

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

An Interview with Meredith Butler

Gregg Sapp

Today, career change is common, often occurring several times during a person's work life. Sometimes a person is presented with an unexpected choice or opportunity that, if taken, requires redirection and a willingness to go out on a limb. Such was the choice Meredith Butler faced early in her career. In 1986, she had been in her position as assistant director at State University of New York (SUNY) Albany Libraries for nearly five years and had established herself on a track leading to a possible library directorship. Then, an unforeseen opportunity arose, one offering distinctly new challenges and a broadening of her professional horizons, but at the possible cost of derailing her aspirations in upper-level library administration. The position of assistant vice president for planning in academic affairs at SUNY Albany promised a chance to focus on developing and evaluating significant programs and to expand her knowledge of the university community. If she accepted it, though, would she miss working in libraries, or would her career path invariably diverge from libraries altogether? She had a decision to make.

Not that Butler has ever been one to back away from making a decision. At a young age, she exhibited unusual industriousness. "I spent my childhood every Saturday morning going to the public library in East Liverpool, Ohio. The first job I had was picking blackberries and selling them to my mother. I worked in gardens and mowed lawns to buy my first bicycle, but the first real job I had was at the *East Liverpool Review*, our local newspaper. I had to field complaints from people who didn't get their paper." Not unlike fielding complaints from library users, years later.

Libraries were instrumental in shaping her youth, but seeing career potential in them was longer in coming. "I really became a librarian almost by accident, but I think it was a natural and fortunate complement to my educational choices. I started out to be a professor of German. I spent much of my life in the foreign language reading room at Ohio State as a graduate student . . . so when I finished my classes I went to the library and I got to know the librarians, who were extremely helpful to me. Becoming a librarian after I finished my graduate work in German was the natural outgrowth of those six years of college. Looking back, I think teaching German would have been



a far less satisfying career choice than being a librarian."

Circumstances provided the opportunity and incentive. "I moved at the time, really, for my husband's career, to Syracuse, and a neighbor suggested that the university had a good library school and that I might want to think about becoming a librarian.

When we went to Syracuse to look for an apartment, I interviewed at the school. They gave me a fellowship and I went there. I actually never worked in a library until I decided to go to Syracuse . . . so I got a job in the Maxwell School Citizenship Library and worked for a very able and demanding librarian named Betsy Knapp."

From early in her career, Meredith was attracted to administration and management. "My first job was as a German language bibliographer at Syracuse. Sara McCain was an excellent supervisor who taught me everything there was to know about doing collection development in the days before automation. She encouraged me to learn all aspects of technical services, as well as bibliographic control. So I really learned all aspects of library operations. But within two years, I was asked to become the head of the Humanities Department. Once I started doing administrative work, I knew I wanted to be an administrator and chose all my subsequent jobs to that end."

In 1976, Meredith relocated to SUNY Brockport to become the assistant director of public services, where she continued to both refine and expand her managerial skills for four-and-a-half successful years. Her next advance was to SUNY Albany, when in 1981 she took the job of assistant director for the libraries, a job which she held until 1986.

It was at this point when she faced a fork in the road of her career: to remain on her current track, with an eventual directorship a distinct possibility, or to venture into a new, different field of academic administration. Ultimately,

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she took the leap and, “attracted to both the content and the scope of the work,” saw the position in Academic Affairs at SUNY Albany as “a chance to do substantive work that could have an impact on the whole university.” She reminisces: “In the three years that I was in the Division of Academic Affairs, I focused on strategic planning and special programs. I developed a freshman seminar to enhance the undergraduate experience. I learned to think broadly about the university, but in great detail and to see things from multiple perspectives. I worked for three different provosts in three years, each of whom left to become a president . . . so the other thing that it taught me is how and why priorities change.”

As priorities changed, however, new opportunities arose for Butler. “At that time I did not have a five-year plan and did not think that I would necessarily go back to library administration.” That situation changed when the position of dean and director of the University at Albany Libraries became available, and Butler landed the job. For sixteen years, from 1989 until 2005, she served in that capacity. During her tenure, she oversaw myriad landmark accomplishments, such as the implementation of the libraries’ first integrated online catalog, its ascent in the Association of Research Libraries, the addition of its two-millionth volume, and the opening of the brand new Science Library building. In acknowledgment of and gratitude for those years of service, in 2000 she was the first person in the SUNY system to be awarded the rank of Distinguished Librarian.

Throughout her career, Butler’s interests and achievements have encompassed the breadth of inquiry that reflects changing times in librarianship. “What I cared about in my profession . . . is that I used research and publishing as a way to teach myself about new content. I never wanted to repeat the same experience, or to become known as an expert in one particular thing . . . I deliberately set out to learn about new issues and current ideas in the profession. For example, I really started working on copyright because the Act of 1976 came out. Librarians found it very difficult to understand, so I began analyzing the implications of applying copyright law to information access in 1978 and did a lot of work on that topic, including chairing the ACRL Copyright Committee for a number of years. In 1982 I turned my attention to the topic of developing user surveys, because I was doing it in my own work. Now we consider that under the topic of assessment. In 1984 I began thinking about electronic publishing and the impact of technological change. In 1992 I worked on strategic planning as a catalyst for change. In 1995 and 1996 I did a major national conference on the economics of information, which brought together for the first time all the major economists of information in the United States who were beginning to look at issues of price inflation and access to scholarship. In 1997 I published on collaboration between librarians and information technologists. In 1998 I published an article on the challenge of archiving digital records, and, finally,

in 2001, I compiled and edited a book on fund-raising for academic libraries. All of this work grew out of the changing needs of my work and the feeling that, if I needed to know more about these topics, perhaps others did and would find what I had to say interesting and useful.”

Butler also has been an active advocate of diversity and social causes in librarianship. She recalls: “My observation of senior management when I was a beginning librarian taught me a great deal about how *not* to manage. As I entered the profession, the style of management that was prevalent was command and control, mostly practiced by senior men. I suppose it is important to say that I went to school and became a beginning professional at a time of real social change and resistance to established power.” She also was influenced by the societal tumult of those years. “My high school years witnessed the resistance movements that began with civil rights. In college, it was the resistance against the Vietnam War. That whole period of significant social change really influenced me. By the time I was in grad school there was the black power movement, women’s movement—all of that had a profound affect on me as a human being and taught me a lot about how I looked at the world and how I wanted to manage people. My commitment to equity, fairness, and social justice also influenced my management style.”

Thus, as a library director, she worked to harness those convictions into a philosophy of management. “I worked and published on topics about which I care deeply.” One of those was gender equity. “In 1990 I got interested in the role of women in institutional change. I worked on this topic in a number of professional associations because I saw the need for more women in higher education and, particularly, in administrative roles.” Another of her causes was multiculturalism. “In 1994 I published an article on creating a multicultural organization, and in 1995 I published on creating the user-centered organization. Throughout my years at Albany, I tried very hard to create a more diverse workforce and a more multicultural organization. I worked hard in my profession, in the Association of Research Libraries, and other professional organizations to put ideas into practice. I think there has been some success. One of the most significant changes for me in the library profession was the increase of women in top administrative positions in the three-and-a-half decades I have been a librarian.” But not all has been so positive. “The profession has a long way to go to increase diversity. I feel I have been less successful in my own organization. What I learned from the process is leadership from the top on issues of social change is necessary, but not sufficient. I am not sure how to be successful in creating a more comfortable environment for persons of color. It is difficult, and I think an organization has to have a critical mass of diverse people before the culture really changes. In today’s budget climate, hiring a critical mass of new librarians becomes very hard to do.”

The importance of one particular, nontraditional skill of library administration has burgeoned in recent

years—entrepreneurship. “Years ago, when I was teaching a graduate course on managing information agencies, I got interested in the concept of entrepreneurship as applied to libraries. I was team-teaching with Tom Galvin, who was at that time a faculty member in our library school. We did some interesting work on entrepreneurial thinking and worked with a student to present a paper at ACRL and write an article on the topic. The more I thought about entrepreneurship and libraries, the more I really saw the value of thinking in new ways. By entrepreneurial thinking, I don’t mean getting money for your organization, but thinking creatively about problems and issues, making connections and creating partnerships, and being entrepreneurial. For librarians it means getting out of the library and doing outreach and being more collaborative, and it means a more public role than some librarians may be comfortable with.” Evidence of the success of her entrepreneurial management is the University at Albany’s new Science Library, for which she was instrumental in raising more than \$3.8 million from private donations.

In retrospect, the pace and enormity of technological change Butler has experienced in her career has been breathtaking. She recollects: “I entered this profession at an extraordinary moment when change was ratcheting up. When I worked at the Citizenship Library, the first month I was there we added a photocopier in the library space. There were lines out the door. When I went to library school, Pauline Atherton Cochran introduced us to computers. Everything we learned was theoretical; we didn’t have a computer in 1969. But she told us about computers and how they were going to change everything.” That prophecy has come true and, just as in its own way the photocopier was a vector for rapid change in 1969, the Internet continues to revolutionize the information landscape by several magnitudes. “I think the Internet changed everything in our profession and changed everything quickly. We haven’t sorted out all the implications for our

profession yet. The ‘Amazoogle’ world is upon us, and I hear a lot of anxiety in professional meetings about what it means for us. I think librarians still have the same skills, knowledge, and service ethic to contribute to this new information environment. But certainly, the way we are providing service is changing.”

While Butler plans to do her best to keep up with the changes in libraries, her recent retirement affords her the time to pursue other vocations. “One of the things I plan to do is to think about what I have an appetite for and not just say ‘yes’ to the many things I am asked to do. I would like to reintroduce choral singing into my life. I have always been a reader, and I would love to be able to do what I did as a student and follow my interest in reading. I want to continue to be of use in my community, so I will do volunteer work for the community organizations I care about. Travel certainly. Over the years, I carved travel time out of my work life in order to renew my appetite for the endless personnel work, but I will certainly do more travel. I also have five grandchildren who are very interesting ages now. The oldest will be off to college in a few years, so I would like to have a deeper relationship with them.”

In summarizing much of what she experienced in academic library administration Butler observes that: “There is a saying, ‘change is inevitable, growth is optional,’ and I can’t imagine anything more boring than a work environment in which there is no change. I actually don’t think it is change that people object to, but the anxiety of not knowing what will happen in a changing situation.” Change, however, bows to some universal human preferences. “All of the near-term trends that I see in information services are based on the principle of least effort for users. That has always been a guiding principle for me. I think to the degree we can identify what users want and be responsive to them, we will be in the game for the near and perhaps longer term.” The challenge, then, is to use changing times and technologies as a springboard to growth.