

Ginger Rogers in Library Land
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Good Afternoon, my name is Lynn Sheehan and I'm currently the director of library services at the University of Charleston in Charleston, West Virginia. My appearance and current position may seem contradictory but I am a fairly recent library school graduate, having earned my MLIS from the University of South Carolina in December of 2000. My checkered library past includes work in a variety of library environments including a school library processing center, public library, and two law libraries. I became the Director of Library Services at the University of Charleston in August 2003.

I've often been told that I possess an overly developed sense of humor. I was recently comforted, however, when I read some research that indicates that this sense of humor may actually be a strength that has helped me survive my first year as a library director and at times being The Lone Librarian. A paper titled, "Small College Library Directors: Getting in the Door and Surviving on the Job" presented at a meeting of American Library Association (ALA) held in Nashville in 1997 reported on results of a study of new library directors who identified a sense of humor as a personal attribute that was rated as essential to surviving and doing well as a first year library director.

Presentations at library conferences and workshops like the ALA meeting I just mentioned usually begin with a brief overview of the presenter's institution and library, referring to student FTEs and the size of the library staff. Depending on the size of the institution, the presenter's library may be staffed with what often seems to me to consist

of an army or at least a battalion of librarians who specialize in various subject areas as well as technical services, public services, and all of the other traditional library departments.

To understand the reference to Ginger Rogers in the title of my paper I need to share a little history with you. A few years ago one of our daughters, a budding feminist, purchased a button that read “Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did while dancing backwards and in high heels.” Armed with the rather strange sense of humor mentioned earlier, I began to reflect on the text of that button while listening to a presentation at a library conference. It occurred to me that librarians at small academic institutions like the University of Charleston are really like Ginger Rogers. We’re trying to provide the same materials and services as large academic libraries but with smaller budgets and fewer librarians—kind of like dancing backwards, but being a librarian, I suppose we’d wear sensible shoes instead of high heels. Like librarians in larger academic libraries as well as public and special libraries, in addition to working with patrons and performing other traditional library tasks, we must also advocate for our share of our institutions’ budgets—looking for ways to demonstrate the effectiveness of the services our libraries provide and hence the need for a piece of the budget pie.

Public and private colleges and universities, community colleges, academic, public, or special libraries—we’re all facing the same challenges. Many current and potential library patrons view the search engine Google as our replacement while at the same time the competition for diminishing institutional fund is growing. We all have work to reposition ourselves in the current “everything’s on the Internet” phase and find new ways to demonstrate our worth to our governing bodies whether it’s a county board,

library committee, board of trustees, or academic and financial administrators. While we work to face these challenges we often develop a bevy of skills that may not be part of traditional library school curriculum, but are necessary in the workplace.

As a Ginger, a typical day for me may begin with an institutional budget committee meeting to evaluate health-care plans for university employees. From there I might return to the library to deliver a 50 minute bibliographic instruction session. That session may be followed by a meeting with the director of the first year experience to talk about incorporating information literacy instruction into his program. Back to the library where I might answer a reference question, un-jam a printer, catalog a book or two, process invoices for payment, or evaluate print serials subscriptions for renewal. **After lunch**, there may be a meeting with another faculty member—this time to plan for an upcoming program accreditation visit. Some days there may also be a faculty meeting or a meeting of the administrative council. In between meetings and classes, I answer reference questions both in person and online; work with library staff to master our new automation system, fill the copy machine toner tank, make change for students doing laundry, and sometimes work at the Circulation Desk. While it's rare that all these activities come together on the same day, it often feels as though they had.

This all leads to the question of what skills are needed to be a successful Ginger? The answer, of course, is everything.

Librarians still need a mastery of the traditional library skills related to acquisitions, technical and public services. Today, however, we have to go beyond traditional acquisition procedures. Acquiring new materials for our libraries no longer means simply dealing with order cards and vendors. In small academic libraries,

acquisitions may also require a librarian to quickly become a subject specialist in a discipline with which he or she possesses only a cursory knowledge on Monday and another new discipline on Wednesday. Acquisitions can also mean coming up with creative ways to encourage faculty involvement in the selection and purchase of library materials for their programs, especially when those programs may soon be evaluated by accrediting agency. Once a Ginger identifies the appropriate material to order, they must then demonstrate their bargain hunting skills and identify the best provider—always a struggle between finding the best price and working efficiently to locate, order, and receive the material in a timely fashion.

In the small academic library, a Ginger may be responsible for cataloging new materials as well as acquiring them. Since graduating from library school and working in technical services in a small academic library as well as a small special library, I have attained a new level of appreciation for the wisdom of our cataloging instructor at the University of South Carolina on why learning to catalog along with everything else we were studying was a very good idea. Her wisdom may be summed up in the simple phrase “You may be the only one of you there,” which is certainly true for a Ginger.

We all study the challenges of providing public services in library school. One aspect of public services that may not be mentioned in library school, however, is that there can be so many publics. In our small academic library our public includes our students, faculty, university administration and staff, other libraries, some of whom we participate with consortially, visitors to the university including prospective students and their families, participants in conferences and meetings held on our campus, alumni who visit campus only occasionally and others who live nearby and are frequent patrons, high

school students attending the alternative school located on our campus, children, both those from the neighborhood needing help with homework and those who are on campus with their student-parents.

On November 2nd, CNN reporters filling air time while awaiting the closing of the polls in western states and early voting results assured viewers that there would be no repeat of the mis-reporting in Florida four years ago. This time around, CNN would utilize new software involving a “powerful new mathematical formula.” While most libraries usually don’t possess software with powerful new mathematical formulas, we often do have access to powerful new automation systems. Mastering the use of an automation system for cataloging, circulating materials, and providing reference assistance is only the beginning. We need to develop the skills to query our systems to create usage statistics, examine the age of our collections and the distribution of materials across various call numbers to look at how our collections are being used or not used and more.

While Gingers don’t need to possess all the abilities of a systems librarian, we do need enough knowledge to interact meaningfully with our organization’s IT director or chief information officer. The best relationship is a partnership but we also have to be prepared to advocate for the needs of the library in relation to campus networking, service, and troubleshooting. We must strive to help IT staffers to understand that while they may view a problem with the server as the only true emergency; we view lack of remote access or inability to reach the library’s online catalog or indexes/databases as equally serious. We have to recognize that IT staffers may see network security as their primary responsibility while we view accessibility as the first order of business. We

need to be active in our organizations' technology planning to assure that library resources are properly supported. While we're keeping things running on a day-to-day basis, we need to be looking forward and planning for the future. Continuing technological developments will enable us to work smarter but they also require creative planning for the acquisition, financing, and implementation of new technologies.

I often wish that I had taken home economics when I was in high school—it would be nice to have some frame of reference for fallen cakes and curdled sauces. In the same way, I often wish that I had attended some type of trade school where the mysteries of copy machines and renegade printers would be made clear. The value of possessing enough mechanical skills to un-jam the copy machine; troubleshoot minor and not so minor hardware and connectivity problems; change the toner in a variety of laser and inkjet printers; clear abandoned or orphan print requests from the queue; and assist students who have somehow managed to send their assignment that is due in an hour into cyberspace should not be underestimated. Being good at these little things can often make a big difference to our patrons, enabling them print off their assignment and get to class on time instead of watching the clock while awaiting a visit from a friendly IT staffer already juggling a variety of requests for help.

While they're not strictly technology skills, the ability to produce a correctly formatted business letter to thank a donor or submit a presentation along with the ability to record the minutes of a committee meeting also comes in handy when the only administrative assistant you have to work with is yourself.

In addition to actively working with the institution's technology team, we also need to form relationships with teaching faculty. While the facets of information literacy and their relationship to critical thinking may seem obvious to us and our librarian colleagues, teaching faculty may need additional information to aid them in embracing information literacy and creating meaningful assignments to integrate into their curriculum. Relationships with faculty, whether as department liaisons or co-teaching, can provide opportunities to teach information skills within the context of other assignments and offer opportunities to really make a difference in student learning and success and demonstrate the effectiveness of library services.

There are a number of other responsibilities carried out by Gingers in all types and sizes of libraries that require an arsenal of skills ranging from entrepreneurship to negotiating trouble waters. In addition to the skills mentioned above we must develop our human resource skills as well as budgeting and facilities management techniques. We must become reflective teachers able to apply a variety of teaching techniques in order to reach the 73 percent of college students whom the Pew Internet & American Life Project tells us use the Internet more than academic and scholarly resources.

One of our recent nursing graduates recently returned to campus to use the library and I had the opportunity to ask him what surprised him most about his new, full-time job. He described all the charting that is required when working with patients in ICU. My surprise has been the great need to market the library and its services to faculty and administration in addition to the students. For librarians, libraries are such an integral part academic life and success of an institution, it seems as though the value of the library would go without saying. Instead Gingers as well as other types of library directors must

face the realization that we are often viewed as a campus money-pit and that it is no longer enough to measure and report inputs and outputs. Our most important responsibility may become the active marketing of our libraries, accepting the premise that “The best ideas don’t win’ the best promoted ideas win.” We have to accept that we may be most effective not when we’re sitting at the Reference Desk waiting to assist patrons but rather when we’re out on campus interacting with teaching faculty and academic administrators and spreading the word about information literacy, critical thinking, and the other ways that the library may help students become successful, life long learners.

The importance of what we do—whether on in the academic library or in our local public library, is so obvious to those of us in the profession, it always amazes me that others in our organizations don’t really understand what we do or better still, what we can do for them. I’ve jokingly told the president of our institution that it’s a good thing the librarians aren’t involved in anything illegal because we take advantage of every opportunity to “shamelessly” pander our services and practice what I call “gonzo” librarianship. Historic stock quotes for the Advancement Office; census statistics to be used in an administrator’s speech; homework assistance for a staff member’s spouse; participation in student projects—we look for every opportunity to spread the word that the library and its resources are ready to assist students, faculty, and staff.

Over the past few years, I answered more than a few questions from students about what it is that librarians do—do we really spend our day reading books? Well, some days, yes we do. They’re not novels; however, they’re more likely to be books on

financial management, budgeting, human resources, active learning, and the changing nature of academia, its students and faculty.

Thank you.

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