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# From Research Institution to Liberal Arts College: An Interview with Merrily Taylor

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# From Research Institution to Liberal Arts College

## An Interview with Merrily E. Taylor

Eric C. Shoaf

**M**errily Taylor has more than a happy name. By age thirty-seven, after positions at the University of South Florida, Columbia, and Yale, as well as a Council of Library Resources academic library management internship in 1976/77, she was appointed university librarian at Brown, the well-known Ivy League institution. Taylor displayed her highly developed traits of leadership and initiative as she led the Brown library in developing one of the first networked online catalogs, oversaw facility improvements and collection building, established new programs, and saw four presidents and more than six provosts come and go during her twenty-two years at the institution. Then, in a somewhat surprising move, she left Brown to become university librarian at Washington and Lee (W&L). Our upward-driven professional instincts often leave us with the expectation that the best move is to larger, more prestigious positions, but Taylor bucked the trend and instead downsized her focus. Now, with eighteen months in her new position, she talks about the changes and challenges of her new work. In this interview, we find that the rewards of such a move are tangible and can be at least equal to those found at larger institutions.

**Q:** *One can imagine that the scope and oversight of operations is different, but what are similarities and differences in directing a smaller college library compared to a larger one?*

**A:** The similarities relate to the role the library plays in the larger institutional setting. In a small college, as in a larger university, the library director must provide and encourage leadership within the library, while establishing and maintaining good relationships with faculty, other administrators, alumni, donors, community members, and other staff outside the library. It's important to be seen as accessible and to be accessible. It is just as important in the college library that librarians, including the director, be involved in the academic planning process and keep abreast of trends in teaching and research. And, because in administration we're dealing with getting things done through and with other human beings, emotional intelligence is just as criti-

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cal in the small institution as it is in the large one—perhaps more so, as dysfunction has greater impact, and more visibility, in a small community.

Many of the differences relate to scope, of course, but also to the primary mission of the institution. W&L is a small university (approximately 1,700 undergraduate students) with only one graduate, professional program (the School of Law). Accordingly, the emphasis for the college library here is on teaching, learning, and undergraduate research. While faculty are expected to do research and publish, in general their advanced research needs are met elsewhere, and thus management decisions within the library are driven by the needs of the curriculum and the students, rather than by research and graduate programs. In many ways, decisions can be more focused here because there is less conflict between the demands of the majority (undergraduates) and a small, but complex and expensive, array of graduate programs.

The size of the operation is central to most of the other differences. Communication is easier when you can get the entire professional staff in one room. In the university, as in the library, there is less bureaucracy and hence more opportunity to get things done swiftly. Both budget and personnel are less complex, though (as typical in academia) both have their local idiosyncrasies. (There is more central control here in some aspects, less in others.) While large research libraries are trying to find ways to flatten hierarchy, get away from organizational silos, and be more agile, smaller libraries are already operating with virtually flat organizations and with a high degree of teamwork. Every member of the staff here has multiple jobs, and thus far there seems to be little discussion about who should do what; people see that something needs to be done and someone steps forward to do it.

**Q:** *What have you found to be major differences in responsibility between your earlier job and your current one?*

**A:** I would say that the responsibility is the same, it's the approach to carrying it out that's different. Just as at Brown,

at W&L I'm responsible for overall library operations, including communication outside the library. I'm involved in development and, as we just got a Friends of the Library group started, I've been spending a fair amount of time working with alumni and other community volunteers. I visit with donors. I'm invited to university events, although there seem to be fewer here than there were at Brown, perhaps because we're not presently involved in a campaign. We're engaged in a library space study, and a good deal of my efforts has gone into working with the staff, our architect/planner, and other university administrators on moving the project forward to a useful conclusion.

Personnel and salary administration here take far less of my time, for a variety of reasons, and I'm involved in fewer formal meetings; one nice thing about a smaller and flatter organization is that decisions can be made and initiatives taken without the need for multiple gatherings to move information up, down, and across the organization.

Librarians are tenure-track faculty at W&L, and one benefit of this that I've noticed is that all of us are meaningfully involved in, and informed about, academic planning. Librarians can, and do, serve on important faculty committees and are voting members in faculty meetings. I'm a member of the Academic Task Force, a group that is responsible for articulating the academic initiatives within the university's strategic planning process. One of our reference librarians is chairing an important task force ("Re-Centering the College's Role") in the college's internal planning process, and our senior reference librarian is a member of a second college task force. Librarians are considered faculty of the college, and one new task for me here in my first year was (as department chair) guiding one of our assistant university librarians through the tenure process. I had to meet with her several times, offer suggestions to help her assemble the most effective tenure packet, chair a meeting of the tenured librarians to discuss her case, and, in due course, write a recommendation to the University Tenure and Promotion Committee. She was successfully tenured and promoted, and of course I was delighted with the outcome; I felt it was a great learning experience for us both.

**Q:** *What parts of your work at Brown University helped prepare you for your current job?*

**A:** Brown taught me how to be a library director, a role that is different than any other in the library. It also taught me how to fulfill that role in an old, elite, traditional, private liberal arts institution. It was at Brown that I got my first real experience in fund-raising, stewardship, and donor and alumni relationships, all critical today for library directors in private institutions. It was at Brown that I first had overall responsibility for technical services and special collections—two areas in which I had no experience—in addition to public services and collection development, areas in which I'd worked and with which I was familiar. And of

course, it was at Brown that I first had the experience of reporting directly to a provost, instead of another librarian, a distinction that can be appreciated only by those who've done it.

Of course, every job I had before I came here helped prepare me for my current job, from Columbia (where I first supervised a library renovation), to Yale (where I worked with my first donors), to the University of South Florida (where I first supervised professional librarians and managed a collections budget). Over the years I've often thought that one critical talent for a library director is the ability to learn quickly and adapt to changes in the organization, whether it's a new provost's management style or a move to an entirely different venue. While I haven't moved around as much as some, I feel that working in four university settings prior to W&L has been a great help to me in adapting to the unique characteristics of this institution.

**Q:** *What have you had to learn?*

**A:** As with any move to a different institution, I've had to learn the history, issues, and culture of W&L (and I'm still learning). Although small, W&L is complex, with three schools (the College, the Williams School of Commerce, and the School of Law), only one of which grants graduate degrees. As an old (founded 1749), elite institution, W&L has much in common with Brown—high-quality faculty, excellent students, passionately devoted alums, and a strong sense of community. It has a different and more focused mission, however, and it's also in a period of transition as we seek a new president. It's been very interesting to me to listen to faculty discussions of how W&L can maintain the traditions that are important to it while carrying the values of a liberal arts education into the twenty-first century.

There also is more emphasis here on certain things that logically would be of more interest to an undergraduate institution; for example, information fluency. W&L has quite an innovative, small program that makes use of high-achieving students as peer mentors, and I've been working with other librarians, faculty, and folks from university computing to find funding that would allow us to expand the program. This means that I've had to update my understanding of current issues and best practices in information fluency, something that wasn't as strong on the radar at Brown, although we'd always wished we could do more in that area.

**Q:** *How has your peer group changed?*

**A:** Well, it depends on how you define "peer group." Having been the director of an ARL library for twenty-two years, and an active participant in the New England library community, I still retain friends and contacts in that environment. However, I'm making new friends as well. The W&L University Library is a member of the Oberlin Group,

which is a rather loosely affiliated group of about sixty elite liberal arts college libraries. The Oberlin Group has no staff, and everything gets done by volunteer work from one member institution or another. One institution collects and disseminates institutional statistics, another does the salary survey, and so on. There is an annual meeting hosted by one of the members, with a program that includes both information sharing and social interaction. I've found the Directors' electronic discussion list extremely useful, and people are very willing to share information and advice. W&L also is a member of VIVA (the Virtual Library of Virginia), the Associated Colleges of the South, and of SOLINET, and I've enjoyed getting to know librarians from colleague institutions in those groups. When I was at Brown, I had the pleasure of interacting with a varied and talented group of colleagues throughout the region, from many different kinds of libraries, and I always found that regardless of our parent institutions we have more issues in common than we have differences. I find this to be no less true in Virginia.

**Q:** *One assumes that broader issues, such as scholarly communication, are approached differently at such institutions as W&L, but they are no less pressing than at ARL libraries. How are the small- to medium-sized institutions dealing with this issue?*

**A:** We have many of the same concerns that any academic library would have—how can we ensure that digital content will really be there when future generations need it? Should we initiate an institutional repository, either as a single institution or in partnership with other institutions? How can we continue to develop digital collections without totally eroding print and other traditional acquisitions? Moreover, as liberal arts college librarians, we have the same obligation to keep staff, faculty, and administrators informed about questions of scholarly communication—for instance, what are the implications of Google Library for an institution such as W&L? Many small college libraries, including W&L, are making efforts to digitize materials from their special collections, just as larger institutions are.

However, I would say that (as opposed to ARL libraries), we are more free to focus on these and other scholarly communication issues as they affect our own students and faculty, and are less under the obligation to take on an issue on behalf of the wider library community, either regionally or nationally. Because of their size and resources, ARL institutions often find themselves key players in collaborative efforts to deal with scholarly communication, digitization, preservation, or whatever the issue of the day happens to be. Sometimes what an ARL library does—or doesn't do—has a very real, tangible impact on issues of scholarly communication, particularly within its home region. One thinks of the leadership of the University of Virginia in the area of digital content, or MIT's develop-

ment of DSpace. On the other hand, the opportunity to lead is by no means confined to large libraries. VIVA would not exist had it not been for the creativity and innovation of Dennis Robison (then at James Madison University), Charlene Hurt (then at George Mason), and Nancy Marshall (then at William and Mary), none of them directors of large libraries in the ARL sense. Of course, in further illustration of my general point, the University of Virginia Library was a major player in the creation of VIVA, as well.

**Q:** *How does a director know when it is time for a change?*

**A:** The same way any of us does, I think. I've always been a great believer in listening to one's inner voice, and I've never gone wrong doing that. One can turn an idea over in one's head for a long time, and then suddenly one day the inner voice says, "It's time." In my case it was a combination of personal issues—I had been in my position at Brown for a long time, and I was increasingly hungry for the opportunity to do something new, something where I would actually have an opportunity to experience a different environment, make a contribution, and learn things at the same time—and a rather clinical analysis that led to the conclusion that I simply wasn't able to get things done at Brown the way I once had. There were a host of reasons for this, but ultimately I concluded that a new director could start afresh and, hopefully, do more for the library than I could. In essence, I left the Brown University Library because I loved it and I wanted more for it than I thought I could accomplish.

**Q:** *Was this more of a personal or professional change for you?*

**A:** As you might gather from the above, it was a little of both. To me, W&L was a very attractive place, both because it is one of the top twenty liberal arts colleges in the United States and because I'm somewhat familiar with the region in which it is located. My predecessor in this job, Barbara Brown, is a close friend, and I'd been visiting her here for more than fifteen years. I knew from her that it was a great place to work, and when I came to interview, I was very impressed with the library staff, faculty, and administration. I felt the same click with the place that I'd felt when I interviewed at Brown, and I thought that there were some interesting tasks to be undertaken here, most prominently a likely renovation of the main library building. In addition to Barbara, I knew a number of other people in Lexington, and I felt that I'd be happy and welcomed in this community. So certainly, there were many personal enticements as well as professional ones.

As to the professional question, well, I'm sixty years old, so I'm not still concerned about whether my career. I feel that I've had my career, and that what I'm doing now is just icing on the cake. However, I don't feel that in coming to W&L I've stepped down in any fashion. Perhaps because

I spent the first nine years of my career in an institution that was neither an ARL library *nor* an elite liberal arts college, but that had a dedicated, creative staff and was offering darned good library services, I've never thought that *All That is Good* is confined to ARL libraries or to research universities. Nor do I think that an operation is easy to run simply because it's small. I think we do ourselves, and our colleagues, a disservice when we associate size with quality or smallness with simplicity. For one thing, we may miss the opportunity to learn from institutions that may be doing something better than we are, wherever they are situated. The only question we need to ask about any library is, "Is it delivering the collections and services that its community needs, in the most effective way possible?" That's the chief mandate of any library director, and it's not easy to achieve, regardless of an institution's size. Any library director whose users would answer a resounding "yes" to that question can be proud.

**Q:** *What is the most surprising thing you have discovered about the smaller university library?*

**A:** I would say that it was the depth and breadth of services offered with the number of staff available. With the exception of the specialized skills and tasks that are required to develop research collections, and the services that are directly related to those collections, this relatively small university library offers essentially the same range of services and support as undergraduates and faculty had at Brown. There is a library Web page, an impressive range of online tools and databases, a librarian liaison with academic departments, an active information fluency program, and a great deal of one-on-one librarian work with undergraduates on projects, honors theses, and the like. However, this is all being juggled by nine librarians and some sixteen support staff. One librarian, for instance, serves as head of technical services, online catalog administrator, and serials librarian, and also handles all the database licenses. A typical assignment for one of the reference librarians, in addition to reference and information fluency classes, is collection development for all the arts and humanities, as well as content management for any library Web page having to do with these disciplines. And this in a library that is open twenty-four hours a day when classes are in session! Obviously the user community here is smaller, but faculty require the same level and quality of support for their teaching, preparation, and research, and students look for the same sort of help when they're working on a project or a paper. The steps involved with licensing and managing electronic products are the same regardless of the size of the library. I remain very impressed with everything this small staff is able to accomplish as a team. I think I had worked in large libraries for so long that I'd forgotten that in smaller institutions, there is much less specialization and much more need for staff to do a little bit of everything.

**Q:** *Based on your experience, what advice would you give to someone who wants to become a library director? Should they set their sights on an ARL library, or look to a smaller university?*

**A:** The first piece of advice I'd give is to focus on the job you have now and do it to the best of your ability. In my experience, folks who start out planning to become library directors often end up disappointed because they can be more focused on the next step up than on their existing responsibilities, and that sometimes leads to problems. Use every position as a learning experience, and don't hesitate to take on additional projects or tasks if you're invited to. Some of the most valuable experiences I had as a developing administrator were things that I hadn't expected to do or that weren't in my job description. Some of them weren't even great fun at the time I was doing them, but I think it's unlikely I would have become a director had I not taken on those responsibilities.

As to an ARL library or a smaller institution, I don't think the question should be framed that way. Often the choices you've made in your first couple jobs have already set you on a path that will determine where you end up as a director, if that is your desire. What you really need to do before you consider *any* career direction is to be realistic about what your end goal really involves, and then think about whether that job syncs well with your own strengths and preferences. People are sometimes attracted to administrative jobs for the wrong reasons—they see these positions as being all-powerful, or more prestigious, or better paid, or perhaps as the next logical step on the career ladder, and somehow expected of them by others. What some folks fail to ask is, "If I get this job, will I enjoy it? Am I likely to be good at it?" There's nothing wrong with wanting a prestigious job and a well-paid position, but you need to be very realistic about what comes with it. For example, how do you feel about public speaking, often in situations where you have to do it on the spur of the moment? Do you enjoy meeting lots of people, and are you comfortable in all kinds of social situations, large and small? Would it bother you to ask someone for money? Do you find it difficult to make decisions in situations where you don't have all the available data, where you don't have a lot of time to think, or where making a decision may make some people angry with you? Does it invigorate you to have fifteen different things going on at once, and can you keep track of all of them, or do you prefer to focus on one or two things at a time, and see them through? How do you feel about working more than thirty-five or forty hours a week, or having to turn up at frequent university events on nights and weekends? Suppose something goes wrong in some department of the library—something that you knew nothing about—and the next day you see *your* name all over the campus newspaper as the person who's responsible for the mess. Are you comfortable reporting to someone who expects *you* to know all the answers about the library

and whom you may not see very frequently? How do you feel about not being in control of all the things that you're responsible for? (The surest route to insanity and ineffectiveness as a director is to second-guess and micromanage the many competent individuals who report to you.) All of these things, especially the need to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously, are routine elements of running a large and critical university department—the library—regardless of the size of the parent institution.

The other key question, when one is thinking about making a career in administration, is “how much of the joy I find in my job is related to working with faculty and students, or directly with collections?” The director of a small college library still has many opportunities for direct user contact, but as the library grows larger, one spends increasing amounts of time in pure administration, and less and less on the hands-on tasks of a librarian. This is not a problem if one enjoys administration, but if you view management, bureaucracy, and organizational politics as a vast irritant, then the job of a director may not be the one for you. One of the mistakes that we sometimes make as professionals is to assume that because someone is very good in a particular area—collection development, reference, cataloging—that they will also be good in an administrative role. In fact, management skills are quite different, and some individuals will make their greatest contributions by continuing to practice frontline librarianship, not by moving to administration.

**Q:** *What sort of future do you see for the small university libraries?*

**A:** I don't have a better crystal ball for this question than anyone else, and certainly mine may not be as good as

some of the people who've been directors of small university libraries longer than I. I think that all university libraries, large or small, are going to continue to experience profound change over the next few decades. Technology has already brought about substantial changes in the way we do our work and in the role of the library, and I believe that this is going to continue. A good deal of work will continue to be with users who don't have to come into the library, as well as with information formats that we can't even imagine today. I think smaller university libraries will develop as all good academic libraries do; that is, they will transform themselves so as to deliver the services, and collections and content that their communities need. Technology will be applied as it becomes critical to faculty and students; when you think about it, only a very few academic libraries are ever cutting edge when it comes to new technologies. A handful of libraries are cutting edge, a few are early adapters, and the vast majority can afford to introduce a new technology only when it is affordable and stable. Unless there is a significant change in library funding in the next few decades, I suspect that this will continue to be the case. For the same reason—limited funding—consortia should continue to be important, although I suspect there may be fewer of them as libraries pick and choose among those that are the most productive. The other trend that I see as important, and continuing, is the growth of direct borrowing partnerships, which benefit all the partner institutions but are certainly of greatest interest to smaller institutions, especially those with young collections and modest acquisitions budgets.

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