

# Perspectives on Leadership

*Editor's Note: Leadership perspectives provide insight and lessons from leaders in the field as they share experiences and offer advice on leading libraries through a period of particularly rapid and unyielding change.*

## Interview with Gary E. Strong

By Susan E. Parker

Many of us have been inspired and influenced into our library careers by a caring, thoughtful mentor at home or school. Gary Strong accepted his invitation from his high school librarian in Idaho, Mrs. Bennett. Like many a mentor before her and since, Mrs. Bennett led by her own example and, as Strong avers, she inspired him “to read and to think and dream beyond that small rural place.”<sup>1</sup> She also gave him a copy of Lawrence Clark Powell’s *A Passion for Books*. Now university librarian at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Strong reports that he had great mentors early on, and along the way. His career, which began as a student employee in the library at the University of Idaho and as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, has taken him from leading public libraries in Oregon and Washington to serving as state librarian of California from 1980 to 1994 and as head of the Queens Borough Public Library, the busiest library in the country, from 1994 to 2003. In these positions he crafted forceful roles for libraries to support literacy, to engage deeply with their communities, and to reach out to partner with libraries abroad.

After this variety of leadership positions, it was a natural fit for Strong to become head of the UCLA Library, one of the largest libraries in the country. So, as Strong puts it, in 2003, “some thirty plus years after forsaking academic



Gary E. Strong

Photo by Scott Quintard, UCLA Photography

librarianship to fulfill my obligation to my scholarship sponsors, I had entered the academic library world.”<sup>2</sup> When he began his current job, Strong noted that “everything I have done to this day has been preparing me for the next years at UCLA.”<sup>3</sup> Strong declares unabashedly that he loved library school, adding that “if one could be arrested for fondling books, I would have spent most of my time in book jail.”<sup>4</sup> His leadership legacy has been characterized by achievements that lay the foundations for future accomplishments. This leadership, which he describes as doing what has come naturally to him, is of interest as we contemplate the future of libraries and their need for successful and meaningful leadership. A recent article noted that library administration is changing, and that change requires new leadership abilities.<sup>5</sup> Among these are the ability to manage change, to articulate a vision, to coach, and to live the service ethic.

Strong exemplifies the type of leader who provides stability while negotiating change, for “change is often far more about leading people through a transition than about changing the operations and structures around them.”<sup>6</sup> His comments about leadership also show how emotional intelligence is applied in leadership by “giving people confidence to meet organizational expectations and serve as change agents.”<sup>7</sup> Recently, recently, I asked Strong about leadership, especially leadership in libraries. Looking for the benefit of his experience and perspective, I was interested in learning how he became a leader and how he became involved in so many different—and so many different kinds of—libraries.

### Q: How do you define leadership?

**A:** Strong says that his job as a leader is to create an environment that allows people to rise to and to meet their own expectations. While there can be only one person at the top, it is important for the leader to articulate a vision for the organization. It is difficult for people to accomplish much, however, without agreement on the vision. Strong noted that there have been instances when “I have said to some they need to find another organization that fits their vision.”

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**Q: In your position, what are some of the ways in which you demonstrate leadership? In other words, what type of a leader are you?**

**A:** While Strong says that “I’m not too bashful about expressing [my] opinions,” he also reports that he listens and soaks up as much information as he can. He gives people in the organization the chance to offer comments. He sets a direction, intervening only if things don’t head that way. But he also asks questions: Are we going in the right direction? What is the right direction? With this kind of consultation, Strong believes, he does not take on the burden of leadership alone and helps give voice to concerns of others in the organization. It’s enough for him that “the future will judge what was right.”

Strong relates a strong sense of pride in hearing from former and current employees who say they appreciated having a boss who gave them the freedom to do things in which they were interested. This led them to be able to accomplish, and in some cases to surpass, their ultimate career goals.

**Q: How did you become a leader?**

**A:** Strong says that it is important for leaders to have an incredible passion for what they do, and the “guts” to act in furtherance of it. Strong’s passion is to unleash the power that comes from connecting people with the information they need. He sees the library as one organization remaining in our democracy “that can power the wind.” Strong’s excitement is palpable when he tells of instances in which one of his libraries has changed a student’s life, or helped create a new generation of faculty members or library leaders. These recollections are more than platitudes to Strong. With that passion, he believes, “we’ll succeed more than we fail. Our environment has to be one in which we can learn from failure. But we also have to believe that we have something to give. This is what the concept of public service means, whatever your community is.”

**Q: What do you think we need from our organizational leaders?**

**A:** Strong identified several characteristics that are important for leaders: maturity, the capacity for risk taking, passion, honesty, and trustworthiness. He observed that it is crucial for the leader to build a team of people whose skill sets are complementary to and align with the leader’s. In addition, leaders must be aware of their own limitations and must seek others to work with them who complement their particular gaps. This effort can be a work-in-progress that involves building an environment that helps staff understand the scope of their work and creates the opportunity for them to excel at new job demands.

**Q: What do you expect from library managers in terms of their active leadership role(s)? What opportunities do you try to provide to help them with that, or what opportunities do middle managers in your library need to be active leaders?**

**A:** Strong uses different tools to help motivate members of his staff. For example, he makes grants from his discretionary funds to support their favorite projects. His funding criteria are straightforward. He asks, “If I fund this, will it make a difference in anyone’s life?” This open-ended question encourages consideration of the potential for negative results as well as positive ones.

As a leader, Strong finds that one of his challenges is to be patient with people who lack the skill sets needed for the positions they hold. It can also require patience with the way people execute their skills. Without giving voice to these observations of individual difference as criticisms, Strong instead makes suggestions or provides alternatives to encourage people to consider different ideas.

**Q: What about other staff who do not have formal leadership positions?**

**A:** Strong believes that the library staff leads every day. To obtain more specific kinds of experience, he urges librarians and other library workers to take initiative. Any individual can step forward and create services, provide liaison work, or propose changes to process. Strong noted, “People who groan and moan that our work world is not perfect are not taking the opportunity to lead.” He named a handful of librarians and other staff in the UCLA library, many of whom have no formal leadership or managerial titles or responsibilities, observing that these employees “look for ways to do.” He believes that leadership opportunities arise when people are looking for them and offer themselves by volunteering for assignments.

**Q: How do you help develop the practice of leadership in your organization?**

**How do the people in your organization (with your help) understand the varied definitions of leadership? How do you try to help them help themselves as leaders, no matter where they work in the organization?**

**A:** Strong has cast the UCLA library as a learning organization. He offers some formal training to those with leadership assignments. The UCLA library has sent people to the Research Library Fellows of ARL, in to the UCLA Senior Fellows, and to the Frye Institute. Facilitation training with an expert in the field is offered to everyone who

works in the library. Strong also provides additional means for people to learn, practice, and receive recognition for leadership skills. The most significant of these is to offer the opportunity to lead a task force or other collaborative project with deliverables. The idea, Strong says, is to offer the opportunity, get out of the way, and allow for both success and for failure. Both success and failure are learning opportunities.

Experience, training, and learning underpin succession planning. Strong says that he has deliberately chosen senior managers whose particular skills match the library's needs, but also with succession planning in mind.

Strong believes it is important to communicate to staff, but as a veteran leader of large organizations, he realizes he cannot make regular contact in person with all employees or librarians. To offer more personal contact, he started a blog on the library's website. This allows him to let everyone in the library know about what he is handling, and to convey what information is available.

Strong says he also pushes his senior management to share the responsibility for communication. Each one has a distinct portfolio, and depending on their styles and characteristics, they each manage their communication and responsibilities very differently.

### **Q: What experiences or kinds of experience are important for leaders? What personal and professional experience helps to prepare someone to be a good leader?**

**A:** For Strong, it can be any experience that stretches or challenges them. He advises that it is not necessary to be in charge of something. He urges staff to “volunteer to work as a member of a task force or find some other way to demonstrate that you can be a good follower. Not everyone needs to be the boss; it's important to understand that being a good follower is as important as being a good leader.” He adds that “there is nothing bad about being a good follower: you can experience and also demonstrate leadership within followership. You should be able to be proud of what you do.”

Strong believes that no leader can achieve success alone; no one can do this without the support of others in the organization. Leaders also help others succeed, especially those who want to contribute to moving the organization forward.

### **Q: What are the biggest challenges facing library leaders today, and how are you helping to set the stage for future leaders? What challenges are they going to face?**

**A:** Strong's concern is “what platform are we going to have for the next leader [of this organization] to build on?” He

also acknowledges the role of professional service, but, he says, “at UCLA I have chosen not to concentrate on my work in the profession. It's a conscious choice. I have had my shot. I did it early. I was president of a state library association at 22, a regional association at 27, a national one at 30.” To rising leaders, he says, “I enjoy watching others in our organization achieve national recognition,” and “I need to get out of your way.”

### **Q: What episodes from your career best exemplify your exercise of leadership of which you are most proud?**

**A:** “I've had three careers,” Strong reflects, “as a state librarian, as an urban librarian, and as an academic librarian (although I am not yet finished with the last one). In each setting there have been people with whom I have worked in the libraries and in the communities who were incredible partners. In every case I left somewhere to go to something, to broaden my professional scope.”

In reflecting upon whether he has been successful at UCLA, Strong noted that it will be some time before it is possible to know. Looking back on what he has accomplished elsewhere, he sees his leadership legacy is one of laying foundations, observing that the California State Library is now viewed as a research library, and major awards based on initiatives he began have come to the Queens Borough Public Library since his departure.

Strong believes in “brutal honesty.” He notes, “people are still looking for the savior. Well, somebody already crucified him.” Strong says, “I'm not a prophet. I can only work within the resources we're given and the best thinking I can engage.” He hopes to lead and inspire others to act as leaders, but “when I can't do it anymore, it's time [for me] to go out to pasture.”

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# Interview with Krisellen Maloney

By Michael Jackson

**K**risellen Maloney is dean of libraries at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and oversees libraries at all three UTSA campuses. Maloney worked previously at Georgetown University, where she served as associate university librarian for digital services and technology planning. She has also held roles including director of information technology in the Library of Congress Law Library and team leader of digital library and information systems at University of Arizona Libraries. Maloney was an ARL 2007–08 Research Library Leadership Fellow, which gave her in-depth exposure to the management strategies of several university librarians from institutions such as Harvard, the University of Minnesota, Penn State, and North Carolina State University. She has a patent on an interactive multimedia report viewer and has published and presented widely on the topics of library systems, information architecture, and management. At UTSA, she is focused on the library as a key component in the success of students and on integrating other campus support units into the library's service function. Maloney earned BS and MS degrees in management information systems, an MLS, and a PhD in information science, all at the University of Arizona.



Krisellen Maloney

## Q: How is the role of the academic library changing on campus?

**A:** Although the core purpose of the library hasn't changed, its role on campus definitely has. We continue to provide collections, services, and facilities that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of faculty and students, but we have adapted the means by which we do these things to respond to changes in the environment. These adaptations have broadened our role on campus to include new activities such as the creation of learning environments for students, expanded roles in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and increased involvement in research activity on campus.

This isn't new. We have lived with substantial changes in the environment for well over a decade, and libraries have been responding incrementally over time, but current economic pressures have added a sense of urgency to our evolution. Now, more than ever, libraries are being asked to demonstrate their worth on campus. Today's academic libraries need to be externally focused, continuously

evaluating the needs of our campuses and identifying new services we can provide to help faculty and students navigate the growing and increasingly complex information environment. Each university will have a different set of opportunities and challenges so each will develop a different suite of services. Academic libraries must be as fully integrated as possible into the intellectual life of their campuses, demonstrating their value in new ways. In these times of increased assessment and accountability, we need to ensure our services and resources are being well-utilized. If they're not, then it's time to rethink our approach or risk irrelevancy.

## Q: How is the library at UTSA contributing to the academic environment on campus in ways that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of faculty and students, and that support teaching and research?

**A:** When I arrived at UTSA they had been without a dean of libraries for over three years so the library was still very traditional, emphasizing physical collections and optimizing processes that support the management of the physical collections. There was a great deal of opportunity to adapt programs and services that had become common in research libraries to the UTSA environment.

The primary issue was a need to provide an integrated learning environment for undergraduate students. UTSA is a Hispanic Serving Institution, where over 57 percent of our students are of the first generation in their families to attend college. The campus has several services designed to meet the needs of these students, including the Judith Gardner Writing Center (WRC) and Tomas Rivera Center (TRC) for Student Success, which offer services such as writing support, tutoring, supplemental instruction, and learning communities. The libraries have always had ties with these groups, but recently, because of a library construction project, we had the opportunity to increase the level of cooperation. The main campus library is in the process of a large-scale renovation, which when I arrived included the development of an information commons. I learned that the WRC and TRC were in the process of planning for new space in a building on the edge of campus. We worked together to modify our plans to expand the information commons into a learning commons that would be a one-stop shop for undergraduate students seeking academic support services. So that our overall space is not reduced, library staff who do not work directly with the public will be moved to the space at the edge of campus that had previously been designated for the WRC and TRC. Although the concept of a learning commons is not new to libraries, it is new to UTSA and it was a way for the library

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to play an important role on campus. The science and engineering colleges saw the success of the learning commons and have provided additional space for the library within their new Applied Engineering and Technology building.

We are also building our relationship with the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), which is UTSA's unit dedicated to enhancing and recognizing excellent teaching by faculty. TLC has been moved into the library organizational structure, providing clear advantages for the library. It provides us with the support that we need to improve the quality of our teaching as we move from providing step-by-step instruction to teaching the underlying concepts of information literacy. It also provides us with confidence as we help faculty incorporate information literacy outcomes into the curriculum. Because librarians are in regular communication with a wide range of faculty, the TLC also benefits. Librarians can promote TLC events and identify faculty who will benefit from the services that the TLC provides. Of course, the university benefits because of the improved support for its teaching mission.

We are just beginning to explore how we can support the research mission at UTSA. We are fortunate, however, that we will be able to adapt examples of successful projects that are already underway in research libraries.

**Q: You certainly seem open to new thinking and being flexible. In regards to leadership issues, in your role as dean of libraries, what are ways in which you demonstrate leadership?**

**A:** It is important for me to provide a clear statement of the role of the library to the campus community. We know from faculty surveys that often the library is associated only with books and, as such, can be viewed too narrowly. It is important for me to understand the university's mission and to communicate to campus administrators new roles for the library.

As we explore new ways for the library to actively contribute on campus, it is important that library staff have a common understanding of our direction. As I mentioned previously, each university will have a different set of needs and will develop services, collections, and facilities to meet those needs. I have to work within the university to develop a clear statement of the library's role on our campus and then communicate that vision to all library staff.

**Q: You make some excellent points about the role of higher-level leadership. What are some opportunities that middle management staff in your library have to be active leaders?**

**A:** I believe that the first step to empowering middle management (and all people in the organization) is to have a

clear direction in the form of a strategic plan, along with an active operational plan. I know that formal planning comes in and out of fashion in libraries and, often, falls out of fashion just when it is most needed. I am a strong believer in formal planning with a caveat against planning for planning's sake. Sometimes organizations invest a great deal of effort in planning only to have the plans sit on the shelf. The planning process and the plans themselves should be used as vehicles for communication. I know that the planning process can sometimes take on a life of its own. It is important that staff from throughout the organization be involved to hear about the direction of the library and to contribute ideas. However, it is the responsibility of managers to listen to ideas and analyze, evaluate and recommend the best course of action at each level of the process. This is a bit of a fuzzy concept. I am not suggesting that managers should be calling the shots, I am saying that managers have the responsibility of understanding broader organizational parameters and, as such, have an evaluative responsibility. They need to rely on their staff for good ideas and to recognize and promote innovation.

Let me briefly describe where I see the responsibility of managers within each part of the planning process. The strategic plan provides a way to describe the destination for the library—where we expect to be as an organization in three to five years. As dean, because of my role on campus, I need to be active in developing the vision for the library. Creating a strategic plan is not done in a vacuum, but rather with input from many external and internal stakeholders. It is also not a one-time activity but a continuous process that is responsive to changes in the environment. I have to take responsibility for using all of the input that I can find to make a better strategic plan. The operational plan provides a roadmap for how we will get to the destination described in the strategic plan. Assistant deans are essential to keeping the operational plan current and effective. They understand and coordinate the activities of an entire aspect of our services (for example, public service, technical service, technology), so they have a broad view of how we should proceed. Assistant deans are responsible for providing leadership that includes communication and coordination of the services within their areas and with other units in the library and on campus. Department heads directly supervise the execution of the work. They need to recognize changes on the ground, such as outdated workflows and new service opportunities, and communicate them effectively so that necessary change can be implemented. Regardless of where they fall in the organizational hierarchy, all middle managers need a shared understanding of the strategic plan, and they all need to play a role in keeping the operational plan active. They need to ensure that every department of the library is coordinating with every other, moving the entire organization toward a common goal. Most importantly, middle managers have to be aware of changes in the environment and have to recognize changes in the environment and

innovations by staff and ensure that they take actions so that the organization can be responsive.

In addition to participating in the planning process, library managers are responsible for creating a positive work environment. We all know that employees' attitudes toward their work are heavily influenced by their direct supervisors. As a result, middle managers are uniquely positioned to create a productive and positive work environment. They can support risk taking, promote good ideas, and encourage new approaches to problems. However, this is a bit more difficult than it seems because moving forward, now more than ever, takes coordinated action. Isolated ideas, even individual heroic accomplishments, rarely make a lasting impact in the new information environment. The middle manager has to provide employees with a context for ideas, and employees need to understand the library's direction and where they fit in the overall movement in that direction. Middle managers provide leadership by inspiring staff and then providing the support necessary for innovation to flourish in the organization.

**Q: Some make the point that governance and leadership in academic libraries should reflect how it is done in the corporate world. Others argue that leadership styles in academia should be significantly different from those found in corporations. What are your thoughts about this issue?**

**A:** The short answer to the question is that I believe that libraries benefit from the same kind of leadership styles found in corporations. Furthermore, libraries, like corporations, have to adapt their leadership styles to match changes in the environment. Until about a decade ago, libraries operated in an environment of stability with no real competition. Since our environment is no longer stable, we need to evolve, fine-tuning our approaches and learning from corporations that have been successful in times of change. I've already talked at length about how managers contribute to the planning process but I will say just a few more words about how corporate planning can transfer to libraries.

Although maintaining an operational plan can be time-consuming, it is an essential communication tool for managing change and fostering innovation. As I said before, real progress in libraries will be the result of people working together toward a common goal. An operational plan allows everyone in the organization to contribute ideas and, when appropriate, to independently make operational decisions. Operational planning, systems analysis and design, and project management all transfer easily from the corporate world to libraries. I think that too often we give up on this because of the effort required to maintain the plans, but they provide the foundation for communication that allows groups to work together.

The concept of strategic planning doesn't always transfer as well from the corporate world to academia, but it's arguably the most important part of the planning process. In libraries, we tend to be more comfortable determining if we are doing a "thing right" (operational planning) than we are determining if we are doing the "right thing" (strategic planning). In corporations, the ability to make a profit is the clear driver of the mission and goals. In academia the drivers aren't always as clear. When academic libraries are too internally focused—looking at ourselves independent of the goals of the university—it is especially difficult to tell what we should be doing. As we shift our focus from the library as a silo on campus to addressing the needs of the university, it becomes clearer how we should refine our mission and goals. We succeed when the university succeeds.

When considering the broader question of leadership style, I think we need to move out of our comfort zones and find more ways to effectively provide leadership in a time of change. Libraries have traditionally had, and for a large part still do have, strong hierarchical cultures. As I said above, hierarchical organizational cultures are well suited for stable, predictable industries. They are internally focused, lack flexibility, and are associated with strong top-down decision making and control. Only the managers need to understand the strategic and operational plans (if a formal plan even exists), and they give explicit direction to their subordinates. Since this type of environment is well-suited for industries where there is a well-established product, it has been appropriate for libraries to be managed in this way.

I would argue, however, that a hierarchical culture is no longer optimal for libraries, but strong direction is necessary. Rapid technological changes and the sheer enormity of the information environment mean we can no longer do business as usual. Library leadership and management needs to encourage innovation. This means that more people in the organization need to understand the direction of the library and be encouraged to contribute ideas and new methods for moving forward. This requires better coordination and communication. It may seem counterintuitive, but a very structured planning environment with clear direction will create a more flexible organization with empowered employees and innovative solutions.

**Q: Some of these ideas are innovative in the library world. What are ways that the library at UTSA is applying the concepts of operational planning and project management? Are there issues for library leaders to consider in adapting these strategies for operational management in their own libraries?**

**A:** These ideas represent trends in the library world that I have seen used successfully at other libraries. I have

had the opportunity to see how university librarians are adapting their organizations to create real changes in their universities. When I arrived at UTSA I was aware that it was necessary for me to identify the ways that our library could improve the efficiency and effectiveness of faculty and students, while supporting teaching and research

We are fortunate here at UTSA because the university has an active strategic planning process. The strategic plan provides us with information on what the university sees as priorities. When I arrived last year, the university had just completed the strategic plan and, because my position had been vacant, the library was not directly mentioned anywhere in the plan. I worked with the provost to insert library-related tactics under the broader university goals. For example, under the university goal to improve the quality of undergraduate education, we added the tactic of increasing the number of students receiving information literacy instruction. We also added library-related tactics for collections and space. Because it is an active plan, this year we requested that new university-wide tactics be added for Special Collections and Archives.

Within the library we have developed a library strategic plan. As a starting point for our plan, each of the library tactics that had been included in the university plan became a goal of our plan. Using the above example, the university tactic to increase the number of students receiving information literacy instruction became a goal in the library strategic plan. We have additional goals that

are not listed on the university plan that describe how we contribute to the broader library community and how we prepare for the future. The clear relationship between the university strategic plan and our strategic plan demonstrates how the library contributes to the overall success of the University.

To translate strategies into operations, we have a library operational plan that, at the moment, is managed by the assistant deans and myself. Although departments within the library had their own plans, there had never been a comprehensive, library-wide operational plan in the past. Since it is difficult to think of a project that doesn't involve public services, technical services, and systems, we need to make library-wide plans that prioritize projects across the different groups. We are still working out the issues related to the complexity that occurs as we all try to balance multiple priorities and develop a single cohesive plan, but we are making progress. The planning objective is to have the library-wide operational plan that is at the correct level to communicate the interrelationships of tasks without having a situation where we are all micromanaging the operation of other departments. Once a technique that works in our library is established, a project manager will monitor and update progress. However, oversight of the plan, continually asking ourselves if we are still doing what is most important, will always be the responsibility of the library management group.