

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

An Interview with Donald E. Riggs

Rich Ackerman

When the high school principal entered the classroom where Donald E. Riggs was teaching biology and told him “We need a librarian,” Riggs replied with a characteristic “Sure!” As he recalls, “At the time I thought it was the worst thing that could happen to me, but it was probably the best thing that could have happened.” Biology’s loss was librarianship’s gain.

From his current post as vice president for information services and university librarian at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), Riggs reflects on a library career filled with challenges and accomplishments. In a series of meetings and exchanges with me, he described his career path with modesty and a quiet persona. Pointing to bound volumes on the shelf behind him, he described how he was founding editor of *Library Administration & Management*, editor of *Library Hi Tech* and *College & Research Libraries*, and served on the editorial board of *Journal of Library Administration*. Knick-knacks from China, Hong Kong, Germany, India, and many other countries recall international talks, consulting service, and collaborations. How did this self-described “hick from West Virginia” build the buildings, inspire a generation of library leaders, publish prolifically on various subjects, lead many professional organizations, and consult actively around the world? As he describes it, he’s always had a passion for service and a desire to lead.

Riggs was an avid reader as a youngster in rural West Virginia. With a shy laugh, he reveals a small glimpse of his early years. “In my first year in grade school, I read thirty books. Then that dropped to six the next year when I got interested in girls. But the following year it started going up again. They give a book seal when you read six. When I was six years old, I got a lot of them. It was quite remarkable!”

Remaining in West Virginia through college, Riggs graduated in 1964 with a degree in biology from Glenville State College, an unusual background for an eventual librarian. Glenville is a teaching institution whose core values are “Tradition, Innovation, Leadership, and Community,” and he took these values to heart. In 1992, his alma mater named him as its “Graduate of the Year,” the equivalent of an honorary Ph.D. When asked about his proudest accomplishments, this recognition was among the first things Riggs mentioned.



Donald E. Riggs

Teaching biology in high school was his first professional job, but he soon added the aforementioned position of librarian to his résumé; one year later, he was also the audio/visual director. Thus, by age twenty-two, he was teaching, administering, and serving as a librarian—roles he continues to fill to this day. While performing these duties he also earned his first professional degree, a master’s in

Education Administration from West Virginia University. Riggs thinks his early start helped his career and he has duly encouraged others to join the field at an early age.

In 1968, Riggs moved to a position as science and economics librarian at California State College in Pennsylvania, about thirty-five miles from the University of Pittsburgh, where he acquired his MLS. The subject specialty in economics allowed him to gain a deeper appreciation of business management, which found later expression in a series of books integrating library management with business practice. Continuing to wear more than one hat, he also served as director of personnel. His advisor at Pittsburgh, Charles D. Patterson, strongly influenced Riggs’s career in library services. They have remained friends and colleagues for more than forty years.

After receiving his MLS, Riggs moved back to West Virginia in 1970. After three years of instructing and serving as library director at Bluefield State College, he took on the new challenge of merging the libraries of four different schools—Bluefield, Concord College, Greenbrier Community College, and Southern Campus of West Virginia College of Graduate Studies—serving as library director of the combined consortium. (The library administrative setup he created still stands, even though the intended merger of the colleges involved never came to fruition.) This situation of

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simultaneously working for more than one institution set a precedent that was to be repeated several times in Riggs's career. He notes that this kind of collaborative work challenges the leader to think synergistically. "One plus one can truly equal three," he says, explaining that combining efforts can result in better library service for all than could be achieved individually. Success comes when each institution's expectations are exceeded. However, leadership in this environment is challenging, for ambiguity is a common problem and, often, the interests of the varied constituents must be addressed. The positive end result, though, is genuine support for the collective effort.

In 1975, Riggs earned an Ed.D. from Virginia Polytechnic Institute. By this time, having spent his entire life in central eastern United States, Riggs and his family got a little restless. They all felt that it was time for a change. He interviewed for two jobs, one in Plattsburgh, New York, and one in Colorado. As he tells the story: "On the same day, January 13, 1976, I got a call from both places. I was their top candidate. That only happens once in a lifetime! I thought if I went up to Plattsburgh, it was a very traditional situation, and it's very cold up there. I had never lived out West, and we were excited about that, so we decided to hitch up the wagon and take off west." He also adds the advice: "When an opportunity arises, take it!"

The Colorado challenge was to create a new institution, the Auraria Higher Education Center, by merging staff and collections from three libraries: University of Colorado (UC) at Denver, Metropolitan State College, and Community College of Denver. This was accomplished and Auraria still exists, much to Riggs's satisfaction. While serving both as a professor and director of libraries at UC Denver, he took on more professional association work, serving on several regional boards, and started publishing original articles on leadership and management. He attributes the recognition that he obtained from his writing as being a key reason that he also won election as American Library Association (ALA) Councilor-at-Large, a long sought for victory. "Why did I get selected? Because of my publications, I think. My name was out there."

Riggs encourages librarians to contribute to librarianship through joining committees in professional organizations. It was in West Virginia that he first became active in professional activities, ultimately serving as 1975–76 president of the West Virginia Library Association. He would reprise that role for the Colorado Library Association (1978–79) and the Arizona Library Association (1983–84). This quite possibly makes him the only librarian to have served as president of three different state library associations. He laughs about his own slow start contributing to professional organizations, though, because while he was anxious to contribute from the start, he also had a hard time getting involved. "I went from not being on any committees to being on so many committees I couldn't attend any conference exhibits!" Perseverance is another one of his conspicuous characteristics.

Over the course of his career, a host of management trends and practices came in and out of style, but one of his favorites, strategic planning, is still widely used. He recalls the fads: "Zero-based budgeting, management by objectives, total quality management—all of them, they come and go. But strategic planning is still here." His 1984 book, *Strategic Planning for Library Managers*, was the first title on that topic for librarians. Strategic planning is an ongoing process through which library leaders articulate courses of action for attaining institutional goals and objectives; it's the best process, he believes, for managing change in libraries. He imparts this belief to his staff, too. For example, soon after taking the rein at NSU, Riggs initiated a strategic planning process. Susi Seiler, the head of technical services, already had a strategic plan for her section. When he asked her about it, she laughed and explained, "I read your book!"

Riggs also led the development of the literature and practice of leadership in librarianship. *Library Leadership, Visualizing the Future* was a pioneering work on library administration and the principles of library leadership. He still lectures on the topic, inspiring the next generation of library leaders by sharing his experience and philosophy. As he describes it, he has "a compelling interest in making things happen." For Riggs, leadership means developing a shared vision and creating innovative strategies for creating change. He counsels librarians to seek positions of responsibility and counts ten former assistant directors who have assumed directorships. "If one wants to transform the vision and mission of a library, then the best place to do so is from the library directorship."

In the preface to his book *Library Communication*, his colleague Ann Eastman recounted an illuminating story about how Riggs is constantly on the lookout for ideas to share via publication, and how a main element of his leadership style involves taking advantage of opportunities. As president of LAMA, Eastman had solicited essays on the relationship between communication and leadership. As she sought help reading submitted papers, she asked rhetorically "Does anyone see a book here?" Riggs, she says, quickly responded with "a fully developed proposal" for turning the papers into a book. She lauds him as a shining example of communication and leadership. Along those lines, Riggs was a founding editor of the *LA&M* journal, and served as LAMA's president from 1994 to 1995. In 1981, LAMA recognized him with its highest honor, the Hugh Atkinson Award.

Riggs strongly believes in goal setting and has kept himself motivated and continuously challenged by setting high personal goals throughout his career. "I had a goal one time," he told me, "of publishing ten books before I was fifty years old. Well, I didn't make it, but I got seven." This literary output mostly occurred during his next position at Arizona State University (ASU), where he worked from 1979 to 1990, first as university librarian and then as dean of university libraries. He wrote or edited books

on leadership, managing change, strategic planning, communication, and time management.

ASU grew dramatically in the 1980s, and Riggs led the construction of four new libraries while overseeing large increases in staff and collection development budgets. His commitment to professional organizations grew; he served, among other assignments, on OCLC Users Council in many capacities (including president in 1990), ALA's Publishing Committee, various Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and LAMA committees; chair of the Artificial Intelligence and Expert Systems Interest Group of the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA), and councilor of ALA, 1982-86. He published more than twenty peer-reviewed articles during his tenure at ASU. When asked where he got the time, he said humbly that he just liked to write, and that people seemed to like to read his work. He was raising a family, too, and fondly recalls swim meets, music recitals, and riding horses in the desert with his two daughters, both of whom have earned MLS degrees.

Riggs's expertise in library technology was recognized internationally in 1988 when he was invited to present a paper at the First International Symposium on New Technologies and Applications in Libraries in Xi'an, People's Republic of China. He subsequently presented and consulted around the world, including Hungary, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Australia, Ukraine, Republic of South Africa, and the Czech Republic. In 1994 he spent four weeks consulting at the City University of Hong Kong. "This experience was rewarding in several respects: comparative librarianship, the rapid growth of Hong Kong libraries, and the planning of library services for a fast growing country." Over the years Riggs has also hosted visiting librarians from a number of different countries.

Moving to the University of Michigan in 1991 fulfilled one of Riggs's lifetime goals, that of running a Top Ten library system. During his six years as dean of university

libraries, he provided leadership on several initiatives. He oversaw the merger of four science libraries, the linking of the undergraduate and graduate libraries (literally, with a bridge!), and the implementation of several technology initiatives. Michigan's Papyrus Collection, for instance, was preserved for future scholars by the creation of a climate-controlled storage area, and was brought to a wider audience through a digitization project that he led. In 1996, his last year at Michigan, librarians from more than forty different countries visited the university to learn about their digital library projects.

In 1997, Riggs moved to his current post at NSU, in Davie, Florida, where he serves as vice president for information services and university librarian. He has led the construction of a new library, which resulted in nearly tripling the size of the professional staff. The dual-use facility, serving both the university and the public, was built in association with the Broward County Library to provide public access to a high-quality research library with extended hours. His experience in collaborative library administration served him well in the joint undertaking with Broward County. It was a delicate political balancing act to get the facility built, as a large bond issue for the public system immediately preceded its construction. "We decided that if the bond issue failed, there was no chance. It was the right thing to do, so our president did everything he could. He even put it on our pay stubs: 'Vote for the Bond Issue!'"

Changes on the public side are driving some decisions at NSU now. "I think libraries are going to have to change. The idea is to become more proactive. We are going to have to define our services more, because overall, in large research libraries, the number of reference questions is starting to decline. . . . One day I was living in Arizona and I wanted to know the elevation of Cottonwood. Now I look it up in Google. Why would I call down to reference to answer that question?" NSU is responding by refining their staffing. They recently hired a communications specialist to

Donald E. Riggs

Selected Professional Offices and Activities

President of three state library associations:

- Colorado Library Association, 1978
- Arizona Library Association, 1983-84
- West Virginia Library Association, 1985-86

Councilor, American Library Association, 1989-93

Board of Directors and Executive Committee, Library and Information Technology Association, 1989-93

President, Mountain Plains Library Association, 1990;

Board of Directors, 1987-90

President, OCLC Users Council, 1990

Board of Governors, Research Libraries Group, 1994

President, Library Administration and Management Association, ALA, 1994-95

Charter member, National Digital Library Federation 1995-97

President (1998-99) and Board of Directors (1997-present), Southeast Florida Library and Information Network

Chair, Leadership Development Committee, Florida Library Association, 2003-04

Selected Awards and Recognition

Outstanding Educators of America, 1974

Who's Who in the World, 1980-present

Who's Who in America, 1980-present

Dedicated service recognition for serving as Chair of AMIGOS Bibliographic Council, 1988-89

Distinguished Service Award, Arizona Library Association, 1990

Hugh C. Atkinson Memorial Award, ALA, 1981

Alumnus of the Year Award, Glenville State College, 1992

focus on outreach to the local community. He sees mobile computing facilities as one way to get information tools into the hands of those needing them. "It's like being back in the hills of West Virginia with the bookmobile!"

Through all his moves and professional development, Riggs maintains that his first love has always been teaching. This is reflected by his experience and in his writings. For example, in 2004, Riggs was selected as the only librarian to contribute a chapter to Pulitzer Prize-winner James MacGregor Burns's four-volume *Encyclopedia of Leadership*. His essay described the vital need for

"transformational and visionary leadership" and discussed how technology offers new opportunities for improving services. "Under compelling leadership, libraries will play a dominant role in fulfilling expectations of a democratic society (e.g., free and equal access to information)." He ended by issuing a call to arms for his academic colleagues: "Schools of library/information science and leadership institutes must become more active in the preparation of future library leaders." Through his teaching, writing, and speaking, Riggs provides a clear example of how such leadership can be passed along to the next generation.

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