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## A Discussion with Charlene Hurt and Rich Meyer

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## *Exit* INTERVIEWS

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### **A discussion with Charlene Hurt and Rich Meyer**

*Conducted by Laura Burtle*

The directors of two of the four research universities in the University System of Georgia are retiring. Charlene Hurt, dean of libraries at Georgia State University, and Rich Meyer, dean and director of libraries at the Georgia Tech Library & Information Center, are retiring this summer. Charlene has been a librarian for 34 years and a library director for more than 30. Rich has been a librarian for 41 years and a director since 1991, having spent many years as an associate director. I met with the retiring directors to learn their thoughts on the past and future of academic libraries.

I started by asking them what have been the most significant changes in libraries and librarianship during their tenures. Rich said that “the shift to digital has been profoundly impactful on libraries. Nothing else comes close to that in terms of the change in processes imposed.” He pointed out that “in the old days, libraries came into existence because there was an economic gain from sharing, and that’s totally gone in the digital environment. In effect, there is a reversal since sharing doesn’t really mean anything in terms of buying digital collections.” It does, however, in terms of institutional repositories, and he predicted a dramatic shift in terms of the university library agenda toward stronger outreach to faculty and stronger engagement with projects like institutional repositories.

Charlene agreed that the move to a digital environment has been a very significant change, starting with OCLC and the online catalog and then online searching. She also sees the movement from solo learning to collaborative learning as having had a big impact on libraries, leading to a radically different view of the function of the library building and changing relationships with the academic community. She noted that collaborative work has put a lot of pressure on the library

as there are few places on campus for group work to take place, perhaps especially on urban campuses. “The change certainly got rid of the quiet library,” she noted, “and coffee-empty library as well!” added Rich.

I asked what career accomplishments make each of them most proud.

Charlene looked back over her career, starting with bringing in OCLC and online searching at Washburn University. “Every directorship I’ve had I’ve had the opportunity to do a building, and that’s been a lot of fun.” The Washburn project was a new building that completely changed the library, which didn’t have a reference desk when she started. “They figured someone could come find a reference librarian if they needed one.” At George Mason, she began to get more interested in the library’s role in the teaching process. There she led the building of the Johnson Center, and she was the “founding mother” of VIVA, Virginia’s virtual library.

In 1989 she co-authored an article on the back page of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* proposing a scholarly information system using the new digital technologies, impressively foreshadowing future developments. “I was very proud of that.”

At Georgia State, she is pleased with implementing a liaison librarian system, seeing librarians become more engaged in teaching and learning, the Library Transformation (a large-scale renovation) and the growth of the collection, particularly in scholarly areas in the humanities. Finally, she takes pride in hiring and promoting outstanding librarians and library staff.

Rich said that winning the ACRL award for Excellence in Academic Libraries in 2007 has to top the list. “What’s

most important about that is that it emerged because of a very robust collaboration and cross-sectional engagement by the librarians, OIT folks and the Teaching and Learning Center that allowed us to make advances that precipitated the award. But it was that collaboration and that joint collegial effort that really made it possible."

Next I asked Charlene and Rich for their favorite library-related memory. Rich recalled having the opportunity to meet interesting, famous people, like the day at Indiana State Larry Bird walked in and gave Rich his papers from a project he'd worked on. "We subsequently crossed paths frequently as the coach at Indiana State lived across the street from us, and we shared post-game social gatherings on many occasions with Larry and the team. It is fun to have that kind of interaction."

Rich has found that the library has been a very effective place to have interactions with some nationally and internationally important individuals. One day during his visit to donate his papers to the library at Clemson, Strom Thurmond came up to him to get help buttoning his collar button, which had popped loose. "Here is a guy who is one of the most well-known guys in Washington, and he's asking me for a little bit of help — that was fun." At Trinity College, he met the prime minister of

Israel, heads of state and senators. "It's amazing the folks you have a chance to meet." Rich noted that an interesting aspect of being a library director is the potential for interacting in a social environment with a lot of really interesting people.

Charlene fondly recalled the day the Student Government Association voted for a student fee to fund the Library Transformation project. "I tear up about it all these years later. They had a very formal hearing with testimony, then they voted — sometimes you think people don't much care about libraries, and that was great. I really love GSU students!"

Asked what legacy each of them hopes to leave their library or university, Charlene said that she hopes she leaves both the library and the university a library that is fully engaged in the academic process. More and more, the way to do that is by being engaged in the teaching and learning process and focusing on the learning and research goals librarians help their patrons achieve, rather than on the tools with which they do that. "I also think that the fact that this space has become a central academic space, visible from the city, is a real contribution to the university — a place where academic community can happen."



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## Burtle: A Discussion with Charlene Hurt and Rich Meyer

Rich stated that “the most important thing to me is that I’m leaving behind a library that supports students more effectively than it did when I joined Georgia Tech.” The library’s door count has doubled since he came to Georgia Tech 10 years ago. “Involvement of students with the library administration has become much more engaged and formalized. They appointed a group of leadership successors to work with us. We’re the only unit on campus with that kind of engagement from students.”

On the question of what the future holds for libraries and librarians, Rich quickly replied “Surprises! Think about various technological things that have occurred, like the laser for example. Or look at how much impact photo-copying has had on libraries, and that technology just came out of the blue. Lasers are like that too; they have a profound impact on all kinds of media technologies, switches, you name it.”

Charlene thinks all librarians know the answer to this — enormous change, enormous opportunity and tough challenges. “I don’t think there’s a librarian who doesn’t know that.” She also revisited the challenges to the model of buying one book for many people. “The model is disappearing. I think what is going on with publishing and copyright threatens the way we do business and ultimately threatens publishers even more. The potential for change is enormous. If publishers succeed in limiting what our students can read, they are threatening the ability of the United States to be intellectually competitive.” She went on to say that she truly believes that challenges to access to scholarly communication threaten learning, research and the creation of new knowledge. “People who only have access to limited information, based on what they can afford, cannot help this world meet the challenges we face.”

Rich added that it is the premise underlying copyright — to protect the creator from being undercut by people stealing the creation — that encourages people to be creative, and the challenge to the library model undermines that. “Part of what’s happened in copyright law in the last few years has been a negative attempt to give more and more support to a crumbling infrastructure.”

Looking to the future, Rich said that “librarians are going to have to become much more engaged with faculty, in faculty offices and research areas, and that will take a lot more librarians.” Charlene added that we’re telling

graduate and undergraduate students to do interdisciplinary research, and faculty typically only know how to do research in their one area and can’t give good advice to their students. So librarians will have to get engaged across the spectrum. Rich noted that Tech is mandating interdisciplinary work and even locating departments that could collaborate in the same building, but there is still resistance. “That’s too bad since the intersection of research areas is where really interesting things emerge.”



*Meyer and Hurt*

Rich and Charlene agreed that recruiting librarians for some positions, especially middle- and upper-management level and technology positions, will continue to be a very big challenge. Charlene also noted a big concern for how we can restructure our organizational staffing to give people meaningful and satisfying work.

Asked about plans for their retirements, Rich noted that he hears the question pretty frequently and doesn’t have a completely clear answer. “I’ve got a list of different things that I’m exploring.” He’s been asked by colleagues at several campuses if he’d be available to help with some projects, to which he’s said yes. Retiring to Greenville, S.C., he will be close by both Furman and Clemson and hopes to help them if possible. He would also like to consult on what he’s learned at Tech about working at technology-focused institutions. He’s hoping especially to help with a project in the Middle East and with a Southern consortium of private liberal arts institutions with which he’s worked before.

“I’m looking forward to spending more time with my grandchildren and with my wife. My wife and I both have been wanting to take up golf again and get serious about it, and that can take up a lot of time!”

Charlene, who will remain in Atlanta for the time being, hopes to do consulting for libraries, and she especially enjoys consulting in the areas of library building and library organizations. “I feel like I have a world of infinite possibilities out there, and I don’t feel in any horrible rush to make decisions. I’m interested in the educational system as a whole, but in short term, I think I’ll get involved in politics. I’ve been mostly keeping my mouth shut for a lot of years, and now I can speak my piece. I don’t know where or about what, but I think I’m going to enjoy that freedom.” ►►