NASIG Newsletter

Profiles

Christian Burris, Profiles Editor

Profile of Steve Oberg, NASIG President

Steve Oberg is the current president of NASIG, an office that he also held in 1998-1999. He manages the library's Resource Description and Digital Initiatives Group, which facilitates user discovery of, and access to, library resources. He also teaches Master's level courses at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as well as at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University. My interview with Steve was completed by e-mail on Saturday, July 22.

Photo Courtesy of Steve Oberg

Who or what drew you to NASIG initially?

My advisor and mentor in the iSchool at Illinois -- it was then known as the Graduate School of Library and Information Science or GSLIS -- Kathryn Luther Henderson, encouraged me to apply for a NASIG student grant award. Henderson's first love was serials although she taught courses in cataloging, preservation, and other technical services areas. I applied at the last minute, did my best to answer all of the essay questions, and never thought for a minute that I'd be chosen. I was genuinely shocked when I was chosen as one of the recipients that year for the 1991 conference at Trinity University in San Antonio. At the time, I was told that what helped my application stand out was that I worked as a graduate assistant at the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Library at Illinois, and the Program Planning Committee was interested in including one or two sessions on Latin America in the program, given the conference location that year. My roommate was a former graduate assistant at the same library who'd gone on to become active in SALALM (Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials) and gave a workshop at the NASIG conference.

Two other longtime NASIG members who are still active in our organization were in that same group of student award winners: Kay Teel (Stanford University), and Kay Johnson (Radford University). Eleanor Cook (East Carolina University) and Lisa Macklin (Emory University) were on the Awards & Recognition Committee at the time, I remember, as was Harriet Kersey (retired). These and others that I met at that very first conference are all

people that I bonded with and am thankful to call friends to this day.

When did you decide to become a librarian?

A family friend in my church at the time who is originally from Brunei, got her M.S.L.I.S. from Illinois (the Urbana-Champaign campus) when I was an undergraduate there in the late 1980s. She encouraged me to consider librarianship as a career as she thought it'd suit me very well. I really didn't know what to think except: 1) I knew that if I didn't go to graduate school right away after finishing my undergraduate degree, I'd never go back and do it later; and 2) my undergraduate degree (history major with a minor in German) had zero career prospects. So, I applied for and was accepted into the graduate programs in history and LIS at Illinois. I chose LIS because I also happened to get a graduate assistantship which came with a salary and tuition remission from the beginning. If I'd pursued a PhD in history, it would have been at least a year before I received a teaching assistantship. Because I paid my own way through school, the LIS degree with an assistantship was by far the better offer, and I never regretted taking it. Interestingly though, I had no prior library work experience nor did I have any prior full-time work experience, period.

What has been your greatest reward as a librarian?

It probably sounds hokey but I've always said that the highlight of my career is my involvement in NASIG. Aside from that, I feel a sense of reward in constantly learning and growing in this profession. There were many times when I wanted to quit over the past twenty-five years or so — librarianship is not a career for the faint of heart, believe it or not, and, regardless of how we like to think of ourselves, it seems to me that librarianship is still a pretty conservative profession — but I kept on mainly because of those opportunities for ongoing growth and development, which help to feed my soul. I also am very passionate about the things libraries stand for.

What drew you to academic libraries?

I've had a varied career. I've worked in two very large academic research libraries, two liberal arts college libraries, for a library systems vendor, and, before Wheaton College, a Fortune 100 healthcare company, where I worked in a variety of positions including as an information architect and an information scientist. But, I chose to come back to academic librarianship because, upon consideration, it suits me best. It's where I feel most at home. There are good things about each place I've worked but I particularly enjoy the liberal arts college setting where I get to do a wide variety of things and also have a much closer connection to students and other faculty. It seems to me that this is where innovation can happen more readily, and I can more clearly see the impact of what the library does.

How did you arrive at Wheaton College?

I've always wanted to work here. I applied and was a finalist for an entry level reference librarian job at Wheaton back in 1991, and thought that was my dream job. I didn't get the job and was pretty bummed about it. However, a week or two later, I got a call from the University of Chicago Library inviting me to apply for a serials cataloger position. (My grad school mentor and professor had specifically recommended me to them.) I interviewed and was hired for it even though while in grad school, I swore I'd never do serials cataloging because I disliked it so much! It's not the first time I've had to eat my words. But the fact is, it turned out that I loved what I did at Chicago; I loved the people I worked with; and I was blessed to have a fantastic mentor and supervisor in my first professional job. My career progressed from there (including my first stint as NASIG President in 1998/1999) but I still kept an eye on jobs at Wheaton and actually applied there three more times over the years. On the fourth try in 2012, I was finally successful ;-)

It's not an easy place to get into, obviously. There are many reasons for that, only one of which has to do with its evangelical Christian standards. The library identified a need to revamp how e-resources and serials were managed, and I had the right background and experience to help with that. I also had extensive experience with technology that they wanted; for example, as someone who had implemented different ILS's and related products at other libraries and who had helped develop aspects of Ex Libris Voyager functionality. Another important aspect is that librarians at Wheaton are faculty (although non-tenure track). They wanted someone who could hold his own with classroom faculty, as well as help integrate the library into the curriculum.

It's a funny thing: The person who got that first Wheaton reference librarian job I applied for still works here, and we are now good friends and colleagues.

How did you become an adjunct member of the faculty at the School of Information Sciences at Illinois?

In early 2002, I was asked by Dr. Linda Smith if I'd be willing to teach a course in their online curriculum, called LEEP, which was still somewhat new back then. LEEP was Linda's brainchild and she also was one of my teachers and mentors when in school. The course was Technical Services Functions and was the online equivalent to a traditional, in-person course that my mentor, Kathryn Luther Henderson, had originally created and I had taken when I was a student. So I jumped at the chance, but I can tell you that it was one of scariest and hardest things I've ever done. It still scares the heck out of me most of the time, but after many years of teaching, I finally feel like I'm sort of getting the hang of it. About four years ago, Linda asked me if I'd be willing to create a new course on e-resources management, which I'd been lobbying for. That, too, was very scary, trust me.

In all of the courses I now teach, one of the hardest things to determine is what to cover, because there is so much rich detail, particularly in technical services-related areas. But you can't (and shouldn't try to) cover everything, because it would be overwhelming. Another challenge is the online learning environment. Many people believe that online learning isn't as good as traditional, in-person learning. Or they say, "It's not the same." No, it's not the same; it is quite different. But I strongly believe it is just as good as in-person learning, and as a hiring manager for many years, my assessment of candidates from in-person vs. online LIS programs tells me there is no difference. However, online coursework requires a very different approach and mindset, and a willingness to experiment and innovate, to be successful. I believe that teaching is teaching, regardless of venue (online or in-person). If you put a large amount of effort into it, you're more likely to succeed. Most people don't realize how much work goes into online courses that do well in terms of student outcomes.

What has been your greatest reward as a faculty member for a library school?

The greatest reward to me is when I get a sense that at least one student in my class starts to "get it," that a light bulb goes off and learning, real learning, begins to happen. Each group of students is different and each one has its own dynamic. If a group dynamic is uninterested and unengaged, this makes teaching a really, really hard thing to do. Conversely, if students are really interested and engaged, it's one of the best feelings in the world.

I'm not sure it was deserved, but I felt a real sense of accomplishment when my students voted me onto the campus-wide list of Teachers Ranked as Excellent at the University of Illinois last Fall. This was the first time for me to get on that list in fourteen years of teaching, and it helped me see that I'm making progress here and there. I still have a lot to learn, though.

This is your second time serving as NASIG's president. How has NASIG changed since your first time?

So much has changed but so much has also stayed the same. Eighteen or so years is a long time! Back then, I well remember the extreme amount of work that went into prepping for board meetings because everything was paper-based. Thick packets of print material had to be FedEx'd to board members well in advance. I took on the task of completely revising the President's Manual—it was huge!—and I now wonder where that went ;-) Today the work of the organization is mostly carried out online and over the phone and that makes things much easier (and less expensive).

Back then one of the most labor-intensive tasks was the committee appointment process. What a challenge! It STILL is a big challenge, let me tell you, even if we can now get by with emailing PDF appointment letters, work through appointment details via a shared online workspace, and so on.

Then, I was the youngest person to be elected president but today, I am very far from young any more.

But let me address how NASIG itself has changed:

- We had more than twice as many paying members in 1998/1999 than we do today.
- Conference attendance was in the high 700s, or just about. Today, we consistently average less than half that amount, and this is a big concern.
- Back then, we still held conferences on college campuses with dormitory housing. Today, we hold our conferences in (usually) comfortable hotels.
- I am proud to have been part of the original group that launched NASIG's first website. (Did you know that we were originally hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill? Also, did you know we had a Gopher site? Do you even know what a Gopher site is?) There were real pioneers like Birdie MacLennan, Marilyn Geller, Maggie Rioux, Stephanie Schmitt, Ann Ercelawn, and others who all made names for themselves within what was then called the Electronic Communications Committee. Today the successor group, called the Communications Committee, is just as important to the work of the organization, but its tasks are even broader and more diffuse today than back then.
- We charged $25 for membership dues back then, whereas today we charge $75 (an amount that has been unchanged for what, fifteen years? It's a bargain.)
- We've always paid careful attention to NASIG's budget but today we are in a healthier, more sustainable, long-term position than back then, in spite of reductions in conference attendance and membership.
- We were officially known as the North American Serials Interest Group with an obvious focus on serials. Even though the electronic publishing revolution was well underway back then, libraries still operated in a predominantly print serials environment, e-books were largely unheard of, and we still worried about things like networked CD towers to run databases. Today our name is NASIG

and our scope has expanded to encompass all e-resources as well as scholarly communication issues.

- The Mexico Student Grant Award didn't exist. Another thing I'm proud of is working with others to make that a reality that continues to this day.

Those are only a fraction of the changes I've seen. What hasn't changed is NASIG's outstanding community focus, its fostering of mentorships and opportunities to support professionals and paraprofessionals in a variety of ways, its innovative programming, and its commitment to present the best annual conference for the lowest cost that it can manage.

Who are you currently reading?

Home by Marilynne Robinson. Just prior to starting this novel, I finished reading the previous one, *Gilead*, which was chosen as the core book for my campus this coming academic year. (Last year, when the core book program first launched, we read *Silence* by Shūsaku Endō). I read all the time, including listening to audiobooks on my long driving commutes, which take about three hours a day. These books, and many others, cause me to think about different life themes such as the meaning of faith and belief, what is "the good life," the role of family, and so on.

What are your priorities/goals as the president of NASIG for the coming year?

Um, does making it through with my sanity intact count?! Just kidding. Truly, it's an amazing privilege to be in this position again. Three things come immediately to mind: 1) ensure that the 2018 conference in Atlanta is successful; 2) I'm looking forward to the final report of the Web-Based Infrastructure Task Force, and working with others to determine what should be done next to improve our web presence as well as the many internal processes that underpin the work of our organization; 3) greatly strengthen our outreach and promotion efforts to ensure that we are consistent in how we present

ourselves, and that we are cutting through the noise to convey to others the great work with which we are already engaged. My pick of these three is not to slight anything else in any way, because there are so many good things NASIG members are doing.

Would you like to share anything else with us?

A personal thing that others may find interesting is that I am the youngest of eight (seven surviving) children. But my older siblings tell me I now look like I'm the oldest and quite frankly, sometimes it feels that way, too. It's not a compliment.

Other than that, I hope it's pretty clear how passionate I am about NASIG and how much I enjoy the opportunity to work with you all this year!