

# VETERANS SPEAK OUT

Millennials know how to get themselves heard, but nothing speaks as loudly as experience

Interviews by  
Jenna Freedman

“There’s just no substitute for experience—logging the years to see it all, gaining knowledge through surviving mistakes—and the confidence experience gives.” So wrote Jenna Freedman in her introduction to a four-part online series for *LJ’s Academic Newswire* featuring interviews with eight librarians who have collectively banked more than 180 years of experience in academic libraries (see “The Veteran Librarians” sidebar).

“[I]t seems to me that the younger-than-mes are actually doing pretty well for themselves as far as getting their thoughts out there,” Freedman wrote. So to get the considered perspective on the record, she asked these librarians a number of questions including the same ones posed by Scott Carlson in his article “Young Librarians, Talkin’ Bout Their Generation,” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (10/19/07). For a full look at how closely these veteran librarians’ experience

mirrors that of Millennials, see the full interviews online at [libraryjournal.com/veteranlibrarians](http://libraryjournal.com/veteranlibrarians).

## The varieties of librarian experience

There’s a lot of focus on the “Next Gen” librarians out there, wrote Freedman, “bringing a youth perspective that’s supposed to shake things up and introducing new ideas and practices into a profession that sometimes moves forward at a glacial pace.”

But the ideas of the new generation don’t invalidate the work done by those who came before. In fact, change in libraries tends to be a lot more evolutionary than revolutionary. And while generational and technological divides have always been with us, Freedman concluded, “when others have at least started the conversations on these matters for us, it would be silly not to glean what we can from their experience.”

### **Carlson question** What is one thing that libraries are doing right and one thing that libraries are doing wrong?

**Fister** I think we’re right about open access, protecting privacy, and defending civil liberties (though of course we often fall down on all of these). Having an FBI agent complain to a *New York Times* reporter about radical, militant librarians makes me proud. The Connecticut librarians who challenged a national security letter make me proud. The [National Institute of Health’s] effort to make publicly funded research public makes me proud.

**Block** Wrong: Most academic libraries

don’t market themselves worth a damn. I suspect there are some that are still passively waiting for students and faculty to come to them. It’s essential for librarians to prove their worth every day and then trumpet their successes to faculty and administrators.

### **Freedman** Is academic librarianship in danger? Is the prognosis better or worse than when you entered the profession?

**Wolven** I think the prognosis is better than ever—with a caveat. I see so many new opportunities opening for academic libraries: closer engagement with educational technologies; building institutional repositories; converting collections to digital form and reimagining their use; building services to support scholarly research and publication; orga-

nizing, preserving, and connecting all of these forms. The question is, what will it mean to be an academic “librarian”?

Even when I started, there were non-librarians performing some of those roles: scholars doing cataloging; programmers creating the MARC format and automated systems. Now, though, that trend is much greater, and I have less sense of what it will mean to be a librarian in this context. I suspect library schools (or information science schools or knowledge organization programs) face the same challenge of redefining the discipline and profession. I am, however, tremendously optimistic.

**Schuman** I think it is better in that it is more diverse e.g., women and minorities. It is worse I think because in a fight for status there seems to be less emphasis on public service.

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**Carlson question** Does the library profession need to diversify and draw from different populations?

**Corby** America has tried over the years of my life to make interest in and knowledge about different cultures a positive value. It is hard for me to narrow this to just a library perspective. It really is a common good.

I think diverse librarians help assure that all students will feel welcome and comfortable asking for help in the library. They contribute much to the public interaction decisions we make so that we don't unintentionally impose a cultural element in our message, whether it be web page, in-person interaction, chat reference, whatever we do.

**Freedman** Were there generational (i.e., generation gap) issues when you entered the profession?

**Schuman** Absolutely. I entered the profession in 1966—by 1968 the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) was founded. We were the “young” people. The first program SRRT put on (I was program chair) was called “The Failure of Libraries: A Call to Action.”

**Tobin** By 1980, when I received my MLS and took a librarian position in public services, there were issues separating the younger and older librarians, especially those involving the use of new tools (primarily online searching). At times, it was like the Katharine Hepburn movie *Desk Set*, pitting computers against experienced librarians. Often the experienced librarians got better (more inclusive) answers, but slowly that changed as more databases became available via Dialog and other vendors. It certainly taught me respect for the depths of the print world and the knowledge held by experienced reference librarians, even while I was trying to use the new tools to speed up the more mundane research processes.

**Carlson question** Will there be a reference desk—yes or no?

**McCook** I either get voice mail when I call or a sigh when I visit, so I think most people get the same and therefore don't use reference desks.

**Fister** Not sure about the furniture, but face-to-face, individualized help with research that doesn't require making an appointment is a good thing. I hope we get smarter about its pedagogical potential, but I think if we drop it altogether we'll lose a lot of students. I

## The Veteran Librarians

Those interviewed have a minimum of 20 years as a librarian, with between five and 35 of those years served in an academic library.



**MARYLAINE BLOCK**  
MLS 1978, 22 years as an academic librarian  
CURRENT Freelance writer, presenter



**KATE CORBY**  
MLS 1974, 23 years as an academic librarian  
CURRENT Reference librarian and bibliographer, Michigan State University, East Lansing



**SHA FAGAN**  
MLS 1970s, 35 years as an academic librarian  
CURRENT Director of Libraries, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY



**BARBARA FISTER**  
MLS 1980s, 23 years as an academic librarian, plus some unofficial librarian work in Saudi Arabia and as a paraprofessional  
CURRENT Instruction and reference librarian, Gustavus Adolphus University, Saint Peter, MN; mystery author; and *LJ Academic Newswire* columnist of Peer to Peer Review



**KATHLEEN DE LA PEÑA MCCOOK**  
MLS 1970s, first seven years as an academic librarian  
CURRENT LIS professor, University of South Florida, Tampa



**PATRICIA GLASS SCHUMAN**  
MLS 1966, five years as an academic librarian  
CURRENT President, Neal-Schuman Publishers



**THERESA TOBIN**  
MLS 1980, 30 years as an academic librarian, ten before that as support staff  
CURRENT Head, Humanities Library, MIT, Cambridge



**BOB WOLVEN**  
MLS 1970s, 37 years as an academic librarian  
CURRENT Associate University Librarian for bibliographic services and collection development, Columbia University, New York

mean, if they're intimidated asking questions spontaneously, are they likely to make an appointment to ask them? We should not be too busy to be available to them. It's easier than ever not to waste time while being available—with wireless and laptops and all. I'd rather see us finding ways to make reference friendly and useful and part of learning—and less time telling one another it's a waste of our precious time.

**Freedman** When you first became a librarian, were there concerns that the profession was endangered by technology?

**McCook** The new technologies were OCLC terminals, PCs, photocopiers... There was concern about shared cataloging via OCLC, but it was just a glimmer.  
**Tobin** By the late 1980s there were certainly concerns about technology replacing librarianship, which became more acute after access to the web became so ubiquitous.

**Fagan** In fact, the change to new technologies actually “persuaded” a few older librarians that it was time for them to retire.

**Carlson question** How well did your library science education prepare you for the field today?

**Fagan** I think that library science education alone does not fully prepare one for the profession.

**Block** Only in habits of mind—meticulousness, concern for accuracy, service ethic, concern for discerning the users' needs and meeting them.

**Corby** Quite well, actually. I was taught the theory of information science in some depth and turned loose with a fairly up-to-date set of technical skills. It has been a challenge to stay up-to-date, and I really doubt that schools can now turn out students who are knowledgeable about all the technologies they may encounter, but in the 1970s it wasn't as hard. ■

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