

Get to Know . . .

Shari Laster

Megan Graewingholt



For government information professionals in libraries, it is sometimes difficult to say which is more rewarding: engaging with the collection or engaging with people in support of the collection. For library professionals like Shari Laster, there is often ample opportunity to do both. Advocating on behalf

of users as well as collections is a natural part of Shari's work, including in her tenure as Head of Open Stack Collections at Arizona State University (ASU).

My first time meeting Shari was at the Federal Depository Library Conference in Arlington, Virginia in the fall of 2016, when she worked as the Government Information Librarian & Data Services Librarian at the University of California Santa Barbara. At that time, I was a newly appointed Government Documents Librarian and first-time attendee at the conference. I was fortunate to attend her educational workshop, "Reaching Out by Reaching In: Government Information Stacks Mayhem."¹ I distinctly recall Shari's enthusiasm for teaching users how to feel comfortable locating materials in the government documents depository collection, literally, using fun and games. Years later, this seems to me the perfect introduction to Shari as a colleague and library professional. Her passion for government information infuses her library work in exceptionally wonderful ways that engage people with collections and encourage their use. Being employed in a specialization that can sometimes feel isolating, I was thrilled to meet a colleague with creative approaches and genuine excitement around government information literacy, advocacy, and use.

Shari continues to serve as a leader within the government information librarianship professional community, including a tenure as chair of the Depository Library Council in 2012-13 and as chair of the Government Documents Round Table in 2017-18. Shari is currently an active member of the GODORT Legislation Committee and the Preservation of Electronic Government Information (PEGI) Project Steering Committee. She has been instrumental in furthering professional scholarship on government information advocacy, open stacks library design, and collection development. Most recently, Shari served as an editor for *Transforming Print: Collection Development and Management for our Connected Future*, now available from ALA

Editions, which showcases the unique and diverse potential of library collections in print.² Discussing this latest work, Shari emphasized that "Rather than looking at just the physical footprint or the dollars spent on e-resources, which are all things that go into collection management, co-editor Lorrie McAllister and I wanted to bring together perspectives that are forward-thinking and engaged with print as having viable futures in academic libraries." Correspondingly, navigating conversations around space and tips for advocating on behalf of large historic print collections are uniquely relevant concerns to the government documents community and will certainly be of interest.

Even now, Shari still finds the most exciting part of library work is managing collections. In her words, "Collections are central to what libraries collectively are. It's not that any one institution can or should have everything, or even close to everything. In a lot of cases, a smaller collection is what institutions should have. Still, libraries are responsible for providing, managing, curating, and preserving collections for user communities—if we're not doing these things, we're doing a lot of other work that may be important, but we're not fully serving as a *library*." While her role at ASU expanded her collections work beyond government information, Shari continues to advocate for access and preservation in areas like shared print programs for journal archiving. "Whether managing open stacks or specialized collections, it's important to look at the network level of who has what, who is managing what for the long term, and how these resources are being made accessible. This is what helps library preservation efforts at a collective scale." In line with this work, Shari has served on the Western Regional Storage Trust's (WEST's) Operations and Collections Council since 2019. Part of her work with this group envisions new areas of opportunity for the future of this shared print program. In many ways, traditional library objectives of ensuring information access and long-term preservation are well aligned with the purposes of shared print programs. Shari agrees, "It's intriguing to think about how institutions that are otherwise very different can work together within a geographic region toward shared collection goals."

Considering the big picture is not only crucial for decision making in managing library collections, but for future growth and succession planning within a specialized field. Library scholarship supports the use of mentorship to help fill critical

gaps in knowledge and provide encouragement for those entering the profession, particularly for new librarians. Studies also show that while satisfaction may be a natural part of librarianship as a profession, “evidence suggests connections to library community are an essential function of the mentoring relationship.”³ Reflecting on her experiences, Shari agrees that “both formal and informal mentorship are essential within the library professional community. Sharing our stories along the way is a big part of why I like being a part of this particular community. I’ve been very fortunate that mentorship has been mutually supportive.”

Naturally, government documents gurus willing to serve as mentors become even more necessary as library roles evolve in order to prevent the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise. As Shari observes, “The profile of who is working with government information changes all the time. Moving into management positions is sometimes easier for those working within government information, since the work engages with so many areas of the library.” It is not a stretch to say that building connections within the profession and among the broader community helps to empower voices critical to the future of government information work. As Shari notes, “It’s fundamental to support the development of skills and expertise to improve how government information collections and specializations align with broader library work. Doing both of these things has a strong connection with becoming a more inclusive and welcoming community.” Considering concepts of critical librarianship,⁴ analyzing government documents in open dialogue offers opportunities to discuss structures of power and

privilege in society. In Shari’s view, “We can’t look at government information in isolation. We have to look at it in terms of power, agency, and collective issues like equal and equitable access. This is an essential part of why our work matters.” It is a joy to participate in such a supportive community of peers, like Shari, as a member of GODORT. I think I can safely say she is still up to mayhem in the stacks.

Notes

1. Shari Laster, “Reaching Out by Reaching In: Government Information Stacks Mayhem” (educational workshop at the Federal Depository Library Conference, October 19, 2016), <https://www.fdlp.gov/file-repository/outreach/events/depository-library-council-dlc-meetings/2016-meeting-proceedings/2016-dlc-meeting-and-fdl-conference/2752-preliminary-detailed-agenda-for-the-fall-2016-dlc-meeting-fdl-conference/file>.
2. Lorrie McAllister and Shari Laster, *Transforming Print: Collection Development and Management for Our Connected Future* (Chicago: ALA Editions, Core Publishing, 2021).
3. Ava Iuliano et al., “Reaching Out to Minority Librarians: Overcoming Diversity Challenges through Mentorship,” in *ACRL 2013 Conference Proceedings* (2012), 483–90.
4. Kenny Garcia, “Keeping Up With . . . Critical Librarianship,” Association of College and Research Libraries, June 19, 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critlib.