. It allows them to see that there is meaningful work beyond what they have been doing in the past.” Though the experience at Yale was not without its share of trials and tribulations, Sullivan remembers the time with fondness. She recounts, “The opportunity to work at Yale was very special for me. . . . It gave me a chance to work with academic administrators, to have those academic administrators understand the value of the library, and the importance of understanding the organizational issues in the library. It was all very important.”

After working at Yale, Sullivan pursued yet another career turning point and took the risk of becoming a full-time consultant. While at ARL in the early eighties, Sullivan learned the consulting practice under Webster and was able to continue to do some consulting after she had gone to Yale. When Sullivan decided to move to full-time consulting, ARL provided her with a safety net by negotiating with her to do a certain amount of training for them, at a stipend. She continues to use the “assisted self-study approach” when she consults, a method she adopted from Webster and Gardner.

In 1988, Sullivan served as LAMA president. Sullivan notes that “LAMA gave me an opportunity to work with people in different types of libraries and to see that innovation happened in public libraries often before it did in academic libraries.” Aptly, the theme for Sullivan’s presidency centered on leadership development, and LAMA’s publications and conference programming for 1988 and 1989 reflected this theme.

A decade after serving as LAMA president, Sullivan was elected president of ACRL. As she discusses her year as president, it becomes obvious that many of the initiatives and programs she started are still near to her heart. One such initiative was the formation of the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute. The institute is for anyone who self-identifies as wanting to gain leadership skills. The first year of the institute, Sullivan attended as an observer, but has subsequently served on the institute’s faculty. In addition to the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute, a joint task force on collaboration between AASL and ACRL was started during Sullivan’s presidency. Another project begun during this period, under the direction of Patricia Iannuzzi, was the creation of guidelines for information literacy competencies.

Today, Sullivan loves the consulting work, and it has been a financially advantageous career for her. Additionally, she has been actively involved in ALA and its divisions for many years. She recounts that her involvement in ALA “has been critical for my own professional and personal development,” and through her involvement she has formed friendships that have lasted throughout her career. When asked what advice she would give new librarians for getting involved in the profession, she suggested looking at the whole ALA structure and identifying discussion groups or committees that interest them. Then, they should attend the meetings and fill out the forms to volunteer to serve. She also recommended approaching leaders within a group and offering to be of assistance on some specific project. For newcomers to ALA, those who let their interests be known to those who are responsible for coordinating efforts will likely be remembered when the need arises.

When asked to compare the typical attitude of librarians at the beginning of her career with that of librarians today, Sullivan noted that throughout her career librarians have been committed to service. However, she has observed that librarians today tend to think “about the larger environment context in which they are operating” and demonstrate a “much greater acceptance of the importance and value of technology.” She also noted that “there is a greater interest

in growth and development and in individuals in practice assuming responsibility for learning and development, seeing that that is part of their responsibility.”

Though Sullivan has not worked in a traditional library job for more than a decade, she has been in continuous contact with libraries and has witnessed many shifts in organizational thinking and planning during her career. When asked what she saw as the major challenges facing libraries today, Sullivan noted such challenges as transforming organizations, using resources advantageously in order to do more with less, and preparing organizations to pursue new initiatives. Other challenges facing libraries today are making “people outside the field really understand and appreciate the work and contributions of the library” and demonstrating the value of libraries in the larger community. To do this, Sullivan suggests that libraries ask themselves tough questions, such as, “What’s the work we do that directly makes a difference for the constituents we’re there to serve? What is it that we now do well that we no longer need to do?” The answers to these questions provide a “good source for ideas about where our competency is and how we can focus more on work that benefits the user.” Ultimately, our efforts should be directed at providing meaningful services for our users, regardless of type of library.

As someone who has had the opportunity to come into close contact with future library leaders at leadership development seminars, Sullivan possesses distinct ideas about what will be required in library leaders of tomorrow. Competencies that she identifies include “being able to look ahead to the future and to articulate that vision; the ability to climb a steep learning curve quickly; the ability to establish and maintain effective relationships with a wide variety of people; and being able to read a situation through several different lenses, such as the political lens and the human resources lens.”

She recognizes leadership development programs as an important start for preparing tomorrow’s leaders, but also believes that much more needs to be done to make the day-to-day work in libraries a richer environment for the development of the competencies cited above. Everyone is both a leader and a follower, she says, and strategic partnerships must be formed to transform organizations.

The ability to look to the future is one of the many skills Sullivan identifies as essential for future leaders. When asked to make some predictions of her own for the profession, she identified several potential forces of change. Sullivan notes that “the Internet and what people are able to do in terms of finding information will be a significant force for change.” She also mentions the blurring of lines between the work of support and paraprofessional staff and MLS-degreed librarians as another force of change. “We already see people coming in from other fields and other disciplines who are able to do the work of librarians with some basic grounding in the field.” As a result, Sullivan wonders about the future of

the master’s degree in library science. In addition, Sullivan notes the recruitment and retention of the next generation of librarians as a concern for current library leaders. She observes that, as a profession, we need to be concerned with “creating organizations and programs that will both attract and keep the best and the brightest.”

Library literature is replete with articles discussing the graying of the profession, the need to recruit new librarians, and the need to develop future leaders to replace those soon to retire. When asked what the profession has to offer those entering the profession, Sullivan responded by saying that she believed there were exciting opportunities in the field, coming from the wide range of work that librarians do and the involvement of librarians in their communities. She also noted that most librarians in their first jobs “have the opportunity for autonomy” and “to really be creative in coming up with possibilities” because it is an ever-changing field. “There are always opportunities for initiative, for new programs, [and] for new ways of thinking about things.”

Sullivan thinks the collaborative nature of our profession is another selling point. She believes that there is a natural professional cohort that helps acclimate new librarians to the profession. However, she said one of the largest obstacles the profession will need to overcome is that of salaries. She stated, “The salaries basically are not commensurate with the kind of responsibility if you look across professional groups.”

As the title of this series suggests, change is a constant in librarianship, and those who have been in the field for any span of time have seen a significant change in the way libraries conduct their business. As someone who regularly assists organizations as they undergo major changes, Sullivan finds herself in a unique position to offer advice on how to embrace change. It is important for individuals to accept that change is a natural part of life. Once this reality has been accepted, individuals need to strive to understand their personal styles and preferences for dealing with change and then to identify ways they can contribute to it. Individuals must assume responsibility for their own responses to change and focus on areas in which they have control or influence. It is important to focus on strengths. In addition, it is important to keep things in perspective and maintain a sense of humor; this makes it easier to tolerate mistakes, both your own and those made by others. And, when the changes feel like too much, it is important to practice personal stress management techniques and to support your colleagues and managers. Perhaps most importantly, she reminds us, you choose your attitude.

As evidenced by her contributions to the profession and professional literature, Maureen Sullivan has not only led change throughout her career but also currently helps organizations as they plan and implement changes of their own. In addition, she plays a vital role in preparing future library leaders to create change wherever their careers take them; and for this, we—as a profession—are truly thankful.