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Perspectives on Leadership: An Interview with Irene Owens

Eric C. Shoaf

Clemson University, shoaf@clemson.edu

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Interview with Irene Owens

By Eric C. Shoaf

Irene Owens is dean of the School of Library and Information Science at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in Durham. Over the course of a distinguished career in librarianship, she has been an elementary school teacher, classification record assistant at the Library of Congress, and has held several positions at Howard University, including a stint as head of the reference department. Owens has served as a consultant in several capacities, including the Triangle Research Libraries Network, a Library Evaluation Project with Tribal Librarians, conducted in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin, and for the U.S. Embassy in South Africa. Since 2005, she has served in her current position at NCCU, leading one of the top library and information science (LIS) education programs. Previously she was a member of the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin.



Irene Owens

She is the recipient of numerous awards including an Outstanding Service Award from Howard University, the Texas Excellence in Teaching Award, and is a member of the Phi Kappa Phi honor society. She is also a Junior Fellow in British Studies and a Faculty Fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. Owens has published widely, including entries in *International Information and Library Review*, *College and Research Libraries*, *Bulletin of the American Society of Information Science*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Library Administration*, and *Library Management*. She edited the volume *Acquisitions and Collection Development in the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Owens is currently at work on a number of research projects including one entitled “Empowerment and Democratic Process in the Management of Community Libraries: Haiti and South Africa.” Throughout her career she has honed the special skill set that is required in a leadership position. Here she discusses the role of library science education in developing leadership skills, and how leadership is an important part of her everyday work.

Q: Are LIS schools doing all they can to teach leadership skills at the graduate level?

A: It is very difficult to answer this question without having data to support an informed response. However, I do feel that schools overall are aware of the importance of leadership skills for our profession and are by and large taking good advantage of many opportunities for leadership as

well as creating others. Leadership and management have evolved over the years incorporating business principles, practices, and approaches, incorporating research in to the practice of LIS. Also, practitioners and academicians are participating in this research and contributing to its growth and development. For example, when I was teaching management/leadership, the students and I enjoyed the use of the case-study approach to problem solving and learning. Students were also very adept at thinking through problems and also integrating what they had learned about management and leadership principles, theories, regulations, and laws, as well as policies and procedures.

Teaching leadership skills in LIS programs over the years has been focused in several ways. Based on my own experience, management classes are usually expanded to include leadership. Most schools, I feel safe in saying, afford students opportunities to learn management/leadership in different types of settings and these can vary from one situation or environment to another. Therefore classes in academic, school, public, and special librarianship would focus on these differences, which are usually also complementary to each other, providing students with a more broadly based learning experience. Moreover, schools that offer students a chance to learn through membership in student professional organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA) or the Special Libraries Association (SLA) do expand student learning experiences and exposure. There are also special leadership training opportunities in other organizations such as the Association of College and Research Libraries or the Library of Congress.

Q: Where does leadership fit into the curriculum in the SLIS program at NCCU?

A: Leadership is a necessity in the curriculum at NCCU, although we would like to do more, especially since we are the only LIS program in an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). We include leadership in all areas of specialization in types of libraries (academic, public, and special) as well as among our student chapters of ALA, SLA, and the American Society for Information Science & Technology (ASIST). SLIS graduates have been especially successful in producing leaders on the local and national level in the various student organizations, especially SLA where we have had an SLA president, board members, etc. There is a critical need for leadership in general, and even more so among minorities who can serve as role models and mentors to all persons in general, and for minorities in particular.

Drawing from the general body of leadership, as well as drawing upon the literature of our field, some of the

Eric Shoaf (eric.shoaf@utsa.edu) is editor of *LL&M* and a graduate of the SLIS program at NCCU.

guiding principles of leadership that we convey to students are:

- leadership is a measurement for advancement in the organization;
- leadership is a part of good stewardship to an organization and to the profession; and
- leadership is appreciated as “service” to an organization.

In speaking with LIS faculty, it is clear that we would like to play a larger role in the profession and in society by acquiring a leadership grant to produce a more focused group of graduates with skills needed to help effect change. We would also like to expand our “International Library Systems” course to focus more on leadership. It is important for students to understand diversity and leadership at a local and national level and also from an international perspective. We are making a lot of progress in this area. Last year, one of our faculty implemented a pilot study abroad course to Denmark. It was a tremendous success and we are planning to repeat the course again this year with a greater level of participation.

Two of our faculty members have served as president of the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA). Their service to NCLA has been a big boost for the school. We also encourage attendance at the NCLA biennial meetings, to join the organization, and to serve at that level. The upcoming president elect of NCLA is an alumna in the School of Library and Information Sciences. Former President Robert Burgin made an attractive offer to our students by affording joint membership in NCLA and ALA (as students) for the same price. That was a great impetus for increasing membership in both organizations and creating more experiences for our students!

Q: As dean of the SLIS, how is leadership a part of your job?

A: Leadership is the core essence of one’s responsibilities as a dean, not only of the school but within the university and beyond. One of the most critical roles within the university is to create and maintain good visibility of the school—to be collegial, cooperative, and to collaborate with other colleagues and disciplines—and that is occurring. The dean takes on several roles in the university. I have a commitment, responsibility, and opportunity to promote the profession and to show its relevancy for all the disciplines in the information and digital age. I have a responsibility to make sure the program is visible in a very positive sense, that the dean and the faculty of the SLIS are collegial, open to new ideas, collaborative. I am also responsible for recruitment, retention, and placement of our graduates and for showing the importance of keeping lines of communications open, and that we are progressive, and that our graduates are be-

ing prepared for today’s market, and that they are very competitive. Accountability and stewardship are also important factors for the dean to be constantly aware of, and to put into practice. Another role is to make sure that the library, technology, and all information services are culturally appropriate for all the citizens of our society.

Q: What sort of continuing education opportunities are available from the SLIS for librarians who seek better leadership skills? Is this a role for professional library educators?

A: This is a need which we are currently addressing. There are many graduates of our school who have been out for a while and desire to update their skills or expand their studies who do not necessarily desire another degree. There is a particular interest in digital librarianship and archives, so we need a rubric under which more training can be made more accommodative. We do have some solutions under consideration.

Interview with Mark Y. Herring

By Jane Duffy

Mark Y. Herring is dean of library services at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Prior to serving there, Herring was dean of library services at Oklahoma Baptist University, and library director at King College in East Tennessee. His



Mark Y. Herring

doctorate is from East Tennessee State University in educational leadership and policy analysis. He has worked in librarianship for three decades.

Herring has written numerous articles, books, and reviews for magazines and journals both in and out of the library profession. His most recent book, *Fool’s Gold: Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library* (McFarland, 2007), and his article “10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library” have been reprinted dozens of times and in more than six languages. Other articles have appeared in *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *College and Research Library News*, *Weekly Standard*, and *Policy Review*.

Jane Duffy (jane.duffy@dal.ca) is Associate University Librarian at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.