

An Interview with Sherre Harrington,  
The Librarian of the College at Amherst College, Robert Frost Library.

Deborah Levheim  
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Library infrastructure:

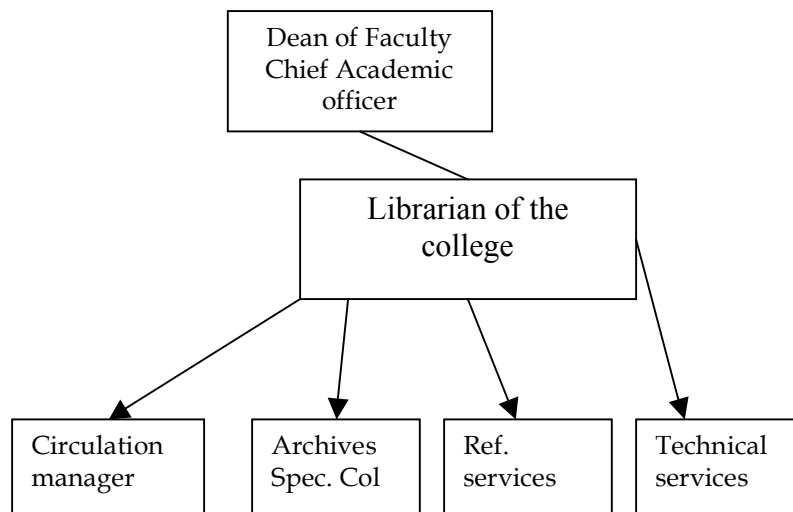
I chose to interview Sherre Harrington for my library director interview. She is the Librarian of the College for Amherst College Library. Amherst College is a small liberal arts college in Amherst, MA. Founded in 1821 Amherst College became co-educational in 1975 after a contentious battle. The Amherst college library recently celebrated the acquisition of its 1 millionth volume. The library system consists of the main library, the Robert Frost Library, the Keefe Science library, and the Morgan Music Library. One of the esteemed alumni of Amherst was Melvil Dewey the inventor of the Dewey decimal system.

Of all of the college libraries in the area, Amherst is the one that I visited least. I received my BA from Hampshire college, and my M.Ed. from the University of Massachusetts, I took some undergraduate classes at Smith college, and of course, I am doing my MLIS coursework at Mt. Holyoke. So, I decided to learn more about Amherst College for this assignment. It was a great decision (if I do say so myself). I found Amherst to be a wonderful library rich in history. I especially liked that the library had a celebration to commemorate the acquisition of the 1 millionth volume.

One of the many things that I liked about Amherst was its relatively open access to things. In my self-guided tour I saw many rare books in the stacks, some were even hand-written. I also felt very free to investigate anywhere I wanted. I went to the map room, which was tucked away in a tiny rarely used hallway. I expected that being

unstaffed, this room would be locked, but it was wide open for patrons to investigate. I also went to the archives and special collections and found that I had easy access to the anteroom and was free to look at exhibits. The problem with access was that many places in the stacks and various rooms could not have easily been navigated by a wheelchair.

The library's reporting structure is pretty unremarkable. In fact, there really isn't an up-to-date official organization chart. According to the director, Sherre Harrington, the college is pretty "mission statement averse" and fairly traditional. If there were an organization chart it would look something like this:



Sherre Harrington's tenure with Amherst College is fairly new, so I asked her if she might want to change any of this. She was not too interested in changing the mission statement [see appendix 1], which is pretty vague. She did say that she might want to

change the organization slightly to incorporate a public service manager who would be responsible for making public service changes across the organization. One example was making sure that directional and informational signs throughout the library were updated, easy to read and helpful.

The library's physical plant information is approximately 122,500 sq. feet. The seating accommodations are approximately 645. There were approximately 66 computers for public use. The computers were not integrated into the flow of information. There was a media center, but the computers were not set up to accommodate students doing collaborative work. They were also in the lower levels, with no windows so it wasn't pleasant to do work there. There are approximately 50 staff in the library. Of professional staff there are 14 MLS and 2 non-MLS.

The hours during the regular semester are 8:30am-1am Monday- Thursday, 8:30am-12am on Friday, 9:30am-11pm Saturday and 10am-1am on Sunday.

The Interview:

Interviewing Sherre Harrington is like having tea with that old friend who you rarely see anymore, but everytime you do see her you promise yourself to see her more because it's so comfortable, she's brilliant, has a great sense of humor and she is really thoughtful about everything she says. I enjoyed the interview thoroughly, and wished we could have talked longer.

Sherre has only been at Amherst for under two years. Her last position was as director of the Science and Engineering Library at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. She is the first woman Librarian of the College at Amherst. I asked Sherre how she felt about being the first. She said that it didn't impact her at all. She assumed that it may have been important to some people but because it wasn't remarked upon in her hiring process she didn't really think about it. She also said that there were so many women administrators in similar positions on campus that it wasn't so remarkable. From my perspective, it's remarkable because the previous Librarian of the College was in his position since 1972, shortly before the college became co-educational. I then asked Sherre about the title: Librarian of the College. To me the sound of it is very historical. It seems to carry so much weight. I believe Sherre felt the weight and history to be cumbersome in carrying out her everyday tasks. She often jokes to people that she "left her robes back at the office". She says that the title is uncomfortable: "I sort of use it rather ironically. It's sort of ceremonial. It's problematic in many ways because it feels like I'm the only one. But there are many librarians. I sort of have a different rank or status because I can vote at Faculty meetings, and none of us [librarians] have faculty status here. I am invested with this representation of all of the librarians. Its peculiar title and role. On the other hand it does it's an indicator of the idea that at one time this person was integral part of the academic organization of the college."

Sherre talked a lot through the interview about Amherst's sense of history and how sometimes the culture there focuses the decision makers to become encumbered with it's

history and tradition, making it difficult to move forward. There is a lot of talk about: “This is the way we’ve always done it...”, “It wouldn’t be Amherst if we didn’t...”, “It’s an integral part of the Amherst ethos...” These feelings have come into play during the discussion of making Amherst a co-educational college, and during the civil rights movement. She mentioned that during the civil rights movement, members of a coalition from Amherst, Smith, Mt. Holyoke and the University of Massachusetts decided to occupy the Frost library. “I don’t know why they chose this building, but I think that sort of taking over the colleges intellectual capital is a thing I really like. But it may have not been that, it may have just been that this is a convenient building and it will have a large impact on the people, because people will want to come in and they’ll find out that they can’t. But I think that symbolically it was much more than that. And things like that are very important.” Discussing this with Sherre made me think about something that we were discussing in class the other day about appropriate questions to ask during an interview. I do believe that a grand sense of history can be an everyday reminder of an illustrious past, but it can also become a cumbersome burden to try and work around. For example, asking about children and marital status in the interview. This supposes that someone who would like to have children will be a liability to the organization. This is a point of view from a male dominated work environment. Fewer organizations, especially libraries are ‘old boys networks’ anymore. Many women, if they are doing the hiring, might feel fine about hiring someone who might get pregnant, or who has very young children because they know that if the person is a good worker, and the organization can provide flex-time it might actually be better to hire this person than an ambitious go-getter, because a new family is more likely to stay in an area and want to build a life

there. The new family doesn't want to go anywhere because it's difficult to move with little ones, find daycare or preschools that are good and that you trust. They don't want to move in the middle of the school year because many of them have made child care commitments. Finally, if the organization has been flexible with maternity leave and flexible schedules, the employee is apt to be more loyal to the company. So, it actually may work out better for the organization to hire people who may be starting a family. Also if a woman is doing the hiring, she might have had a similar situation, and feel connected to the potential employee. If you have a notion that an organization has always been an 'old boys network' and always will be an old boys network, and in fact you have to create legislation to make them comply with allow women and minorities into the organization, your company is not innovating, it's stagnating. Being too weighted down with history makes it difficult to be flexible.

In direct contrast to this weight-y history is Sherre Harrington's management style. I asked her how she viewed her management style. She said she didn't really have a management style per se. However, she thought it might be connected with feminist practice. She gave some adjectives to exemplify this: I believe in participation, non-judgmental, non-hierarchical as possible, but also supposed to be a leader, and allow people to feel that they have a leader. I have ultimate responsibility.